

# Difficulty Assessments and Adjustments

Deliberate practice works best if the exercises are performed at a good challenge level that is neither too hard nor too easy. To ensure that trainees are practicing at the correct difficulty, they should do a *difficulty assessment and adjustment* after each level of client statement is completed (beginner, intermediate, and advanced). To do this, use the following instructions and the Deliberate Practice Reaction Form (Figure A.1), which is also available at <http://pubs.apa.org/books/supp/deliberate-practice>. **Do not skip this process!**

## How to Assess Difficulty

The *therapist* completes the Deliberate Practice Reaction Form (Figure A.1). If they

- answer either Question 1 or 2 on the Reaction Form as "too hard," follow the instructions to make the exercise easier;
- answer both Questions 1 and 2 as "too easy" and "no," proceed to the next level of harder client statements or follow the instructions to make exercise harder; or
- answer both Questions 1 and 2 as "good challenge" and "no," do not proceed to the harder client statements but rather repeat the same level.


## Making Client Statements Easier

If the therapist ever answers either Question 1 or 2 on the Reaction Form as "too hard," use the next-level easier client statements (e.g., if you were using Advanced client statements, switch to Intermediate). But if you already were using Beginner client statements, use the following methods to make the client statements even easier:

- The person playing the client can use the same Beginner client statements but this time in a softer, calmer voice and with a smile. This softens the emotional tone.

FIGURE A.1. Deliberate Practice Reaction Form

**Question 1: How challenging was it to fulfill the skill criteria for this exercise?**



**Question 2: Did you have any reactions in “good challenge” or “too hard” categories? (yes/no)**

Good Challenge			Too Hard		
Emotions and Thoughts	Body Reactions	Urges	Emotions and Thoughts	Body Reactions	Urges
Manageable shame, self-judgment, irritation, anger, sadness, etc.	Body tension, sighs, shallow breathing, increased heart rate, warmth, dry mouth	Looking away, withdrawing, changing focus	Severe or overwhelming shame, self-judgment, rage, grief, guilt, etc.	Migraines, dizziness, foggy thinking, diarrhea, disassociation, numbness, blanking out, nausea, etc.	Shutting down, giving up

**Too Easy**

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**Proceed to next difficulty level**

**Good Challenge**

↓

**Repeat the same difficulty level**

**Too Hard**

↓

**Go back to previous difficulty level**

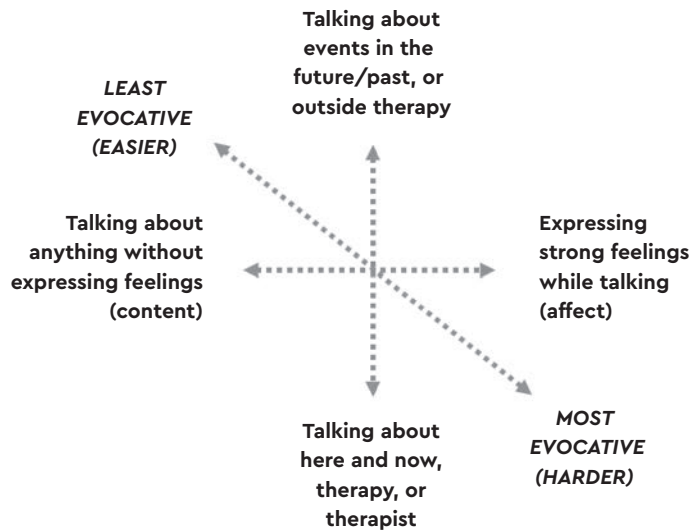
- The client can improvise with topics that are less evocative or make the therapist more comfortable, such as talking about topics without expressing feelings, the future–past (avoiding here and now), or any topic outside therapy (see Figure A.2).
- The therapist can take a short break (5–10 minutes) between questions.
- The trainer can expand the “feedback phase” by discussing psychotherapy theory and research. This should shift the trainees' focus toward more detached or intellectual topics and reduce the emotional intensity.

### Making Client Statements Harder

If the therapist answers both Questions 1 and 2 on the Reaction Form as “too easy,” proceed to next-level harder client statements. If you were already using the Advanced client statements, the client should make the exercise even harder, using the following guidelines:

- The person playing the client can use the Advanced client statements again with a more distressed voice (e.g., very angry, sad, sarcastic) or unpleasant facial expression. This should increase the emotional tone.

**FIGURE A.2. How to Make Client Statements Easier or Harder in Role-Plays**



Note. Figure created by Jason Whipple, PhD.

- The client can improvise new client statements with topics that are more evocative or make the therapist uncomfortable, such as expressing strong feelings or talking about the here and now, therapy, or therapist (see Figure A.2).

Note. The purpose of a deliberate practice session is not to get through all the client statements and therapist responses but to spend as much time as possible practicing at the correct difficulty level. This may mean that trainees repeat the same statements or responses many times, which is okay as long as the difficulty remains in the “good challenge” level.