

what is anxiety?

Many people experiencing the symptoms of anxiety can begin to wonder if there is something really wrong with them. One typical fear is that they might be going crazy. Unfortunately, the reactions and comments from other people such as, 'just get yourself together' are not very helpful.

Although you might feel alone in your struggle against anxious moods, the reality is that many people experience these moods either from time to time, or on a more regular basis. In fact, it is estimated that 1 in every 5 experience significantly anxious mood at some time in their life.

Anxiety can effect any kind of person at any stage of their life, whether they are an introvert or an extrovert, socially active or shy, youthful or elderly, male or female, wealthy or poor. Whatever your distinction, you can become anxious. That means that any person you know is also fair game. So remember, you are not alone.

Understanding Anxiety

Feeling afraid is very much a part of the experience of being human. It occurs in response to realistically anticipated danger and therefore is a survival instinct. For example, if a ferocious animal confronted us it is likely that we would respond with fear. This response is important because it initiates a whole series of physical and behavioural changes that ultimately serve to protect us. In this example, when confronted by an animal, the feeling of fear would probably lead us to either run for our lives or become sufficiently 'pumped up' to physically defend ourselves. As you can see from this example, the experience of fear is part of a process of survival.



The experience of anxiety is very similar to the experience of fear - the main difference is that anxiety occurs in the absence of real danger. That is, the individual may think that they are in danger but the reality is that they are not. To illustrate this, think of the anxiety one may feel when walking down a poorly lit alley. The individual may feel anxious because they perceive some potential danger. This may not mean that there is any real danger in walking down this particular alley, but what causes the experience of anxiety is that the person believes that they are in danger. Therefore, the experience of anxiety and fear are basically the same except that in the case of anxiety, there may not be any actual danger - the person just thinks there is.

Fight/Flight Response



It is important to fully understand the way our bodies react to threat or danger, whether real or imagined. When a person is in danger, or believes that they are in danger a number of changes occur. This response has been named the fight/flight response. As previously explained, when confronted with danger we will typically

flee from the situation, or stand and fight. The main purpose of the fight/flight response is to protect the individual. It is therefore important to remember that the experience of anxiety is not in itself, harmful. When a person's fight/flight response is activated, three major systems are affected. These are the physical, cognitive and behavioural systems.

Physical System

When we believe that we are in danger, our whole physical system undergoes some major, temporary changes designed to enhance our ability to either run away, or stand and be ready to fight. Physically, as soon as danger is perceived, the brain sends a message to our autonomic nervous system. Our autonomic nervous system has two sections: the sympathetic branch and the parasympathetic branch. These two sections control the physical changes that occur in the fight/flight response. The sympathetic branch is the part that activates the various areas of the body to be ready for action. When the sympathetic branch is activated, it includes all areas of the body, and therefore, the person experiences physical changes from head to toe.

To get things moving, the sympathetic nervous system releases two chemicals from the adrenal glands on the kidneys. These chemicals are called adrenalin and noradrenalin and are basically messengers that serve to maintain the physical changes for a sufficient amount of time.

So what are these physical changes that the sympathetic mechanism produces when you are anxious?

1. An increase in heart rate and strength of beat

One physical change that is quite noticeable to the person experiencing the fight/flight response, is an increase in heart rate and the strength of heartbeat. An increase in heart rate enables blood to be pumped around the body faster, so that oxygen gets delivered more promptly to the various tissues of the body and waste products can be efficiently eliminated.

2. A redistribution of blood from areas that aren't as vital to those that are

There is also a change in blood flow - away from places where it is not needed (such as skin, fingers and toes) towards the places it is likely to be needed (large organs and muscles). This is very useful because if we were attacked and cut in some way we would be less likely to bleed to death, as the blood will be with the vital organs. This physical change results in the skin looking pale and feeling cold, and also in the experience of cold, numb and tingling fingers and toes.

3. An increase in the rate and depth of breathing

As well as changes to heart rate, there are also changes to the speed and depth of breathing. This is very important, as it provides the tissues with the extra amount of oxygen required to prepare for action. The feelings produced by this increase in breathing can include breathlessness, choking or smothering feelings, tightness and pain in the chest, and sighing and yawning. One of the main



side effects of this increase in breathing is that the blood supply to the head is actually decreased. This is not dangerous but can produce a collection of unpleasant symptoms, including: dizziness, light-headedness, blurred vision, confusion, feelings of unreality and hot flushes.

4. An increase in sweating

Another physical change in the fight/flight response is an increase in sweating. This causes the body to become more slippery, making it harder for a predator to grab, and also cooling the body and thus preventing it from overheating.

5. Widening of the pupils of the eyes

One effect of the fight/flight response that people are often unaware of, is that the pupils widen to let in more light, which may result in the experience of blurred vision, spots before the eyes, or just a sense that the light is too bright. This change enables the person to more effectively use their sight to identify any hidden dangers such as something lurking in the shadows.

6. Decreased activity of the digestive system

The decreased activity of the digestive system allows more energy to be diverted to systems more immediately related to fight or flight. The range of effects you might notice as a result of this body change are a decrease in salivation, resulting in a dry mouth and decreased activity in the digestive system, often producing feelings of nausea, a heavy stomach or even constipation.

7. Muscle tension

Finally, many of the muscle groups tense up in preparation for fight/flight and this results in subjective feelings of tension, sometimes resulting in aches and pains and trembling and shaking. The whole physical process is a comprehensive one that often leaves the individual feeling quite exhausted.

Behavioural System

As already mentioned, the two main behaviours associated with fear and anxiety are to either fight or flee. Therefore, the overwhelming urges associated with this response are those of aggression and a desire to escape, wherever you are. Often this is not possible (due to social constraints) and so people often express the urges through behaviours such as foot tapping, pacing or snapping at people.

Cognitive System

As the main objective of the fight/flight response is to alert the person to the possible existence of danger, one major cognitive change is that the individual begins to shift their attention to the surroundings to search for potential threat. This accounts for the difficulty in concentrating that people who are anxious experience. This is a normal and important part of the fight/flight response as its purpose is to stop you from attending to your ongoing chores and to permit you to scan your surroundings for possible danger. Sometimes an obvious threat cannot be found. Unfortunately, most of us cannot accept not having an explanation for something and end up searching within themselves for an explanation. This often results in people thinking that there is something wrong with them - they must be going crazy or dying.

Restoration of the Systems

Once the immediate danger has abated, the body begins a process of restoration back to a more relaxed state. This is once again controlled by the autonomic nervous system. This time it instructs the parasympathetic branch to begin the process



of counteracting the sympathetic branch. As a result, the heart rate begins to slow, breathing rate slows, the body's temperature begins to lower and the muscles begin to relax. Part of the process of restoration is that the systems do not return to normal straight away. Some arousal continues and this is for a very good reason. In primitive times, if a wild animal confronted us it would be foolish to relax and be off guard as soon as the animal began to back off. The chances of danger continuing in such a case causes the body to remain prepared for the need to once again face danger. Therefore, some residual effects of the fight/flight response remain for some time and only gradually taper off. This can leave the individual feeling 'keyed up' for some time afterwards. This helps to understand why it is that people can feel anxious for ongoing periods of time when no obvious stressor is present.

What Causes Anxiety?

The combination of factors which result in an individual developing an anxiety disorder differ from person to person. However, there are some major factors that have been identified, which may be common to sufferers. These factors can be effectively divided into biological and psychological causes.

Biological Factors

A genetic factor has been linked to the development of anxiety disorders. For example, in obsessive-compulsive disorder, about 20% of first-degree relatives have also suffered from the condition. Overall, based on family studies, it has been suggested that individuals may inherit a vulnerability to developing an anxiety disorder.

Psychological Factors

Having this genetic vulnerability does not imply that those individuals will develop an anxiety disorder. A great deal depends on the lifestyle of that person, the types of life stressors they have encountered and their early learning. For example, if we were taught to fear certain neutral situations as a child it can become difficult to extinguish these learned patterns of behaviour. Therefore, we may have developed certain patterns of thinking and behaving which contribute to the development of an anxiety disorder.

Summary

As you can see from this description of the fight/flight response, anxiety is an important emotion that serves to protect us from harm. For some people the fight/flight response becomes activated in situations where no real danger is present. The types of situations vary greatly from person to person. For example, simply anticipating poor performance on an examination can be enough to activate the fight/flight response. An anxiety disorder is usually diagnosed when a person cannot manage to function adequately in their daily life due to the frequency and severity of the symptoms of anxiety. It is important to keep in mind however, that some anxiety is functional, enabling us to get to work on time, meet demands, cross busy streets and remain aware of our surroundings.

what is generalised anxiety?

Feeling tense, stressed, and worried at certain times when under pressure is a normal human response. In fact 2 out of every 5 people report that they worry at least once every day. However, for some people their worry, feelings of anxiety and tension persists to the point that they significantly interfere with their daily life. If this sounds like you, then you may find the information in this sheet very helpful in understanding what generalised anxiety is and its relevance to you.

What is Worry?

Before you can understand generalised anxiety, you need to have an understanding of worry. Worry is generally regarded as a form of verbal mental problem solving about potentially negative future events. It can be triggered by a variety of external events, or from thoughts that just pop into your head. Worry is characterised by a lot of “what if” statements such as:



- “What if I fail my exam?”
- “What if I can’t do the job?”
- “What if I can’t provide for my family?”
- “What if I get anxious during my interview?”

Normal worry is relatively short-lived and leads to positive problem-solving behaviour. Worry becomes unhelpful when it is about a number of things, is very frequent, and is difficult to control or dismiss. People may think this type of worry is useful, that it helps with problem solving and planning, or prevents future negative outcomes. However, this is not the case, as prolonged or frequent worry generates more anxiety and more worry, which may actually prevent positive thinking and action.

What are the key symptoms?

Generalised anxiety involves:

- **Anxiety or worry about several things** has occurred for at least the past 6-months
- The worry is experienced as excessive and uncontrollable, is present most days, and interferes with the ability to focus on tasks.

At least 3 of the following symptoms also need to be present for the past 6-months or longer:

- **Feeling restless**, keyed up, on edge & unable to relax
- **Physical tension**.
- **Sleep disturbance**. Having trouble falling asleep, maintaining sleep, or experiencing unsettled sleep.
- **Problems concentrating** and focusing on a task.
- **Feeling irritable**.
- **Feeling tired** or exhausted easily.

What are the causes?

The causes of generalised anxiety are not clearly understood. However, a number of vulnerabilities are considered to increase the chance of developing generalised anxiety:



- An inherited general biological disposition to experience negative emotions.
- Prolonged stress, and past experiences of uncontrollable or traumatic events.
- Direct or indirect messages from the people around you that the world is threatening or that worry is useful.
- A coping style that involves avoiding challenges or situations where there is the chance of experiencing negative emotions.

Diagnosis and Treatment

Generalised anxiety is not always easy to diagnose as some of its symptoms overlap with depression and other anxiety problems. It is thus important to see a mental health practitioner for a definite diagnosis.

The recommended psychological treatment for generalised anxiety is cognitive-behaviour therapy. This usually includes: relaxation to reduce chronic tension; techniques for dealing with unhelpful beliefs about worry; learning to challenge and let go of worries; learning more helpful coping and problem solving strategies; and learning to be less focused on uncertainty, and more present focused.



Mindfulness training and meditation may also be helpful for some individuals to reduce worry and increase present moment focus. However more research is required to determine if it is as effective as cognitive-behaviour therapy.

how worry works

Worry and Problematic Worry

Worry is generally regarded as a form of verbal mental problem solving about potentially negative future events. Normal worry is generally short-lived and leads to positive problem-solving behaviour. Worry becomes unhelpful when it is about a number of things, is very frequent, and is difficult to control or dismiss. Prolonged or frequent worry generates more anxiety and more worry, which may actually prevent positive thinking and action.

What Triggers Worry?

Worrying can be triggered by various things. Some triggers may be more obvious and linked to external things, for example:



- Seeing a certain image (e.g. in the newspaper or on TV)
- Hearing certain information (e.g., on the radio or in a conversation)
- Being put in a certain situation (e.g., having to make decisions, perform a task, lead others, or face uncertainty)

Some triggers may be less obvious. These may be thoughts or images that seem to just pop into your head out of the blue. An initial “What if...” question that comes to mind for no apparent reason, can even be a trigger for worrying. For example, the thought “What if I left the iron on?” might pop into my head. If I think “I probably didn’t” and decide not to worry about it, chances are I will forget about it, and the thought will slip my mind. However, if instead I start to ‘chase’ the thought further (e.g., “The ironing board might catch fire and that will spread to the whole house.” “The house might burn down and then I will lose everything!”), then the original “What if...” question has now triggered a worry episode.

What Maintains Worry?

People who describe themselves as chronic worriers are often disturbed that they seem to spend much of their waking hours worrying excessively about a number of different life circumstances. They do not understand why this activity continues. They often ask, “Why do I do it?” and “What keeps my worrying going?”

There are two types of thoughts or beliefs about worry which work to maintain the worry, in a vicious cycle. These are negative beliefs about worrying, and positive beliefs about worrying. Unhelpful strategies such as avoidance and thought control also maintain worry.

Negative Beliefs About Worrying

In addition to the specific things people worry about, people with generalised anxiety disorder may also **worry about the fact that they are worrying**. In this case, such worriers are often concerned that worrying is “bad” and may believe that:

- Worrying is **uncontrollable**, and will take over and result in a loss of control (e.g., “I won’t be able to control my worrying, and it will never stop”).
- Worrying is **dangerous**, and will cause either physical or mental harm (e.g., “If I keep worrying like this I will go crazy/ have a breakdown/become ill”).



Holding these (false) negative beliefs about worrying makes the process of worrying very distressing for you, and this will even keep your worrying going.

Positive Beliefs About Worrying

Worriers often hold (false) positive beliefs that worrying is beneficial and “good,” which can keep worriers worrying. Some positive beliefs may be:

- Worrying **motivates** me to do things
- Worrying helps me find **solutions** to problems
- Worrying **prepares** me for the worst
- Worrying helps me **avoid** bad things
- Worrying **prevents** bad things

Avoidance and Thought Control

Avoidance may take the form of avoiding a feared outcome (e.g., passing up a promotion to avoid the feared outcome of not doing a good job) or avoiding worrying itself (e.g., not watching the TV news in case a worry is triggered, or asking for reassurance from loved ones that nothing bad will happen to you). Avoidance limits a person’s opportunity to have experiences that disconfirm their worries and their beliefs about worrying. IN a sense, not confronting your worries keeps the worrying going.

People who worry often attempt unsuccessfully to control their worrisome thoughts in a number of ways. These may include trying to suppress their worries, trying to reason with their worrisome thoughts, distracting themselves or thinking positively. These attempts at thought-control rarely work, as trying to suppress a thought usually has the opposite effect of making that thought occur more, which in turn fuels the belief that worries are uncontrollable.



In other information sheets, we can explore some better strategies to manage worry.

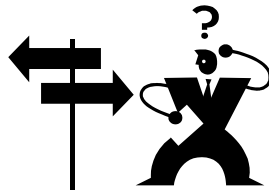
accepting uncertainty



The inability to tolerate uncertainty is an **attitude** many people have towards life. When one has this attitude, uncertainty, unpredictability, and doubt are seen as awful and unbearable experiences that must be avoided at all costs.

If you hate uncertainty, then you may perceive worrying to be useful to you. You may think that worrying is a way of preparing yourself for the worst – getting you ready for anything that might happen. Worrying might be seen as a way of attempting to predict life so that there are no nasty surprises. As such, worrying reduces your experience of uncertainty and unpredictability. And because worrying reduces your feelings of uncertainty, you will continue worrying and worrying and worrying. In other words, worrying helps you believe that you have more control and certainty in life.

In reality, has your worrying made anything more certain or more predictable? Does worrying really change the outcome of what will happen? Unfortunately, life is still as uncertain and unpredictable as it ever was, it is only your perception that you somehow have more control that has changed. But is this really true? In fact, all you have done is think of all the worst case scenarios, worked yourself up, made yourself feel really bad in the process and often paralysed yourself from taking any action. So, ask yourself, is worrying about uncertainty really worth it? Maybe it is time to consider a different way?



There are two main strategies for learning how to accept uncertainty and thus reduce worry.

1. Challenging Intolerance of Uncertainty

Ask yourself the following questions and write down your responses. See if you can come to an understanding of the disadvantages and problems of being intolerant of uncertainty.

- Is it possible to be certain about everything in life?
- What are the advantages of requiring certainty, versus the disadvantages? Or, how is needing certainty in life helpful and unhelpful?

- Do you tend to predict bad things will happen just because they are uncertain? Is this a reasonable thing to do? What is the likelihood of positive or neutral outcomes?
- How likely is it that things you predict will happen? Is it possible to live with the small chance that something negative may happen, given its likelihood is very low?
- Can you live with some of the uncertainties of life? How do you do this? And can you do this in other situations you find difficult?
- Ask a friend how they cope with uncertainty, see if you can learn a few tips from them?

2. Acceptance and Mindfulness

When you are intolerant of uncertainty, your mind tends to be focused on the future. An antidote to this style of thinking is to practice becoming more present focused and accepting of your current experience. That is, more mindful. The steps to being more accepting and mindful are explained in the infosheets *What is Mindfulness?* and *Mindfulness & Letting Go*. Three basic steps to follow are:

- **Being aware** of what you are currently thinking and what you are feeling in your body. Use the feeling of your breath to remain present. What are you noticing when you are needing certainty? Acknowledge these thoughts and feelings, maybe saying “ah, so that's how it is”.
- **Letting go** of the need for a quick fix, by saying something to help you let go of the need for certainty. Maybe “it's only a need for certainty thought, just let it go”.
- **Being Non-judgmental**, by bringing a gentle curiosity to the thoughts that drift by without judging them or trying to change them. Then return your focus to the here and now of your experience. Focus your attention fully on sounds around you or sensations in the body, or your breath, or the task at hand.



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improving how you feel

People often believe that the feelings and emotions they experience are caused by external events, situations, and the behaviour of others. For example, we might hear ourselves say, “My partner made me so angry,” “My boss made me so nervous,” “This trip down south made me feel so relaxed,” or “I’m depressed because I didn’t get the job I wanted.” What is the assumption underlying these statements? That someone or something other than ourselves was directly determining the feelings we experienced. However, if we stop to analyse the process that links an external situation to our emotional responses, we will find that there is a step in between.

What Influences My Feelings?

What really makes us feel and respond the way we do, is not the situation or the words and actions of another person, but how we perceive that situation or that person’s actions. It is our thoughts and beliefs about an event that significantly influences our feelings and actions.



Here’s an example. Suppose you went to a party and your host introduces you to Mike. As you talk to him, you notice that he does not look directly at you but often looks around the room. How would you feel if you thought, “Boy, this guy is so rude! He won’t even look at me while I’m talking with him! How nasty!” What if you thought, “Mike must think that I’m really unattractive and uninteresting. I must be a really boring person. Nobody wants to talk to me!” What about if you were to think, “Mike’s probably waiting for a friend to come. Maybe he’s getting a bit anxious.” You probably realised that you felt three different emotions as a result of those three different thoughts. Often, we are not aware of our thoughts and beliefs because they are so automatic and happen quickly. But they are there, and they affect the way we feel.

Why do I feel distressed?

We’ve talked about the way our thoughts affect how we feel. If we are feeling happy and excited, chances are we have been thinking positive thoughts and about positive things. On the other hand, if we are feeling anxious, depressed, and upset, it is very likely that we have been thinking negative thoughts. We call these unhelpful thoughts (simply because they lead to unpleasant feelings or unhelpful actions!). All of us, at times, think things that make us feel sad or anxious, and that is a normal part of life. However, if you often feel distressed or upset, you might need to examine your thinking in order to improve how you feel.

Feelings are not Thoughts

When we first try to distinguish thoughts from feelings, it can be easy to confuse them. We might be used to talking about thoughts and feelings as being part of the same experience, but it is more helpful to separate them and

remember that feelings are not thoughts. For example, you might hear a person saying “I *think* I’m anxious,” but they’re probably *thinking* “Everyone will laugh at me,” and *feel* anxious. More commonly, you might hear someone saying something like “I *feel* that my boyfriend doesn’t appreciate the gift I bought for him,” when they are actually *thinking* “My boyfriend doesn’t appreciate the gift I bought for him,” and *feel* hurt.

Unhelpful Thinking Styles

What sorts of thoughts are unhelpful? Unhelpful thoughts are those that tend to focus on the negative aspects of a situation, or those that overestimate the chances of a negative event occurring, or those that place unrealistic demands on yourself or others. These are also often known as unhelpful thinking styles because they are patterns of thinking that have become a habit and contribute to a person feeling unhelpful negative feelings.

What Can I Do?

Plenty! There are lots of things you can do to help yourself feel better, and this next suggestion has been proven to be pretty effective. If unhelpful thoughts lead to distressing emotions, then it might be quite reasonable to say that the most effective thing to do would be to change those unhelpful thoughts to helpful ones! Yeah? Okay, so, how can you do that?

First, identify how or what you are feeling. Then, ask yourself “What am I thinking? What conclusions am I making?” to see how and why you are feeling distressed. Remember, unhelpful thoughts will lead to you feeling upsetting emotions.

The next step is to challenge your thinking by exploring other possible explanations and looking at a situation from different points of view. You might ask yourself, “What other ways are there of viewing this situation? How might someone else view this situation? What other explanations could there be?”



The final step is to ask yourself, “How can I revise my original thoughts to take into account these other possible viewpoints?” Then, think of an alternative explanation. This becomes your new, balanced, and helpful thought. A balanced and helpful thought or belief is one that takes into consideration alternative viewpoints and helps you feel better. Replace your original, unhelpful thought with this new, balanced, and helpful belief. Once you have done this, you will probably find that you feel better and your mood will be improved.

thinking & feeling

People often believe that the feelings and emotions they experience are determined by external events, situations, and the behaviour of others. For example, we may hear ourselves say, "My boss made me so nervous," "My partner made me so angry," "This trip down south made me feel so relaxed," or "I'm depressed because I didn't get the job I wanted." What is the assumption underlying these statements? That someone or something other than ourselves was directly determining the feelings we experienced.

We come to these conclusions automatically without asking ourselves if this assumption is true. However, if we stop to analyse the process that links an external situation to our emotional responses, we will find that there is a step in between.

How Our Thoughts Influence Our Feelings

What really makes us feel and respond the way we do, is often not the situation or the words and actions of another person, but how we perceive that situation or that person's actions. It is how we see something or someone and what we think about it or them that really influences how we feel. It is our thoughts and beliefs about an event that significantly influences our emotions and actions.

Here's an example. Suppose you went to a party and your host introduces you to Mike. As you talk to him, you notice that he does not look directly at you but often looks around the room. How would you feel if you thought, "Boy, this guy is so rude! He won't even look at me while I'm talking with him! How nasty!" What if you thought, "Mike must think that I'm really unattractive and uninteresting. I must be a really boring person. Nobody wants to talk to me!" What about if you were to think, "Mike's probably waiting for a friend to come. Maybe he's getting a bit anxious." You probably realised that you felt three different emotions as a result of those three different thoughts. Often, we are not aware of our thoughts and beliefs because they are so automatic and happen quickly. But they are there, and they affect the way we feel.

What am I Feeling?

It is often difficult to know exactly what we are feeling, and sometimes it can also be difficult to put it into words. The list below contains words that describe feelings, and this might be a useful starting point in you being able to understand the connection between your thinking and your feelings.

Words That Describe Feelings

Tense	Enraged	Frightened	Cheerful
Annoyed	Happy	Panicky	Euphoric
Unhappy	Exhilarated	Frustrated	Mad
Exuberant	Keyed-up	Scared	Uneasy
Anxious	Irritated	Flat	Sad
Depressed	Joyful	Tired	Discouraged
Angry	Excited	Nervous	Jealous

This is only a limited list but it should give you an idea of the kinds of words we could use to describe our feelings.

Automatic thoughts

Just as we are not always conscious of the way we walk or how we drive a car, we are often not aware of our thinking. Some of our thinking is so habitual that it is automatic, and just like driving, when things are automatic, we might not be conscious of them. All of the time, our brains are turning over thoughts and ideas. However, we are not consciously aware of most of them because it happens relatively fast and we are not accustomed to slowing them down. Our automatic thoughts, however, play an important role in our emotional well-being.

There are three kinds of automatic thoughts:

Neutral thoughts, e.g. "I think I will buy some bread today."

Positive thoughts, e.g. "This is something I can do really well."

Negative thoughts, e.g. "I often find it hard to concentrate – I must be really stupid."



Automatic thoughts often reflect worries and concerns, however they can be about anything at all, anything we have ever seen, heard or learned. In addition, it can be anything we know about from any source at all. Obviously, though, negative automatic thoughts are the ones that can cause us emotional distress. People who are depressed tend to think negative thoughts about themselves, the world about them, and their future, and it is these thoughts that can be changed to lift your depression.

Feelings are not Thoughts

When we first try to distinguish thoughts from feelings, it can be easy to confuse them. We might be used to talking about thoughts and feelings as being part of the same experience, but it is more helpful to separate them and remember that feelings are not thoughts. For example, you might hear a person saying "I *think* I'm anxious," but they're probably *thinking* "Everyone will laugh at me," and *feel* anxious. More commonly, you might hear someone saying something like "I *feel* that my partner doesn't appreciate the gift I bought for him," when they are actually *thinking* "My partner doesn't appreciate the gift I bought for him," and *feel* hurt.

Being aware of your feelings and your thoughts is the first step towards feeling better. If thinking influences feelings, then it makes sense that if you want to change the way you feel, you need to change the way you think. Look out for the information flyer entitled "Changing the Way You Think" for more details on how to do this.

what are core beliefs?



By now you are probably becoming used to the process of challenging your thinking in a range of situations. You know how to identify the thoughts that are causing you distress and how to challenge them and replace them with more balanced thoughts. However, you might notice that there are times when it is harder to believe the new balanced thought and the old unhelpful thoughts seem to be very powerful. You might notice that this happens in certain kinds of situations.

A possible explanation for this 'difficulty in letting go' of an unhelpful thought is that there may be a strong core belief at the root of that unhelpful thought. **Core beliefs** are the very essence of how we see ourselves, other people, the world, and the future. Sometimes, these core beliefs become 'activated' in certain situations. Here's an example:

Erica is able to challenge her thinking in most situations. However, she has noticed that she has trouble challenging her thinking in situations involving her flatmates and friends. In these situations, she has recognised that her thinking is often about being unlikeable. In fact, when she really looks hard at her thinking, she can see that often the underlying self-statement is, "I'm unlovable."

Core beliefs, such as the one from the above example, develop over time, usually from childhood and through the experience of significant life events or particular life circumstances. Core beliefs are strongly-held, rigid, and inflexible beliefs that are maintained by the tendency to focus on information that supports the belief and ignoring evidence that contradicts it. For example, Erica focuses on any feedback from her flatmates that isn't positive and then uses this to confirm that yet again she is unlikeable. Even neutral statements from her flatmates and friends are often interpreted as negative. Over the years, this narrow focus gives strength to the belief and Erica no longer thinks to question it. It is just totally and absolutely accepted. It is not surprising, then, that these types of beliefs are the hardest to shake.

Identifying Themes from Thought Diaries

So, how can you start identifying your core beliefs? The first step is to look over your Thought Diaries to see if your 'hot' thoughts have any common themes. You might notice that there are certain patterns to your thoughts – similar themes that occur in the B columns. Look closely at these to identify the patterns. You may become aware of one or two common themes found in the things you say about yourself, others, and the world.

Identifying A Core Belief

The process of identifying a core belief is not a great deal different from what you have already been doing in your thought diaries. Essentially, the idea is to extend the hot thought further to reveal the bottom line or root of what you might be thinking. Use questions such as: "If that's true, what does that mean?" "What's bad about that?" "What does that say about me?"

This process is like sifting through the layers of self-talk to get at what is at the bottom layer. Now, you are ready to challenge your core beliefs. Even though these beliefs are strongly held, it is important that they are challenged, just like any unhelpful thoughts. Once you have fully identified what you are telling yourself, you can begin to see if your core beliefs hold up against all that you have experienced. This process of challenging your core beliefs may not be an easy one. If you find the process too difficult or distressing, do consider seeing a mental health professional and discussing this with them.

Challenging Your Core Beliefs

To evaluate and challenge your core beliefs, ask yourself "What experiences do I have that show that this belief is not completely true all the time?" List as many experiences, and be as specific, as possible. Remember to write down everything even when you're not sure if they are relevant. When you have considered all the experiences you have written down, develop an alternative, balanced core belief. Remember that these experiences show that your unhelpful core belief is not completely true all the time. What would be an appropriate balanced and helpful core belief? Write this down.

Behavioural Experiments

You could also try doing a behavioural experiment to challenge those hard-to-budge unhelpful core beliefs. The purpose of doing an experiment is to find out how true your core beliefs are. Here's how you could conduct an experiment.

1. Write down the core belief you want to test
2. Think of a few tasks you could do to test your core belief
3. Write down what you would expect would happen if your core belief were true
4. Carry out the tasks
5. Record what actually happened when you carried out the tasks
6. Compare the actual results with your prediction and write down what you might have learned from the experiment. Then, write down a new balanced belief that fits with your conclusion.

Following Through

You might find it useful to write your balanced core beliefs onto cards that you can carry around with you as a reminder when this type of thinking is triggered. Once you've developed balanced core beliefs, follow through on them. Balanced core beliefs require careful nurturing and 'tender loving care.' Affirm yourself by using positive self-statements, remind yourself of all the evidence against the unhelpful core belief. Also, **act against** your unhelpful core belief. Ask yourself, "If I really believed my balanced belief, what are the things I would do?" Then, go out and do them. The more you do these things, the more you will come to believe your balanced beliefs. Over time, these new core beliefs will be integrated into your belief system.

analysing your thinking

We've talked about the way our thoughts affect how we feel. If we are feeling happy and excited, chances are, we have been thinking positive thoughts and about positive things. On the other hand, if we are feeling anxious, depressed, and upset, it is likely that we have been thinking negative thoughts. We call these unhelpful thoughts (simply because they lead to unpleasant feelings or unhelpful actions!). All of us, at times, think things that make us feel sad or anxious, and that is a normal part of life. However, if you often feel distressed or anxious, you might need to examine your thinking to improve how you feel.

If unhelpful thoughts lead to distressing emotions, then it might be quite reasonable to say that the most effective thing to do is to change those unhelpful thoughts to helpful ones!



So, how can you do that? To start influencing the way you feel, you need to learn to be aware of, and "capture," those unhelpful thoughts and beliefs, with the ultimate aim of changing them. To do that, let's start with doing an ABC analysis.

The ABC analysis begins with identifying the '**A**' which stands for '**Activating Event**.' Simply write down an event or a situation in which you experienced a strong negative emotion, such as, depression. Record the situation the same way a video camera might record it – just the facts. This means that you do not include your thoughts about why the situation occurred, who was responsible, and how you felt about it. Just describe the event simple, without any 'frills.'

The next step is to identify the '**C**' which stands for '**Consequences**,' and this includes both your feelings and your actions/behaviour. Write down the words that best describe your feelings. When you have written down these words, rate the intensity of the emotion from 0 to 100. The higher the number, the more intense the emotion. Have a look at all those feelings and then choose the feeling that best represents the emotion you actually felt at the time and underline it. You might also want to note any actions that you carried out, for example, drawing all the curtains, putting on the answering machine, and going to bed.

Now, bearing in mind the situation and the feelings you experienced, identify the '**B**,' which represents your '**Beliefs**' or thoughts, expectations, perceptions, and attitudes. Ask yourself "What was I thinking of when the event occurred?" "What was going through my mind at the time?" Write down all of these thoughts in a list. When you have completed this task, read through each statement and then underline the thought that is most associated with the primary emotion you felt during the '**A**'. We'll now call it your hot thought. Now rate how much you believe this thought on a scale from 0 to 100.

Let's look at an example. Imagine walking into a party and feeling anxious. To do an ABC analysis, you might ask yourself, "How am I making myself anxious? What am I thinking?" You might identify a thought such as, "I don't want to be here." If you only had this thought, you'd probably not experience a strong emotion but only feel mildly anxious. If you do experience a strong emotional response to this thought, it probably indicates that there are other thoughts underlying this thought. Therefore, the thought, "I don't want to be here" is only an initial thought, and you would need to discover what other unhelpful thoughts were present to invoke such a strong emotional response.

How to Uncover Your Unhelpful Thoughts

By asking yourself a number of questions, you can uncover any other unhelpful thoughts underlying an initial thought. Let's use the example of being at the party to identify the unhelpful thoughts underlying the initial thought "I don't want to be here." The following is a description of the thoughts that might be going through your head as you uncover other unhelpful thoughts. The questions in bold are your unhelpful thought discovery questions.



"I don't want to be here".

"I don't want to be here because...?"

"...people will look at me and know that I am depressed"

"...and that is bad because...?"

"Well, they will think something is wrong with me"

"...and what is bad about that..?"

"....They will think I'm crazy!"

"...and what does that say about me?"

".....that I must be crazy."



Your task is to become an expert at identifying your unhelpful thoughts. Sometimes, one or two thoughts might not represent the other unhelpful ones you might have had. As such, to get to those other thoughts, you might need to ask some of the following questions, called Thought Discovery Questions:

"What is bad about that?"

"What is it that I see happening in this situation?"

"What am I concluding about myself or others in this situation?"

"... and that is bad because ..."

"... and what does this say about me ...?"

It is best to be as specific as you can, even if some of your unhelpful thoughts sound stupid or embarrassing when you think about them. Discovering your unhelpful thoughts, no matter how silly they sound, is important in learning how to better manage your mood.

After you have done this, the next step is to do some 'Detective Work' and 'Disputation.' At this point, it is important that you understand how to identify your feelings and thoughts surrounding a particular situation, especially one in which you experienced unhelpful, negative emotions. When a person experiences unhelpful emotions, they might get a stronger physical reaction in their body, such as a tightness in the chest when anxious, an increase in blood pressure when angry, or a sense of heaviness when depressed. Emotions such as depression, guilt, fear, rage, and anxiety might also lead to avoidance and unhelpful behaviours towards yourself and others, get in the way of effective problem solving, and contribute to long term difficulties such as hypertension, heart disease, interpersonal problems, and psychological problems. Doing the ABC analysis is taking the first step toward learning to better manage your mood and helping yourself feel better.

changing your thinking

In the handout 'Thinking & Feeling,' we established that it is our thoughts that influence our feelings, emotions, and behaviours – the thoughts and feelings connection. We also discussed and identified some unhelpful thinking patterns and styles that we frequently use. Often, a depressed person will think negative thoughts that are characterised by these unhelpful thinking patterns, which lead them to feel depressed, miserable, and distressed. This, in turn, maintains and perpetuates the depression.

The key to changing the way we feel is found in challenging and changing our unhelpful thoughts and beliefs. This begins with you taking a good hard look at them. Imagine that you are a detective and a lawyer, and your unhelpful thoughts and beliefs are to be investigated or on trial.

To assess whether or not your thoughts and beliefs are valid, you need to gather and examine evidence. As such, we liken this process to that of being a detective. This is the fourth step (or **D**) that follows on from the ABC Analysis.

Detective Work

“**D**” stands for “Detective Work” where you look for evidence that does or does not support your thoughts and beliefs. Like all good detectives, we need to find out the facts, and gather the evidence. Here are some helpful questions:

- Where is the evidence (or proof) that my thoughts/beliefs are true?
- Are there any evidence that disproves my thoughts/beliefs?
- How do I know that my thoughts/beliefs are true?
- Are there facts that I'm ignoring or I've overlooked?
- What other explanations could there possibly be?
- How realistic are my thoughts, beliefs, and expectations?



Disputation

“**D**” also stands for “Disputation.” Remember, you are also like a lawyer, asking questions that challenge your thoughts, beliefs and expectations, ultimately testing and challenging whether or not they stand true, and whether they help or hinder you. Here are some other helpful questions to ask yourself:

- What other ways are there of viewing the situation?
- How might someone else view the situation?
- If I were not depressed, how might I view the situation differently?
- Realistically, what is the likelihood of that happening?
- Is it helpful for me to think this way?

Detective work and disputation is about trying to be objective about our thoughts. It is about analysing them, assessing, and evaluating them to see if they are indeed valid and true, as opposed to accepting these thoughts and believing them without question.

The End Result

We've spent some time examining the link between thinking and feelings, and discussed how to identify your unhelpful thoughts and thinking styles. We've also talked about looking for evidence that might prove or disprove your unhelpful beliefs as well as considering other alternative ways of viewing the situation. Now let's look at how you can change the way you are thinking in order to improve how you are feeling.

By this time, you would have learned how to describe an **A**ctivating Event, identify your automatic and unhelpful **B**eliefs and thoughts (including the Hot Thought) that have contributed to your experiencing distressing emotions (**C**onsequences), and recognise a few unhelpful thinking styles you might have used. You would have also used the **D**etective Work and **D**isputation section to challenge your hot thought. Now, take a good look at the evidence you have listed and the answers to the other challenging questions. Is there enough evidence to believe that your hot thought is true all of the time? Are there other alternative explanations?

At this point, ask yourself, “How can I revise my hot thought to take into account all the evidence I have listed?” Then, write out an alternative explanation. This becomes your new, balanced thought. A balanced and helpful thought or belief is one that takes into consideration all the evidence, objective information, and alternative viewpoints. This is the fifth step of the ABC analysis – the **E**nd Result, where you replace your original, unhelpful thought with this new, balanced, and helpful belief.

After you have written down your new, balanced thought or belief, ask yourself, “How do I feel now?” Look at the most intense emotion you identified in section **C**, and re-rate how intense that emotion feels for you now. Often, you will find that it is not as extreme and distressing.

Finally, read through the Detective Work and Disputation section again, and re-rate how much you believe the hot thought now.

This final step of replacing your unhelpful (hot) thoughts with balanced thoughts is very important. Challenging your beliefs and evidence testing is the process of change, but the final step is where you **MAKE** the change. You'll probably find that this process becomes easier after some practice. So keep it up. Keep practising and remember that you can be your own expert at managing your moods!

calming technique

Everyone knows that breathing is an essential part of life, but did you know that breathing plays an essential role in anxiety? This information sheet will briefly discuss the role of breathing in anxiety and guide you through a simple calming technique that uses breathing patterns to help you relax.

Breathing is a powerful determinant of physical state. When our breathing rate becomes elevated, a number of physiological changes begin to occur. Perhaps you've noticed this yourself when you've had a fright; you might suddenly gasp, feel a little breathless and a little light-headed, as well as feeling some tingling sensations around your body. Believe it or not, the way we breathe is a major factor in producing these and other sensations that are noticeable when we are anxious.

Anxious breathing

You might already know that we breathe in oxygen – which is used by the body – and we breathe out carbon dioxide. In order for the body to run efficiently, there needs to be a **balance** between oxygen and carbon dioxide, and this balance is maintained through how fast and how deeply we breathe. Of course, the body needs different amounts of oxygen depending on our level of activity. When we exercise, there is an *increase* in both oxygen and carbon dioxide; in relaxation there is a *decrease* in both oxygen and carbon dioxide. In both cases the balance is maintained.

When we are anxious though, this balance is disrupted. Essentially, we take in more oxygen than the body needs – in other words we overbreathe, or *hyperventilate*. When this imbalance is detected, the body responds with a number of chemical changes that produce symptoms such as dizziness, light-headedness, confusion, breathlessness, blurred vision, increase in heart rate to pump more blood around, numbness and tingling in the extremities, cold clammy hands and muscle stiffness.

The normal rate of breathing is 10-12 breaths per minute – what's your breathing rate?

The Calming Technique

While overbreathing and hyperventilation are not specifically dangerous (it's even used in medical testing!), continued overbreathing can leave you feeling exhausted or "on edge" so that you're more likely to respond to stressful situations with intense anxiety and panic.



Gaining control over your breathing involves both slowing your rate of breathing and changing your breathing style. Use the calming technique by following these steps and you'll be on your way to developing a better breathing habit.

- 1 Ensure that you are sitting on a comfortable chair or laying on a bed
- 2 Take a breath in for 4 seconds (through the nose if possible)
- 3 Hold the breath for 2 seconds
- 4 Release the breath taking 6 seconds (through the nose if possible), then pause slightly before breathing in again.
- 5 Practise, practise, practise!

Breathing tips

- When you first begin changing your breathing, it may be difficult to slow your breathing down to this rate. You may wish to try using a 3-in, 1-hold, 4-out breathing rate to start off with.
- When you are doing your breathing exercises, make sure that you are using a stomach breathing style rather than a chest breathing style. You can check this by placing one hand on your stomach and one hand on your chest. The hand on your stomach should rise when you breathe in.
- Try to practise at least once or twice a day at a time when you can relax, relatively free from distraction. This will help to develop a more relaxed breathing habit. The key to progress really is practise, so try to set aside some time each day.

By using the calming technique, you can slow your breathing down and reduce your general level anxiety. With enough practice, it can even help to reduce your anxiety when you are in an anxious situation.

progressive muscle relaxation

One of the body's reactions to fear and anxiety is muscle tension. This can result in feeling "tense", or can lead to muscle aches and pains, as well as leaving some people feeling exhausted. Think about how you respond to anxiety. Do you "tense up" when you're feeling anxious? Muscle relaxation can be particularly helpful in cases where anxiety is especially associated to muscle tension. This information sheet will guide you through a common form of relaxation designed to reduce muscle tension.

Muscle tension

Muscle tension is commonly associated with stress, anxiety and fear as part of a process that helps our bodies prepare for potentially dangerous situations. Even though some of those situations may not actually be dangerous, our bodies respond in the same way. Sometimes we don't even notice how our muscles become tense, but perhaps you clench your teeth slightly so your jaw feels tight, or maybe your shoulders become. Muscle tension can also be associated with backaches and tension headaches.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

One method of reducing muscle tension that people have found helpful is through a technique called Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR). In progressive muscle relaxation exercises, you tense up particular muscles and then relax them, and then you practise this technique consistently.

preparing for relaxation

When you are beginning to practice progressive muscle relaxation exercises keep in mind the following points.

- **Physical injuries.** If you have any injuries, or a history of physical problems that may cause muscle pain, always consult your doctor before you start.
- **Select your surroundings.** Minimise the distraction to your five senses. Such as turning off the TV and radio, and using soft lighting.
- **Make yourself comfortable.** Use a chair that comfortably seats your body, including your head. Wear loose clothing, and take off your shoes.
- **Internal mechanics.** Avoid practicing after big, heavy meals, and do not practice after consuming any intoxicants, such as alcohol.

general procedure

- 1 Once you've set aside the time and place for relaxation, slow down your breathing and give yourself permission to relax.
- 2 When you are ready to begin, tense the muscle group described. Make sure you can feel the tension, but not so much that you feel a great deal of pain. Keep the muscle tensed for approximately 5 seconds.
- 3 Relax the muscles and keep it relaxed for approximately 10 seconds. It may be helpful to say something like "Relax" as you relax the muscle.
- 4 When you have finished the relaxation procedure, remain seated for a few moments allowing yourself to become alert.

Relaxation sequence

1. **Right hand and forearm.** Make a fist with your right hand.
2. **Right upper arm.** Bring your right forearm up to your shoulder to "make a muscle".
3. **Left hand and forearm.**
4. **Left upper arm.**
5. **Forehead.** Raise your eyebrows as high as they will go, as though you were surprised by something.
6. **Eyes and cheeks.** Squeeze your eyes tight shut.
7. **Mouth and jaw.** Open your mouth as wide as you can, as you might when you're yawning.
8. **Neck. !!!** Be careful as you tense these muscles. Face forward and then pull your head back slowly, as though you are looking up to the ceiling.
9. **Shoulders.** Tense the muscles in your shoulders as you bring your shoulders up towards your ears.
10. **Shoulder blades/Back.** Push your shoulder blades back, trying to almost touch them together, so that your chest is pushed forward.
11. **Chest and stomach.** Breathe in deeply, filling up your lungs and chest with air.
12. **Hips and buttocks.** Squeeze your buttock muscles
13. **Right upper leg.** Tighten your right thigh.
14. **Right lower leg. !!!** Do this slowly and carefully to avoid cramps. Pull your toes towards you to stretch the calf muscle.
15. **Right foot.** Curl your toes downwards.
16. **Left upper leg.** Repeat as for right upper leg.
17. **Left lower leg.** Repeat as for right lower leg.
18. **Left foot.** Repeat as for right foot.

Practice means progress. Only through practice can you become more aware of your muscles, how they respond with tension, and how you can relax them. Training your body to respond differently to stress is like any training – practising consistently is the key.