

NCMHCE Sample Case Study

Part One

Intake

Client

Age: 35

Sex Assigned at Birth: Female

Gender Identity: Cisgender Female

Pronouns: She/her

Sexual Orientation: Heterosexual

Race/Ethnicity: White

Relationship Status: Divorced

Setting: Community agency

Payment: Sliding scale

Type of Counseling: Individual

Provisional Diagnosis: Major depressive disorder, single episode, moderate, with anxious distress, mild: F32.1

Presenting Problem:

You are a licensed mental health counselor working in a community agency. Your client self-referred for services because “my mother won’t stop bugging me for staying in bed all day. I can’t help it. I am in a rut and cannot find a way out.” Your client reported the feelings of hopelessness began 3 months ago. She stated, “My divorce was finalized at that time. Even though my ex and I had grown apart, I felt so sad that I had no energy to go to work.” After calling in sick for 2 weeks with no doctor’s note, she was fired. Due to resultant financial difficulties, the client stated, “I had no choice but to uproot my children and move in with my mother. I just feel like I’ve failed at everything.” The client shared that she feels sad, empty, and anxious most days, disclosing, “I wake up feeling sad. I can’t remember the last time I enjoyed something. Then I think I should be doing more for my children, and I get anxious.” The client reported that she also feels “tense every day” because she and her mother “do not see eye to eye” on raising the client’s children. “My kids are often in trouble at school, and my mother thinks it’s because I don’t spend enough time with them. I just don’t feel like getting out of bed much. And when I am with them, I tend to zone out and I can’t relax. Then I feel guilty. I worry that something awful may happen—like a natural disaster—and I will have wasted the time that I could have spent with them.”

Your client reported that she used to create jewelry for fun and to supplement her income. However, she stopped making craft jewelry and closed her online shop 2 months ago because of fatigue. “After dealing

with the kids, I just want to eat and go to bed.” She has asked her mother to watch her children 3–4 nights a week because she is so fatigued. “I would like to go back to being who I used to be—social, energetic, accomplished—but I don’t know how to get there. I feel like a different person now.” This is your client’s first attempt at counseling.

Relevant Mental Status Observation:

Your client presented dressed in a gray sweatshirt and pants and exhibited a slight body odor. She was alert and oriented to person, place, time, and situation. Her eye contact was fair. The client reported feeling “sad”, and her affect was congruent. She wiped tears away frequently with her sleeve. The client’s motor movements and gait were slow. The client’s thoughts were cogent and linear. The client’s thought content was focused primarily on harsh self-judgement, with an emphasis on perceived failings. No delusions or hallucinations were noted. She denied suicidal and homicidal ideation. Your client has not experienced a manic or hypomanic episode. She denied using alcohol and other substances. Your client reported that her appetite has increased; she snacks throughout the day and has gained 10 pounds in the past 3 months. In addition, your client reported that for the past 2 months she has been sleeping “a couple of hours more than usual.” She was seen by a physician 2 weeks ago and deemed to be in good health.

Family History:

Currently, your client and her ex-husband have joint legal custody of their children, aged 10 and 12. Your client is concerned that the children may be complaining about her “moods” to their father and that this may result in a change in the custody arrangement.

Your client’s father is deceased. Your client and her children have been living with the client’s mother for the past 2 months. The client shared that she has had conflicts with her mother for years. Your client has one sister, 2 years younger, who lives out of state “and my mother was always more forgiving toward her. I always felt like I had to be perfect, and my mother was very disappointed whenever I made a single mistake.”

Work History

Prior to her divorce, your client was working full-time as a nurse. She reported, “I had worked as a night nurse, 11 pm to 7 am, for years. I slept while my children were at school, so I could be there for them when they came home. That worked for a long time, until it didn’t.”

At the end of the intake, the client asked, “Will my mother have access to my records since she is paying for these sessions? I don’t want her to know how much I’m struggling.” You addressed the client’s concern about confidentiality and scheduled the next session.

Domain 5. Counseling Skills and Interventions

Sub-Domain 5.E. Establish therapeutic alliance

1. During the intake, how would you establish a therapeutic relationship with this client?
 - A. Reflect what is irrational about her self-evaluations.
 - B. Advise her about how to manage painful experiences.
 - C. Summarize her emotions and desire for change.**
 - D. Explore how she could improve her role in relationships.

Domain 4. Treatment Planning

Sub-Domain 4.D. Identify strengths that improve the likelihood of goal attainment

2. What information would you explore to help the client remember her strengths?
- A. the client's disclosure about her previous level of functioning**
 - B. the client's recollections of past mistakes
 - C. the client's feelings about her mother paying for counseling
 - D. the client's use of cognitive distortions

Domain 1. Professional Practice and Ethics

Sub-Domain 1.F. Discuss limits of confidentiality

3. How would you manage the client's concern about confidentiality?
- A. Explain that you will share progress updates but no details.
 - B. Clarify what can and cannot be shared through informed consent.**
 - C. Request the mother's assent to treatment and obtain the client's consent.
 - D. Ask the client for a signed release to include her mother in her treatment.

Domain 2. Intake, Assessment, and Diagnosis

Sub-Domain 2.E. Determine diagnosis

4. What self-report from the client is a criterion for the given diagnosis?
- A. disagreements with her mother
 - B. increased psychomotor agitation
 - C. difficulty managing her children
 - D. decreased pleasure in activities**

Domain 2. Intake, Assessment, and Diagnosis

Sub-Domain 2.J. Assess the presenting problem and level of distress

5. Which criteria were used to determine the severity specified for the client's major depressive disorder?
- A. the number of symptoms is not substantially in excess of those needed to make the diagnosis, yet functional impairment exists**
 - B. the intensity of the symptoms is distressing, but manageable, and results in minor impairment of social or occupational functioning
 - C. the intensity of symptoms is high and is accompanied by psychomotor agitation and mixed features associated with a major depressive episode
 - D. the number of symptoms and their intensity are distressing and unmanageable and interfere with client's social and occupational functioning

Domain 4. Treatment Planning

Sub-Domain 4.B. Establish short- and long-term counseling goals consistent with client's diagnosis

6. What short-term goal would guide treatment of the client's presenting problem?
- A. Spend 1 hour each day rewriting difficult childhood memories with her mother.
 - B. Return to previous sleep schedule to be more present with her children.**
 - C. Spend 1 hour each day journaling about her vision for her next marriage.
 - D. Return to full-time work in nursing to boost her self-image and mood.

Part Two

First session, 1 week after the intake session:

Your client arrived at the session on time, dressed as she was at intake. The client reported, "I feel about the same, not much has changed for me." The client shared that she attempted to resume the previous sleep schedule she had when she was working full-time, with mixed results. "I have no problem sleeping while the children are at school. When they come home, I feel very groggy, though I have made an effort to join them for a snack, since my goal is to spend more time with them. But my older child doesn't seem to want to spend much time with me anyway." Your client wiped a tear away on her sleeve. You reflected the client's feelings and celebrated her effort toward her short-term goal. You discussed human development and divorce with your client to normalize the older child's response. Your client expressed a "repeated worry" that her children will start "hanging around with the wrong crowd and get into major trouble." The client also shared that she continues to feel "like a failure." She stated, "I will probably never pull myself together enough again to get another job." You provided psychoeducation on cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). In order to facilitate her understanding of CBT, you conducted an exercise in session and then asked the client to keep a journal of her thoughts and feelings over the next week. The client reluctantly agreed, stating, "I'll probably fail at this too." You scheduled a session to take place in 1 week.

Domain 5. Counseling Skills and Interventions

Sub Domain 5.F. Apply theory-based counseling interventions(s)

7. From a CBT perspective, how would you help your client reduce her feelings of depression?
- A. Reflect and summarize her feelings about the older child's response.
 - B. Challenge your client's statement about obtaining another job.**
 - C. Reflect on how she managed feelings about the future when she was working.
 - D. Challenge your client's payoff for feeling sad and hopeless around her mother.

Domain 2. Intake, Assessment, and Diagnosis

Sub-Domain 2.G. Consider co-occurring diagnoses

8. Considering your client's statements about "repeated worries", what potential comorbid disorder warrants further assessment?
- A. separation anxiety disorder
 - B. obsessive-compulsive disorder
 - C. panic disorder
 - D. generalized anxiety disorder**

Domain 5. Counseling Skills and Interventions

Sub-Domain 5.D. Implement individual counseling in relation to a plan of treatment

9. What cognitive distortion did the client make in her statement about obtaining another job?
- A. all-or-nothing thinking
 - B. personalizing
 - C. fortune-telling**
 - D. minimizing

Domain 6. Core Counseling Attributes

Sub-Domain 6.M. Use foundational listening, attending, and reflecting skills

10. How would you reflect the client's feelings about after-school time with her older child?
- A. "You feel angry that you made the effort to join them, and they didn't appreciate it."
 - B. "You feel proud that you made a promise to them, and you kept it."
 - C. "You feel sad that they don't want to spend as much time with you as they used to."**
 - D. "You feel ashamed that they would rather spend time with their grandmother or their dad."

Part Three

Seventh session, 7 weeks after the intake session:

Your client arrived for the session on time, wearing a T-shirt and jeans. She reported that her sleep schedule has become more regular. She said she has cut down on "eating her feelings" and is paying more attention to when she feels hungry. "I mostly save snack time for after-school with the kids. Sometimes we make a snack together." The client shared that because her energy has returned, she is able to be more present when her children are "in the mood to hang out and talk" and that this has been a "positive change." She stated, "The tension with my mother is still there when I'm really stressed out, but when I'm calmer, she's calmer. It's funny how so many things are interconnected." You celebrated these positive changes and highlighted the client's agency in the process. Your client stated that she still struggles with feeling like a failure compared to her sister, friends, and former colleagues. You recalled similar comparisons that you have been between yourself and loved ones, and you wondered whether to share this with the client. Your client wants to start applying for a new job, but she keeps picturing herself performing "horribly" in job interviews. This results in feelings of intense anxiety. You invited the client to participate in a role play, to which the client agreed. You asked the client about thoughts and feelings that came up for her during the role play, shared your observations, and then co-created a homework assignment. You scheduled the next session to take place in 1 week.

Domain 6. Core Counseling Attributes

Sub-Domain 6.A. Awareness of self and impact on clients

11. What outcome would be most important in deciding whether to self-disclose in this session?
- A. normalizing
 - B. maintaining focus**
 - C. rapport-building
 - D. demonstrating credibility

Domain 5. Counseling Skills and Interventions

Sub-domain 5.F. Apply theory-based counseling intervention(s).

12. Using a cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) approach, what might you suggest as an alternative to address what the client is picturing?
- A. guided imagery**
 - B. imaginal rehearsal
 - C. externalizing
 - D. scaling

Domain 5. Counseling Skills and Interventions

Sub-Domain 5.M. Guide clients in the development of skills or strategies for dealing with their problems

13. Using a person-centered approach, what would you invite your client to do in the role play?
- A. speak from her father's and mother's perspectives
 - B. speak as her real self and as her ideal self**
 - C. speak from the perspective of externalized fear
 - D. speak from the wise mind within herself

Review the [NCMHCE Content Outline](#) for a full description of the examination development, content, and weightage for each domain.