

# Worksheet

Professional Version | US English

# Alternative Action Formulation



---

## Description

---

The *Alternative Action Formulation* is a CBT case conceptualization (formulation) worksheet. The purpose of a formulation is for the client and therapist to come to a shared understanding of a problem. This formulation template follows a Problem > Coping strategy > Unintended consequence format and is designed to encourage a focus on alternative (more adaptive) behavioral strategies.

---

## Instructions

---

Start by identifying the client's current difficulties and the strategies that they use to cope with these. The consequences of the current coping strategies are then explored (look out for short-term gains and long-term costs). Clients are then encouraged to consider alternate coping strategies.

---

## References

---

Eells, T. D. (Ed.). (2011). *Handbook of psychotherapy case formulation*. Guilford Press.

Johnstone, L., & Dallos, R. (2013). *Formulation in psychology and psychotherapy: Making sense of people's problems*. Routledge.

Kuyken, W., Padesky, C. A., & Dudley, R. (2008). *Collaborative case conceptualization: Working effectively with clients in cognitive-behavioral therapy*. Guilford Press.

Persons, J. B. (2012). *The case formulation approach to cognitive-behavior therapy*. Guilford Press.

Tarrier, N., & Johnson, J. (Eds.). (2015). *Case formulation in cognitive behaviour therapy: The treatment of challenging and complex cases*. Routledge.

# Alternative Action Formulation

## Problems & difficulties

List all of the problems that you are having

## Vulnerabilities

What makes you more likely to experience this problem than someone else?

## Triggers

What made these problems so bad *now*?

## Coping strategies

What do you do to cope with these problems?  
What makes you feel better, at least temporarily?

## Effects of these coping strategies

How do these strategies make you feel in the short-term,  
and in the long-term?  
What are the advantages and disadvantages?

## Alternative actions

If your current solutions aren't completely effective,  
what else could you try?

Consider common CBT mechanisms: avoidance, cognitive bias,  
conditioning, rumination, safety behaviors, selective attention

# Alternative Action Formulation

## Problems & difficulties

List all of the problems that you are having

List problems.

Ask client to order them in terms of severity – focus on the most severe first.

## Vulnerabilities

What makes you more likely to experience this problem than someone else?

Consider biopsychosocial predisposing factors: biological vulnerability, social support (or lack of), and intrapersonal factors (e.g. beliefs).

## Triggers

What made these problems so bad now?

What events, thoughts, emotions, or behaviors precipitated the current episode? What previously protective factors are absent?

## Coping strategies

What do you do to cope with these problems?  
What makes you feel better, at least temporarily?

Look out for and ask about common CBT maintenance mechanisms such as:

- Avoidance / safety behaviors
- Ruminating / dwelling
- Seeking relief / reassurance which is a powerful reinforcer (conditioning)
- Selective attention

Consider common CBT mechanisms: avoidance, cognitive bias, conditioning, rumination, safety behaviors, selective attention

## Effects of these coping strategies

How do these strategies make you feel in the short-term, and in the long-term?  
What are the advantages and disadvantages?

Look for patterns of short-term gain and long-term cost – we often take action geared towards short-term sensations such as relief which can end up being counterproductive

## Alternative actions

If your current solutions aren't completely effective, what else could you try?

Clients often initially find it difficult to generate alternatives. Helpful questions might include:

- If you had a friend who was in this situation what might you advise them to try?
- (Empathize) It looks like your best efforts to cope are intended to make you feel better in the short-term but they're not making the problem go away. What other things could we try that might help us take a step towards beating it in the long term? (encourage incremental solutions rather than one-shot efforts)

# Alternative Action Formulation

## Problems & difficulties

List all of the problems that you are having

Horrible memories of being attacked by my ex-partner that I can't get out of my mind.  
Feeling scared all the time.

## Vulnerabilities

What makes you more likely to experience this problem than someone else?

my ex-partner was violent and he had a history of being violent.

## Triggers

What made these problems so bad *now*?

I didn't feel this way when I was with him because I was more focused on keeping safe. Now we're separated I have more head-space.

## Coping strategies

What do you do to cope with these problems?  
What makes you feel better, at least temporarily?

Try to push the memories away - by keeping really busy or distracting myself with tv.

Never being alone - always ask my daughter to come with me when I need to go out.

Consider common CBT mechanisms: avoidance, cognitive bias, conditioning, rumination, safety behaviors, selective attention

## Effects of these coping strategies

How do these strategies make you feel in the short-term, and in the long-term?  
What are the advantages and disadvantages?

Short-term - feels better to distract myself, better than thinking of what happened.  
Long-term - nothing really changes and I keep having these memories. Feel like I haven't got any control over my own mind.

Short-term - feel safer when she is with me, it means I can get some things done.  
Long-term - I don't feel safe when I'm alone, it's draining for her and I worry she will resent me. I feel helpless and dependent.

## Alternative actions

If your current solutions aren't completely effective, what else could you try?

Try to fix these memories so I can put it behind me once and for all - therapist says we can try to 'process' them with exposure.

- Ask other people to help me.
- Gradually try to do more alone.
- Practice relaxation or mindfulness.
- Do an experiment to find out whether the worst really does happen.

# Alternative Action Formulation

## Problems & difficulties

List all of the problems that you are having

Depressed - I feel useless and worthless.  
Tired.  
Not sleeping well - can't get to sleep, racing thoughts.

## Vulnerabilities

What makes you more likely to experience this problem than someone else?

Never been very good at making friends.

## Triggers

What made these problems so bad *now*?

Struggling at work and my girlfriend left me.

## Coping strategies

What do you do to cope with these problems?  
What makes you feel better, at least temporarily?

Dwell on my problems and ask lots of  
"why me?" questions.

Think about all the ways that I'm defective so  
that I can try to fix them.

Stay in more so I have time to think.

Consider common CBT mechanisms: avoidance, cognitive bias,  
conditioning, rumination, safety behaviors, selective attention

## Effects of these coping strategies

How do these strategies make you feel in the short-term,  
and in the long-term?  
What are the advantages and disadvantages?

Short-term - feels like I'm trying to do  
something to solve problems.  
Long-term - haven't managed to solve them  
so far.

Short-term - being systematic like that works  
when trying to solve problems in other areas  
of my life.

Long-term - not working, makes me sad.

Short-term - feels easier than going out and  
facing people.  
Long-term - nothing good is happening to me.

## Alternative actions

If your current solutions aren't completely effective,  
what else could you try?

- Try to solve my problems systematically with a pen and paper for a set period of time rather than just going over them in my head.
- Be fair to myself - think about what I'm good at and do more based on my strengths.
- Go out and stay active - give myself a chance to have nice experiences

Psychology Tools develops and publishes evidence-based psychotherapy resources. We support mental health professionals to deliver effective therapy, whatever their theoretical orientation or level of experience.

Our digital library encompasses information handouts, worksheets, workbooks, exercises, guides, and audio skills-development resources.

Our tools are flexible enough to be used both in-session and between-session, and during all stages of assessment, formulation, and intervention. Written by highly qualified clinicians and academics, materials are available in digital and printable formats across a wide range of languages.



**Resource details**

Title: Alternative Action Formulation

Type: Worksheet

Language: English (US)

Translated title: Alternative Action Formulation

URL: <https://www.psychologytools.com/resource/alternative-action-formulation/>

Resource format: Professional

Version: 20230721

Last updated by: EB

**Terms & conditions**

This resource may be used by licensed members of Psychology Tools and their clients. Resources must be used in accordance with our terms and conditions which can be found at: <https://www.psychologytools.com/terms-and-conditions/>

**Disclaimer**

Your use of this resource is not intended to be, and should not be relied on, as a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. If you are suffering from any mental health issues we recommend that you seek formal medical advice before using these resources. We make no warranties that this information is correct, complete, reliable or suitable for any purpose. As a professional user, you should work within the bounds of your own competencies, using your own skill and knowledge, and therefore the resources should be used to support good practice, not to replace it.

**Copyright**

Unless otherwise stated, this resource is Copyright © 2023 Psychology Tools Limited. All rights reserved.