

Difficulty Assessments and Adjustments

Deliberate practice works best if the exercises are performed at a good challenge that is neither too hard nor too easy. To ensure that they are practicing at the correct difficulty, trainees 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 <https://www.apa.org/pubs/books/deliberate-practice-motivational-interviewing> (see the "Clinician and Practitioner Resources" tab). **Do not skip this process!**

How to Assess Difficulty

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

- rate the difficulty of the exercise above an 8 or had any of the reactions in the "Too Hard" column, follow the instructions to make the exercise easier;
- rate the difficulty of the exercise below a 4 or didn't have any of the reactions in the "Good Challenge" column, proceed to the next level of harder client statements or follow the instructions to make exercise harder; or
- rate the difficulty of the exercise between 4 and 8 and have at least one reaction in the "Good Challenge" column, do not proceed to the harder client statements but rather repeat the same level.


Making Client Statements Easier

If the clinician ever rates the difficulty of the exercise above an 8 or has any of the reactions in the "Too Hard" column, 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

Proceed to next difficulty level

Good Challenge

Repeat the same difficulty level

Too Hard

Go back to previous difficulty level

Note. From *Deliberate Practice in Emotion-Focused Therapy* (p. 180), by R. N. Goldman, A. Vaz, and T. Rousmaniere, 2021, American Psychological Association (<https://doi.org/10.1037/0000227-000>). Copyright 2021 by the American Psychological Association.

- The client can improvise with topics that are less evocative or make the clinician more comfortable, such as talking about topics without expressing feelings, the future or past (avoiding the here and now), or any topic outside therapy. The clinician can take a short break (5–10 minutes) within the practice.
- The trainer can pause the practice to provide an opportunity for the clinician to think reflectively about the statement. They can use prompts such as “What might be underneath this statement?” “What emotion might the client be experiencing?” or “What might this say about the client’s values?” to promote the reflection. They can also help shape the response to meet the criteria of the skill.

Making Client Statements Harder

If the clinician rates the difficulty of the exercise below a 4 or didn’t have any of the reactions in the “Good Challenge” column, 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.
- The client can improvise new client statements with topics that are more evocative or make the clinician uncomfortable, such as expressing strong feelings or talking about the here and now, therapy, or the clinician.
- The trainer can pause the practice and encourage the clinician to consider additional responses, focusing on building the guessing muscle, using deeper reflections about underlying meaning, client values, or emotional undertones.

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