

## **Practical for your Practice:** **CBT Agenda Setting**

- 1) Discuss the function and rationale for Agenda Setting in your first session, being sure to tie it to the overall rationale for treatment.
  - a) *“Setting an Agenda at the beginning of every session will help us both be on the same page every time we meet. It is important to me that you feel treatment is focusing on your stated goals during every session.”*
- 2) Agenda Setting should be collaborative.
  - a) *“At the start of each meeting we will come up with an Agenda together.”*
- 3) Keep the Agenda limited to 2-3 items.
  - a) It is difficult to adequately discuss more than 3 Agenda items in any one session.
  - b) If more than 3 items come up during the Agenda Setting, set the expectation that topics not discussed will be covered in the following session.
    - i) Be sure to come back to any Agenda items not covered during the following session!
  - c) Ask your client to prioritize the Agenda items.
- 4) Strike a balance between Agenda items clearly related to treatment goals and those topics that your client feels are important to talk about in a given session.
- 5) Write down the Agenda.
  - a) Use a whiteboard or paper on a clipboard so that both the client and therapist can see the Agenda.
  - b) Ideally the task of writing down the Agenda will be something the client takes on after several initial sessions where the therapist does the writing.
- 6) Questions to ask your client to help set the Agenda:
  - a) *“What items would you like to place on the agenda for today’s session?”*
  - b) *“What topics do you think are important to discuss today?”*
  - c) *“What would you like to have accomplished by the end of today’s session?”*

### **Agenda Setting Challenges / Solutions**

- 1) "I don't know" problem: client has trouble coming up with Agenda items.
  - a) Potential Solutions:
    - i) Review the treatment goals
    - ii) Summarize the previous session
    - iii) Offer several choices based on the previous session or treatment goals
    - iv) Assign agenda setting as homework
    - v) Ask what the client doesn't want to talk about
  
- 2) "Chatty Cathy/Charlie" Problem: client dives right into a detailed description of Agenda item.
  - a) Potential Solutions:
    - i) Gently interrupt and say: "*Shall we call this problem \_\_\_\_\_ & put this on the agenda?*"; or "*What shall we call this problem?*"
  
- 3) Too many Agenda items: client lists too many items.
  - a) Potential Solutions:
    - i) Prioritize all Agenda items; have a discussion about what are the most important problems
    - ii) Discuss how much time should be allotted to each Agenda item
    - iii) Plan on discussing items past #3 in the next session.
  
- 4) Trivial Agenda items: client avoids meaningful topics.
  - a) Potential Solutions:
    - i) Discuss the pros/cons of avoiding talking about difficult topics
    - ii) Explore Automatic Thoughts related to Agenda setting
    - iii) Therapist suggests Agenda topics
    - iv) Discuss ways of managing distress in-session (taking a break, changing topics)
  
- 5) Emotional reaction to Agenda Setting: client becomes emotional during Agenda Setting.
  - a) Potential Solutions:
    - i) Work with the client in the moment by exploring their Automatic Thoughts:  
(1) "*What was going through your mind when I asked you for items to put on today's agenda?*"
    - ii) Clients may be feeling hopeless about treatment, fear that things will get worse, and/or perceive themselves to be weak.
    - iii) Put Agenda Setting aside if the emotional reaction is very strong.
    - iv) Eventually return to a discussion of the rationale for creating an Agenda at the start of each session; renew that process during this session or the start of the next.