

Emotion Focused Formulation (CCC): how to build it, step by step.

A collaborative map built around the feelings a person finds hardest to bear. Also known as a Comprehend, Cope and Connect (CCC) formulation, after the approach developed by Isabel Clarke. It starts from what the person feels now, so it can be built when more abstract formulation is too much.

Build the map in this order, one layer at a time

- 1 The horrible feelings**
Start in the centre. "When things are at their very worst, what do you feel?"
- 2 The recent trigger**
What set the feelings off, and what did it seem to mean about them?
- 3 Difficult life experiences**
When have these feelings shown up before?
What makes them make sense?
- 4 Strengths and resilience**
Not an afterthought. Drawn in a curve over the top: it holds everything else.
- 5 The coping strategies**
"What do you do to stop yourself feeling those feelings?"
- 6 Short-term benefits**
"How does that strategy help you?" Ask this before any downsides.
- 7 Long-term costs**
"What does it cost you?"
- 8 The maintenance cycle**
Show how the coping accidentally feeds the horrible feelings.
- 9 Ways out**
Points where the person could do something different. Choose together what feels achievable.
- 10 Goals**
Along the bottom, so the map points towards what they want.

Four families of coping

- **Moving away:** isolation, avoidance, numbing, sleeping
- **Moving against:** anger, aggression, control
- **Moving towards:** people-pleasing, reassurance-seeking, over-caring
- **Over-functioning:** perfectionism, striving, hypervigilance

Many of the problems people bring to services are, in fact, attempted solutions.

The core assumptions

- Emotions make sense in context.
- Behaviour serves an emotional function.
- Emotions organise how we experience the world and how we act.
- Difficulties often come from unmet emotional needs, avoiding emotion, or emotional lessons learned in harmful circumstances.

The six questions, in order

- 1 What are the horrible feelings?
- 2 What tends to trigger them now?
- 3 What does the trigger mean about you?
- 4 Where did you first learn those meanings?
- 5 What do you do to avoid or manage the feelings?
- 6 How do those strategies accidentally keep the feelings going?

One maintenance cycle, walked through slowly

Trigger Nobody replied to my message → **Meaning** I'm not wanted → **Horrible feeling** Shame →

Coping I withdraw → **Consequence** Less contact with people →

Outcome Lonelier, and the shame grows ↻ **back to the centre**

Way out: when they notice themselves starting to withdraw, an opposite action: saying yes to one plan, making a phone call, going outside for a walk. Draw on the strengths at the top of the map. There is often more than one cycle; add them as they come up.

Who it was designed for

People whose coping has been overwhelmed by current stress and past trauma, for example:

- acute psychiatric inpatient wards
- crisis and home treatment services
- community mental health teams, especially with complex trauma histories

The same map works as a shared team formulation, so staff can understand and respond to the person consistently.

Using it safely

- **Start with the centre and one cycle.** In acute distress that may be all that is useful in one session.
- **Go gently with the history.** Don't push for trauma detail unless the setting can hold it.
- **Check risk** before and after, and follow your service's risk procedures.
- **Frame coping as understandable,** not blameworthy.
- **Use supervision.**

Try the interactive worksheet

Same layout, a worked example and a fillable PDF. Free, opens in your browser, no sign-up.

formulatetools.co.uk/library/emotion-focused-formulation

References. Clarke, I. (2015). The emotion focused formulation approach: Bridging individual and team formulation. *Clinical Psychology Forum*, 275, 28–32. · Clarke, I., & Nicholls, H. (2017). *Third wave CBT integration for individuals and teams: Comprehend, cope and connect*. Routledge.