**Activity-Uncover Root Causes of User Problems with the “5 Whys” Technique**

**Objective:**

To help participants **analyze user problems beyond surface symptoms** by applying the **“5 Whys” method** within a **user-centered framework**.  
The goal is to identify **true underlying causes** of user pain points and generate **actionable insights** for problem-solving and design improvement.

**Duration:**

60 – 75 minutes

**Materials Required:**

* Whiteboard or chart paper
* Sticky notes
* Markers or pens
* Sample **user problem scenarios** or real user feedback/interview summaries
* “5 Whys” worksheet (one per group)

**Group Size:**

4–6 participants per group

**Pre-requisites:**

* Basic understanding of **User-Centered Design (UCD)** principles
* Familiarity with **user research data** or common user experience challenges

**Activity Overview:**

Participants will practice identifying **root causes of user issues** by using the **5 Whys** method in a collaborative setting.

They will start from a **user pain point** (e.g., a usability or process issue) and iteratively ask **“Why?”** to reach the true source of the problem — moving from symptoms to causes and then to potential design actions.

**Step-by-Step Instructions:**

**Step 1: Introduction (10 minutes)**

* Facilitator explains the concept of **Root Cause Analysis** and how the **“5 Whys”** technique helps teams uncover deeper insights.
* Emphasize **user-centered thinking**:
  + Focus on understanding *why* users behave in a certain way.
  + Avoid assumptions; rely on **data, empathy, and observation.**
* Show a simple example:
  + **Problem:** Users abandon checkout.
  + **Why 1:** Page loads slowly.
  + **Why 2:** Too many scripts.
  + **Why 3:** Scripts not optimized.
  + **Why 4:** No optimization guidelines.
  + **Why 5:** No performance review process.
  + **Root Cause:** Missing performance governance.

**Step 2: Form Groups and Assign Scenarios (10 minutes)**

Divide participants into small groups. Provide each group with:

* A **user problem scenario** (real or hypothetical), such as:
  + “Users stop using the new mobile app after one week.”
  + “Customers frequently call support to reset their passwords.”
  + “Employees resist using the new time-tracking system.”
* Ask each group to read the scenario carefully and discuss what the **visible user problem** is.

**Step 3: Conduct the “5 Whys” Exercise (25 minutes)**

Each group now applies the **5 Whys technique** to dig into the problem:

1. **State the Problem Clearly:**  
   Write down the main user problem or symptom.
2. **Ask the First Why:**  
   Why is this problem happening?  
   Write the group’s answer under the first “Why.”
3. **Ask the Second Why:**  
   Based on the first answer, ask “Why?” again.
4. **Repeat Until the Fifth Why:**  
   Continue until the team reaches a **root cause** — the point where further questioning no longer adds new insights.  
   (The fifth “Why” is typical but not mandatory.)
5. **Document the Process:**  
   Use sticky notes or a worksheet so the logic flow remains visible (Problem → Why 1 → Why 2 → Why 3 → Why 4 → Why 5 → Root Cause).
6. **Validate Root Cause:**  
   Encourage the group to reflect:
   * Is the cause **within our control** to change?
   * Is it **supported by evidence or user feedback**?

**Step 4: Develop User-Centered Insights (15 minutes)**

After finding the root cause, groups discuss:

* How does this root cause affect the user’s experience or behavior?
* What user needs or emotions are being overlooked?
* What potential solutions or design improvements can address this root cause?

Encourage each team to identify at least **two actionable insights** aligned with **User-Centered Approach principles**, such as:

* Improve usability or accessibility.
* Enhance feedback loops.
* Offer clearer communication or onboarding.
* Redesign the process for efficiency and inclusivity.

**Step 5: Group Presentations and Reflection (10–15 minutes)**

Each group presents:

* The original user problem
* The chain of 5 Whys
* The identified root cause
* Recommended user-centered solution

Facilitator summarizes common patterns and emphasizes:

* How deep questioning helps uncover hidden causes.
* How user empathy combined with structured inquiry leads to better design outcomes.

**Expected Learning Outcomes:**

By the end of this activity, participants will:

1. Apply the **5 Whys** method to identify root causes of user issues.
2. Understand how **user-centered thinking** improves problem analysis.
3. Recognize the difference between **symptoms** and **underlying causes.**
4. Generate actionable, empathy-driven design or process improvements.
5. Develop confidence in structured and collaborative problem-solving.

**Facilitator Tips:**

* Encourage “Why” questions that stay **process-focused, not person-focused.**
* If groups stop too early, challenge them to dig deeper.
* Validate findings with real **user data or scenarios** when possible.
* Summarize by linking findings to the **Define** and **Ideate** phases of Design Thinking.

**Example Summary Table (Template for Teams):**

| **Step** | **Question** | **Answer / Observation** | **Notes** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Problem | What user problem are we addressing? | Users abandon checkout before payment. | Symptom identified |
| Why 1 | Why are users abandoning checkout? | Payment page loads slowly. | Observation from analytics |
| Why 2 | Why does it load slowly? | Page uses large scripts. | Technical bottleneck |
| Why 3 | Why are scripts large? | No optimization during development. | Process issue |
| Why 4 | Why wasn’t optimization done? | No defined performance review process. | Organizational cause |
| Why 5 | Why is there no review process? | Lack of performance governance in dev cycle. | Root Cause |
| **Root Cause Identified** | **Missing performance governance process.** | **Action:** Create coding guidelines and performance checks. |  |

**Link to the Document Concepts:**

This activity directly aligns with your uploaded document sections:

* **2.1 & 2.2:** Applying user-centered principles (Empathy, Context, Feedback) while analyzing problems.
* **3.1 & 3.2:** Practicing structured problem-solving through the **5 Whys technique.**
* **3.3:** Following best practices — collaboration, documentation, and validation.
* **5:** Combining UCA with 5 Whys for holistic, human-centered solutions.