Behavioral Experiment

CBT: Testing Your Thoughts in Real Life

A behavioral experiment is a planned way to test a worried or negative thought by trying something and seeing what really happens. Cognitive therapists James Bennett-Levy, Gillian Butler, Melanie Fennell, Ann Hackmann, Martina Mueller and David Westbrook brought together more than 200 examples in the Oxford Guide to Behavioural Experiments in Cognitive Therapy (2004). This worksheet walks you through planning an experiment, doing it and learning from the result.

1 Kinds of experiments

- **Act and see:** do the thing you fear in a small way. Example: ask one question in a meeting and notice how people respond.
- **Drop a safety habit:** do something without the habit you lean on. Example: leave the house after checking the lock once.
- **Watch others:** observe what other people do. Example: notice how often coworkers make small mistakes, and what happens next.
- **Ask around:** run a small survey of people you trust. Example: ask five friends whether they have ever forgotten someone's name.

Why does this work? *Thinking a fear through can make it look less likely, yet the feeling often stays the same. Trying something and seeing the result for yourself tends to be more convincing. In a small study, therapists in training who tried both methods on themselves rated behavioral experiments as more powerful than written thought records for changing what they believed.*

2 Plan your experiment

The thought I want to test:

Example: If I say no to my boss, she will think I am lazy.

How strongly I believe it now (0 to 100%)

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

What I will do, and where and when I will do it:

What I predict will happen, and how I will know:

**This worksheet provides information but is not a substitute for therapy. It works best with guidance from a professional.*

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3 Get ready

What might get in the way, and how I will handle it:

4 What happened

What happened when I tried it:

How this compares with my prediction:

5 What did you learn?

What this tells me about my thought:

How strongly I believe the original thought now (0 to 100%)

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

A more balanced thought:

My next experiment:

Start with a small experiment you can do this week. An experiment that does not go as hoped still teaches you something about what to try next. If the fear is big, or it is linked to panic, trauma or OCD, plan your experiments with a therapist.

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