

# Worksheet

Professional Version | US English

# Behavioral Experiment (Portrait Format)



---

## Description

---

*The patient and the therapist begin much as two detectives who have a hunch they want to explore. First, they specify the hunch or assumption they want to test. One example might be "If I assert myself with another person he will reject me". The therapist derives a specific hypothesis from this general rule. The hypothesis is stated in specific operational terms, and the therapist and patient may formulate an experiment to test the prediction made from the general rule.*

---

– Beck, Rush, Shaw & Emery (1979)

Behavioral experiments are a powerful technique, commonly used in cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). There are many formats which can be tailored to serve different purposes, including:

- **Surveys** – which may be purely information-gathering, or which may test specific hypotheses.
- **Experiential exercises** – which may allow the client to test specific beliefs (e.g. "If I carry out an interoceptive exposure exercise of hyperventilating I will pass out and die").
- **Hypothesis testing** – may be designed to allow clients to gather information to test the validity of thoughts, predictions, or beliefs.

In essence, as long as a belief is clearly specified, the evidence supporting it can be explored experimentally. Experiments are designed to provide clients with new information. This information may serve to confirm or disprove beliefs, or offer support in favour of one hypothesis over another. The *Behavioral Experiment* worksheet guides you through the essential steps required to plan and evaluate behavioral experiments. It is well suited for hypothesis testing ("If I do X then Y will happen") but can also be used for data gathering ("If I ask X then I will learn Y").

---

# Instructions

---

1. Specify the client's prediction / belief / hypothesis / assumption / thought as clearly as you can.
  - "If... then..." statements often work nicely.
2. Design an experiment to test the prediction.
  - Think about what circumstances would need to be in place for the prediction to be tested: Where would the client need to go? What would they need to do or observe? What safety behaviors might need to be minimized in order for it to be a fair test? How many times might the experiment need to be repeated?
  - Think in advance about what you need to observe: What kinds of results will you need to record? What behaviors need to be attended to?
  - Always think about safety – do you need a graceful plan of retreat?
3. Carry out the experiment.
4. Record your observations.
  - What did you, or those around you, notice?
5. Reflect upon your observations.
  - Was the original prediction supported by the results of the experiment?
  - Is there another belief which might account better for the results that you observed?

---

# References

---

Beck, A. T., Rush, A. J., Shaw, B. F., Emery, G. (1979). *Cognitive therapy of depression*. Guilford press.

Bennett-Levy, J., Butler, G., Fennell, M. J. V., Hackmann, A., Mueller, M., & Westbrook, D. (Eds.) (2004). *The Oxford handbook of behavioural experiments*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

# Behavioral Experiment

## Prediction

What is your prediction?

What do you expect will happen?

How would you know if it came true?

Rate how strongly you believe  
this will happen (0-100%)

## Experiment

What experiment could test this prediction? (where & when)

What safety behaviors will need to be dropped?

How would you know your prediction had come true?

## Outcome

What happened?

Was your prediction accurate?

## Learning

What did you learn?

How likely is it that your predictions will happen in the future?

Rate how strongly you agree  
with your original prediction  
now (0-100%)

# Behavioral Experiment

## Prediction

What is your prediction?  
What do you expect will happen?  
How would you know if it came true?

If I speak in public I will shake so much that people will notice and laugh at me.

Rate how strongly you believe this will happen (0-100%)

90%

## Experiment

What experiment could test this prediction? (where & when)  
What safety behaviors will need to be dropped?  
How would you know your prediction had come true?

Speak up at the next meeting on Monday - I could present some of the data that I have been meaning to show.  
Would need to gesture with my hands, and not hold on to the table.  
I could ask my friends if they noticed me shaking when I talk.

## Outcome

What happened?  
Was your prediction accurate?

I was really nervous and was very aware of my hands.  
my friends said I spoke well and that they could not see me shake.

## Learning

What did you learn?  
How likely is it that your predictions will happen in the future?

Although I feel nervous when speaking it's not as obvious to other people.

Rate how strongly you agree with your original prediction now (0-100%)

50%

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: Behavioral Experiment (Portrait Format)  
 Type: Worksheet  
 Language: English (US)  
 Translated title: Behavioral Experiment (Portrait Format)

URL: <https://www.psychologytools.com/resource/behavioral-experiment-portrait-format/>  
 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.