SENTIO UNIVERSITY

Satir Iceberg Worksheet

Part 1. The moment to explore

Item	Entry
Client name or initials	
Clinician	
Date	
Session number	

The moment, in the client's words

Include: one recent event that stirred the client up, where it happened, who was there and what was said.

What the client hopes to understand or change

Include: the reaction the client wants to understand, in the client's words.

How the client feels about themself at the start

Ask: Right now, how do you feel about yourself, from 0 to 10?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Very low										*Very high*

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Part 2. Above the waterline: behavior and coping

Begin with what anyone in the room could have seen and heard. Ask one question at a time and write the client's words.

Level	Questions to ask, then the client's words
Behavior The client's words and actions, the part others could see	*Take me through that moment step by step. What were your words, and what was your tone? What would someone watching have seen?*
Coping The survival stance that appeared under stress: placating, blaming, being super-reasonable or being irrelevant	*When the tension rose, how did you handle it? Did you smooth things over, push back, stick to facts and rules, or change the subject? Is this how you often respond under stress?*

The strength inside the stance

Include: what the stance carries that the client can keep, such as caring in placating, assertiveness in blaming, intelligence in being super-reasonable or creativity in being irrelevant.

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Part 3. Below the waterline: feelings and perceptions

Go one level at a time, at the client's pace. The levels affect one another, so return to an earlier level whenever something new comes up.

Level	Questions to ask, then the client's words
Feelings The emotions of that moment	*Which feelings came up in that moment? Was there a quieter feeling under the first one, such as hurt or fear under anger?*
Feelings about feelings How the client reacts to those feelings	*When you look at that feeling now, what is your reaction to it? Are you embarrassed by it, afraid of it, or at ease with it?*
Perceptions Beliefs, values and the meaning the client made of the moment	*What did that moment mean to you? What did you conclude about yourself, about the other person and about the situation? Where did you first learn to see things this way?*

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Part 4. The deepest levels: expectations, yearnings and the Self

Many expectations began long before this moment. Help the client sort what belongs to the past from what the client wants now.

Level	Questions to ask, then the client's words
Expectations What the client counted on from self, from others and from life	*What were you counting on, from yourself or from the other person? What happened instead? Have you hoped for this from people since you were young?*
Yearnings The longings everyone shares, to be loved, accepted, validated and confirmed	*If you had received what you were counting on, what would that have given you? To feel loved, accepted, valued or understood? What do you long for in this relationship?*
Self The source of the client's inner experience, at the base of the iceberg	*Apart from this moment, what feels most true about you as a person? Which strengths and values do you bring? Which of them could guide your next step?*

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Part 5. Back to the present

Close with what the client found and one step the client can take now.

What the client found

Include: what lay beneath the reaction, in the client's words.

A way to meet the yearning now

Include: an old expectation the client can let go of, and one present-day way to meet the yearning beneath it.

One step before the next session

Include: what the client will do or say, with whom and when, in words that take account of self, the other person and the situation.

How the client feels about themself at the end

Ask: Right now, how do you feel about yourself, from 0 to 10?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Very low										*Very high*

Notes for the next session

Include: levels to return to, and anything to check with the client.

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Clinician guide: using the Satir iceberg

- **When it fits.** Use the worksheet when a client keeps reacting the same way in a relationship and wants to understand the reaction. In the Satir model, the story a client brings is the setting for change, and the focus is on how the client copes (Satir et al., 1991).
- **Keep to one event.** Fill in every part about the same moment so that each level stays concrete. Satir et al. (1991) show how one memory, a father who took only one of his sons fishing, revealed all six levels of the other son's experience.
- **Follow the client's pace.** The levels are interdependent, and the work can start at any level, so begin where the client is and check each level before you close (Satir et al., 1991). Write the client's own words in the boxes.
- **Separate the past from the present.** Many expectations that need attention are held over from the past, often from childhood. Help the client acknowledge an old expectation, let it go and find a present way to meet the yearning beneath it (Satir et al., 1991).
- **Close in the present.** End with what the client found and one step, such as a message that takes account of self, the other person and the context, which Satir called congruence (Satir et al., 1991). If the client reports hopelessness or thoughts of self-harm, assess risk and follow your setting's crisis protocol.

Adapted from the description of the personal iceberg in Satir, Banmen, Gerber and Gomori (1991). The layout and wording are original.

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Completed example: Rosa (a fictional client)

Rosa, 44, is a high school teacher in outpatient therapy for stress and arguments at home. She explored one moment with her therapist, D.L., a marriage and family therapist, at her fifth session, on December 3, 2026. Rosa, her therapist and every detail of the case are invented.

Part 1. The moment to explore

Item	Entry
Client name or initials	Rosa, 44
Clinician	D.L., marriage and family therapist
Date	December 3, 2026
Session number	5

The moment, in the client's words

"Saturday night my son Mateo, who is 16, came home at 1 a.m., two hours after curfew, and he hadn't texted. I yelled at him at the door, then gave him a long talk about rules. The next morning I didn't speak to anyone."

What the client hopes to understand or change

"I want to stop exploding and then shutting down. I want Mateo to talk to me."

How the client feels about themself at the start

Ask: Right now, how do you feel about yourself, from 0 to 10?

0	1	2	**3**	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Very low										*Very high*

Part 2. Above the waterline: behavior and coping

Level	What D.L. recorded
Behavior	"I yelled 'Do you know what time it is?' before he got his shoes off. Then I listed every rule he broke. The next morning I didn't say a word."
Coping	Blaming at the door, then super-reasonable: rules and facts with no feeling. "That's what my dad did with me."

The strength inside the stance

Her blaming carries assertiveness and the wish to protect Mateo. Her talk about rules shows how much she cares about his safety.

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Part 3. Below the waterline: feelings and perceptions

Level	What D.L. recorded
Feelings	“Furious.” Under it: fear for his safety and hurt that he didn’t text.
Feelings about feelings	“Ashamed. A good mother stays calm.” She is afraid of her own anger.
Perceptions	“He doesn’t care how I feel.” “If I don’t control things, everything falls apart.” She learned the second belief as the oldest child in her family.

Part 4. The deepest levels: expectations, yearnings and the Self

Level	What D.L. recorded
Expectations	That Mateo would text if he was late. That she should stay calm no matter what. An older one: that her father would notice when she was scared.
Yearnings	“To matter to Mateo. To feel close to him. To know I’m a good mother.”
Self	“I love my kids fiercely, and I keep going when things are hard.”

Part 5. Back to the present

What the client found

“My anger was covering fear. I expected Mateo to read my mind, the way I wanted my dad to read mine.”

A way to meet the yearning now

Let go of expecting her father to notice. Ask Mateo for twenty minutes together on Sunday afternoons, with no talk about rules.

One step before the next session

Tell Mateo calmly on Sunday: “I was scared when I didn’t hear from you. I need a text if you’ll be late.”

How the client feels about themself at the end

Ask: Right now, how do you feel about yourself, from 0 to 10?

0	1	2	3	4	5	**6**	7	8	9	10
Very low										*Very high*

Notes for the next session

Ask how the talk with Mateo went. Consider a family session with him.

D.L. slowed down when Rosa called herself a bad mother and wrote her shame under feelings about feelings. When Rosa linked her expectation of Mateo to an old one of her father, D.L. helped her separate the two. Rosa rehearsed her message twice, and her rating rose from 3 to 6.

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References and further reading

Books for clinicians

Satir, V., Banmen, J., Gerber, J., & Gomori, M. (1991). *The Satir model: Family therapy and beyond*. Science and Behavior Books. ISBN 978-0-8314-0078-1.

Research

Banmen, J. (2002). The Satir model: Yesterday and today. *Contemporary Family Therapy, 24*(1), 7–22.

Haitoglou, D. (2026). The Satir model as a systemic transformational approach: A synthesis of empirical and conceptual studies. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 52*(3), Article e70147.

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