



A 90-minute behavioral experiment group

An Everyday Insight tool
behavioralexperiment.com



A facilitator guide for one 90-minute session on predictions and behavioral experiments. Use it with the 90-minute handout.

What the session is for

Members learn to notice a prediction, test a small one in the room, test a belief about what other people think with an anonymous survey, and plan an experiment for their own lives. The aim is for each member to see that a prediction is a guess they can check.

What you'll need

- The 90-minute handout for each member, four pages, and a pen.
- A whiteboard or flip chart.
- Small slips of paper for the survey.

The session at a glance

MINUTES	STAGE	WHAT HAPPENS
0 to 10	Welcome and norms	A check-in, then the norms.
10 to 18	Predictions	What a prediction is, and the example on page 1.
18 to 35	A test in the room	A small prediction, tested and compared.
35 to 55	The group survey	A belief about what people think, tested anonymously.
55 to 78	One for this week	Each member plans an experiment, then pairs check it.
78 to 90	Close	Plans said out loud, and the closing words.

Welcome and norms, 0 to 10 minutes

Ask for a word about how each person is arriving, with passing allowed. Then set the norms out loud.

- **Nobody has to share or try anything.** Passing counts as full participation. Every experiment is the member's choice.
- **No dares.** Nobody pushes anyone to go bigger. The group's job is to help a member find a test they're willing to try.
- **No reassurance.** When someone shares a worry, the urge is to tell them it'll be fine. Hold it. Reassurance can do the work an experiment should do, and then nothing is learned.
- **What's said here stays here.** Say it anyway. Be clear about the limits, too. You can't promise what other members will repeat, and you'll need to act if someone's safety is at risk.

Two ways in. Nobody has to show their page. In discussion, members can talk about the process, like what it was like to write the prediction down, without saying what it was. A made-up example works too.





Predictions, 10 to 18 minutes

SAY “A prediction is a thought about what will happen if you do something. ‘If I speak up, people will think it’s a dumb question.’ ‘If I go, I won’t be able to handle it.’ They feel like facts, so we steer around them. Some predictions turn out right and some don’t, and the only way to know is to find out. A behavioral experiment is a small, planned way of finding out.”

Walk through the example on page 1: the prediction, how strongly it was believed, the safety behavior left out, what happened, and the new rating.

A test in the room, 18 to 35 minutes

SAY “Let’s try one right here. Think of something small you could do in the next few minutes, like asking the group a question or saying one thing you noticed today. Write what you expect to happen and how sure you are, from 0 to 100. Then, if you’re willing, do it. Afterward we’ll compare. Nobody has to take part.”

Give a minute to write, then invite volunteers. Don’t go around the circle. When someone tries it, ask the group to respond the way they naturally would, without applause or reassurance.

Debriefing. Compare what was predicted with what happened, then ask what it means for the belief, and have members rate it again. If the prediction came true, that’s useful too. Ask how bad it actually was and how long it mattered. The feared outcome is often smaller in real life than in the prediction.

QUESTIONS

- What did you expect, and what happened?
- How much do you believe the prediction now?
- What did you leave out, and what was that like?
- What would a smaller test look like?

The group survey, 35 to 55 minutes

The group survey. Members who want to write a belief about what most people think on a slip, like “Most people would think less of someone who cries at work,” and hand it in folded. The facilitator picks one and reads it aloud as a question about each member’s own view, like “Would you think less of someone who cries at work?” Nobody says whose it is. Each member answers on a slip of paper, yes, no, or not sure, and the facilitator tallies the slips out loud. Whoever wrote it compares the tally with what they expected, silently or out loud. Keep beliefs about people in general, never about anyone in the room.

Run it two or three times if there’s time, with different volunteers. Members who don’t volunteer still learn from hearing how the group answers.

One for this week, 55 to 78 minutes

Each member plans a test on page 3. Then pairs take four minutes each to check each other’s plan with two questions: “What would we see if the prediction came true?” and “What would you normally do to make sure it goes okay?” Members can check their own plan alone instead.





Make the prediction specific. “It’ll go badly” can’t be tested. Ask, “What would we see? What would someone do or say?” A prediction like “I’ll stumble and two people will look at each other” can be checked against what actually happens.

Another possibility. Ask what else might happen, and have members rate that too. A test that can support either prediction teaches more than one that can only knock down the fear.

Safety behaviors. These are the things people do to keep the feared outcome from happening, like rehearsing, keeping it short, avoiding eye contact, or bringing someone along. They feel helpful, but they keep the test from telling the member anything. If it goes well, the member credits the safety behavior. Ask, “What would you normally do to make sure it goes okay?” and plan to leave one out.

Close, 78 to 90 minutes

Do a round. Each member says what they’ll test and when, in one sentence, with passing allowed. They fill in page 4 after the experiment.

SAY “One last thing. Whatever happens, you learn something. If the prediction comes true, you find out how bad it really is and that you got through it. If it doesn’t, you find out the prediction was wrong. Either way, you know more than you did.”

Facilitator moves

How you respond matters more than which questions you pick. These four moves cover most of it.

1. Ask what you would see

Turn every vague prediction into something observable. “What would someone do or say if it went the way you fear?”

2. Ask about the safety behavior

“What would you normally do to make sure it goes okay?” Then help the member decide which one to leave out this time.

3. Debrief with curiosity

Ask what happened before asking what it means. Then ask what it means for the belief, and how much they believe it now. Let the member draw the conclusion.

4. Keep it small and voluntary

If a plan sounds too big, ask for the smallest version that would still tell them something. A small test that happens beats a big one that doesn’t.

What to watch for

- **Experiments turning into dares.** Pressure from the group, or from the facilitator, turns an experiment into a performance. Keep every test voluntary and small.
- **Reassurance seeking.** Members may ask the group whether their plan will go fine. Turn it back to the experiment: “That’s what the test is for.”
- **Discounting the result.** “It only went well because they were being nice.” Ask what result would count, and plan the next test to check it.





- **Beliefs that don't belong here.** Steer away from predictions about a traumatic memory, a real medical risk, harming oneself, or real danger, like confronting someone who has hurt them. Those belong in individual work with a clinician.
- **Safety concerns.** If a member mentions suicide or self-harm, or it shows up on a page, respond calmly, don't explore the details in the group, check in with them privately right after, and follow your setting's risk procedures. In the US, 988 is available by call or text at any time.

Notes by setting

- **Inpatient units.** Keep experiments to the unit, like asking staff a question or joining a group activity. The in-room test and the survey work well. Don't depend on homework, and expect members to come and go.
- **Intensive outpatient and partial hospital programs.** When sessions are a day apart, keep each experiment small enough to try before the next session.
- **Substance use treatment.** Predictions about getting through a hard moment without using are common and worth testing, but keep experiments away from places, people, and situations with a risk of use.
- **Outpatient groups.** Members have time to run experiments between sessions, so the debrief carries more weight here.

Sources

The experiments follow the Oxford Guide to Behavioural Experiments in Cognitive Therapy by J. Bennett-Levy and colleagues, Oxford University Press, 2004. The step ladder follows the graded approach in the Centre for Clinical Interventions' anxiety modules. If-then plans draw on P. M. Gollwitzer and P. Sheeran, *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 2006. The forms in these handouts were written for Everyday Insight.

