

## **Guidelines on using homework in highly critical and shame prone clients**

Ideally, homework assignments are a direct extension of what happened in the session. Often, initial stages of therapy homework consist of awareness-building assignments. This can be as simple as saying, “Pay attention to what the critic is saying to you this week,” or “notice what it feels like when your critic is talking to you. You don’t need to do anything about it. Just observe what happens.” Later homeworks are used to build on and practice new behaviors that occurred during the experiential work in the session. Often times it can be helpful to do the homework in session with the client before they practice it at home. When assigning homeworks with highly self-critical clients, it’s important to make sure the homework is framed in a manner that shows a tentative and exploratory nature and that any experience they have with it is just right. It can also be helpful to frame homeworks as practice and to remind them that practice can be really hard and that practice means making mistakes. You can remind them that practice is not performance and that part of practice is failure and mistakes. That it’s not supposed to go well all the time and that’s why it’s called practice.

Highly self-critical clients often have difficulty in following through with homework assignments. When a client does not follow through on homework assignments that were agreed to, it’s important to explore what happened in a non-shaming manner. The process of exploring what happened and also discussing what it’s like to talk about not doing homeworks that were committed to can be an important therapeutic element in itself. Possible barriers to look for include: fear of not doing the tasks correctly, hopelessness, unexpressed anger towards the therapist, counterpliance (feeling like the homework was not their choice and resisting coercion), the task as described didn’t make sense to them, fear of what they would encounter (including shame), lack of time (i.e. not making it a priority), procrastination, or forgetfulness.