CLINICAL DOCUMENTATION · WORKSHEET

Case Conceptualization Template

A case conceptualization template organizes assessment findings into a working explanation of a client's difficulties. It helps clinicians connect context, maintaining factors, and treatment targets.

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What this tool does

This case conceptualization template helps clinicians organize assessment findings into a tentative explanation of a client's difficulties. It addresses the gap between collecting information and explaining how a person's experiences, current circumstances, and coping responses may connect to the concerns that brought them to care. A case conceptualization is the clinical story that explains why this client has these difficulties at this time, and what is keeping them going. It moves beyond a list of symptoms to a working model that links a client's history, beliefs, behaviors, relationships, and context into a coherent explanation. That model is what turns assessment data into a focused, individualized treatment plan, and it is one of the clearest markers of clinical skill.

A widely used organizing framework is the four P's: predisposing factors (the vulnerabilities a person brings, such as genetics, temperament, or early experiences), precipitating factors (the triggers or stressors that set off the current episode), perpetuating factors (what maintains the problem now, such as avoidance, beliefs, or relationship patterns), and protective factors (the strengths and supports that buffer against the difficulty). Mapping these makes the drivers of a problem, and the levers for change, visible.

A conceptualization should be theory-informed and testable. Different orientations emphasize different mechanisms: a cognitive model centers on beliefs and information processing, a behavioral model on contingencies and avoidance, a psychodynamic model on internal conflict and relational patterns, and so on. Whatever your frame, the conceptualization should generate a clear hypothesis about what is driving the problem and predict which interventions are most likely to help. If treatment is not working, the conceptualization is the first thing to revisit.

Treat it as a hypothesis, not a verdict. Early conceptualizations are tentative and should be refined as you learn more, and where possible shared collaboratively with the client, whose own understanding is part of the data. A clear, evolving formulation keeps treatment coherent, helps you anticipate ruptures and obstacles, and gives you a rationale you can articulate to the client, to supervisors, and in your documentation.

A common pitfall is writing a symptom list dressed up as a formulation, for example restating the presenting problem under each of the four P's instead of explaining the mechanism that links them. Another is confusing precipitating and perpetuating factors: a precipitant is what started this episode, while a perpetuating factor is what is keeping it going right now, and treatment usually targets the latter even when the former gets more attention in the first session.

Cultural context belongs in the formulation, not as an afterthought. The DSM-5-TR's Cultural Formulation Interview is a useful structure for capturing how a client's cultural identity, explanatory models, and social context shape both the presenting problem and what kind of help feels acceptable to them, and folding that into your predisposing and perpetuating factors keeps the model from defaulting to a one-size-fits-all account.

Once the working hypothesis is in place, it feeds directly into a treatment plan: the perpetuating

factors you identify become the targets, and the protective factors become resources to build the plan around. Many clinicians keep the conceptualization and the treatment plan as companion documents, updating both together as new information changes the picture.

Professional guidance from the British Psychological Society describes formulation as an ongoing, collaborative process grounded in the client's account and psychological evidence. This template provides a place to organize that reasoning; completing its boxes does not validate the explanation. Ask what evidence supports each proposed link and what observation would lead you to revise it.

For an illustrative formulation, imagine a client who began avoiding meetings after a difficult presentation. Record the presentation as a possible precipitant and the reported avoidance as a current behavior. The idea that avoidance maintains fear remains a hypothesis to discuss and assess. Ask about workload, discrimination, accessibility, and previous experiences before deciding that the difficulty comes mainly from the client's thinking. To make the hypothesis reviewable, record what you would expect to observe and what might point toward another explanation. For this example, ask whether the client also avoids supportive meetings or whether the difficulty occurs mainly with a particular colleague. The answers could shift the focus toward fear of evaluation, an unsafe workplace interaction, or a combination. Write the client's disagreement alongside your interpretation rather than treating disagreement as evidence that your theory is correct.

Research reviewed by Jarvis and colleagues on the American Psychiatric Association's Cultural Formulation Interview found preliminary benefits for communication and eliciting clients' perspectives. That evidence supports asking about meaning, identity, and context. It does not establish that this standalone case conceptualization template improves outcomes, and a cultural explanation should come from the client's account rather than assumptions about a group.

Use the completed formulation to identify questions for the next assessment and a rationale for the Treatment Plan Template. A Progress Note (SOAP/DAP) Template can record new observations that support or challenge the hypothesis. The List of Cognitive Distortions can supply language for collaboratively exploring thoughts when a cognitive approach fits, while the tools library offers other clinical resources. The Intake / Biopsychosocial Assessment Template can help organize the background information you still need. When transferring notes into a formulation, retain the distinction between a reported experience and a proposed explanation. For example, "the client reports feeling criticized" and "criticism maintains avoidance" make different claims. Mark the latter as a hypothesis and identify what further discussion would help evaluate it.

If you are using this page to understand your own difficulties, consider bringing your notes to a licensed clinician instead of assigning yourself a diagnosis. The Mental Health Assessment is a screening resource that can help organize concerns for discussion; its results cannot confirm a formulation. Psychology.com's therapist directory can help you find someone to discuss your concerns with.

How to use it

1. **Begin with the presenting problem,** capturing symptoms, impact on functioning, and the theoretical orientation you are working from.
2. **Work through the four P's in order,** separating predisposing vulnerabilities, precipitating triggers, perpetuating factors, and protective strengths.
3. **Draft the working hypothesis in section 6,** a few sentences linking the four P's into one coherent account of what drives and maintains the problem.
4. **Translate the model into treatment targets,** naming which perpetuating factors to address first and the obstacles you anticipate.
5. **Treat the document as a draft,** revisiting it as new material emerges. A conceptualization that never changes is probably not being used.

1 Client and presenting problem

Client identifier

Presenting problem(s) and symptoms

Theoretical orientation used

- ○ Cognitive behavioral
- ○ Psychodynamic
- ○ Behavioral
- ○ Humanistic
- ○ Systemic / family
- ○ Integrative
- ○ ACT
- ○ DBT

2 Predisposing factors

Vulnerabilities the client brings: genetics, temperament, early experiences, attachment, and learning history.

Predisposing factors

3 Precipitating factors

The triggers or stressors that set off the current episode.

Precipitating factors

4 Perpetuating factors

What maintains the problem now: avoidance, beliefs, reinforcement, relationship or systemic patterns.

Perpetuating factors

5 Protective factors

Strengths and supports that buffer against the difficulty and can be built on in treatment.

Protective factors and strengths

6 Working hypothesis

Pull the factors into a coherent explanation of how the problem developed and persists.

Clinical formulation

7 Treatment targets and plan

Treatment targets implied by the model

Anticipated obstacles

8 Clinician

Clinician name and credentials

Looking back

Which of the four P's was hardest to fill in for this client, and what would you need to ask in the next session to complete it?

Does your working hypothesis actually predict anything, such as what should improve if a perpetuating factor is removed? If not, what would sharpen it?

How would this formulation read from the client's chair? Consider which parts you could share aloud as a collaborative check.

Sources

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