

Dealing with anxious thinkingⁱ

1. What is anxious thinking?

When you are anxious, there are changes in the way you think, as well as in how you feel. Once you are feeling anxious, you tend to look on the black side of everything and imagine that unpleasant and frightening things are going to happen. These thoughts then make you even more anxious. Everyone looks ahead and tries to foresee and avoid problems. But in anxious thinking, the balance between expecting the worst and expecting good things is disturbed. Anxious thinking is distorted thinking. It is when you worry before anything happens, when you expect the worst, when you tell yourself that you won't be able to cope and there is no real reason to think this. Unrealistic and negative thinking can trigger anxiety and slow down recovery.

Can you relate to the example below?

Disagreement with a colleague

Person A	Person B
She doesn't agree with me; she thinks what I said was stupid	So we have a different point of view. That is OK
I am a fool; I should not talk	It was interesting to discuss our different ideas
I can't handle it; I am getting out of here	If she has a problem, then too bad
Anxiety/panic	Interested/stimulated

Learning to recognize unrealistic, frightening thoughts and to balance them with more realistic, reassuring ones can be very helpful. However, changing your way of thinking is quite difficult at first and you will need to keep working at it. It may help to enlist the help of someone you trust.

2. Identify anxious and negative thinking

Negative and frightening thoughts can be difficult to spot because they become a habit, they can flash quickly into your mind and most of us are not used to noticing our thoughts. Learning to spot and catch these troublesome thoughts is a skill you can master with time.

When you are anxious, you tend to think in particular, distorted ways. These are called 'thinking errors'. Here are some common examples. Try to spot the ones that apply to you.

- ❑ *Thinking the worst*, eg 'The pain in my chest means there is something wrong with my heart'.
- ❑ *Predicting that the worst will happen*, eg 'They won't like me. They'll think I'm stupid'.
- ❑ *Exaggerating negatives*, eg 'I made a complete mess of it. It was an absolute disaster'.
- ❑ *Overgeneralizing* — *if something happens once, you think it will always happen*, eg if you feel anxious at the supermarket checkout, thinking 'I'm always anxious when I go

out'.

- ❑ *All-or-nothing thinking*, eg 'Unless I do it with no mistakes at all, I have failed'.
- ❑ *Imagining that you know what other people are thinking*, eg 'I can tell they are thinking what a fool I am'.

You may also have beliefs about yourself and about other people that are unrealistic. Anxious people often imagine that other people are judging them harshly. Here are some examples of beliefs that make people more likely to be overly anxious. Mark the ones that apply to you.

- ❑ When people look at me, they are examining what I do.
- ❑ If I am criticized, it means that I am wrong.
- ❑ If I make a mistake, it means I am stupid.
- ❑ If I don't agree with people, they won't like me.
- ❑ To be a good person, I have to be nice to everyone.
- ❑ If someone is hurt or offended by what I do, this means I am a bad person.
- ❑ If I show emotion, it means that I am weak.
- ❑ People will think that there is something wrong with me if they see that I am anxious.
- ❑ The opinions of other people about me are very important.
- ❑ I am afraid that I look or sound silly to other people.
- ❑ I can tell that people will evaluate me negatively.
- ❑ I have to be very careful about what I say in case I offend someone.
- ❑ Approval is very important to me.
- ❑ Being anxious is a sign of weakness.
- ❑ When people see me behave like this, they will talk badly of me to others.

If you have other unrealistic beliefs, write them below or use separate sheet of paper

eg if someone is late, I assume there has been an accident.

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.....
.....

3. How do you change the way you think?

It is likely that you have been thinking in an unrealistic or a negative way for some time now. You may find it quite difficult at first to change the way you think and this may trigger more negative thoughts, such as 'I'm useless. I can't do anything right'. You may need help from a friend or from your health worker. Give yourself time. **Remember you can learn to think more realistically and this will make a huge difference in your life.**

Here are some suggestions:

First, write down your negative or frightening thoughts as soon as possible. If it's difficult to notice any thoughts, try noticing when you feel down and ask, 'What went through my mind just before I started feeling anxious'.

Second, ask yourself, 'Is this belief that I have true?' In order to do this, it may help to:

- consult someone outside the situation for their opinion
- ask yourself whether everyone would have the same belief in this situation
- ask yourself if the belief is true in every situation

- examine the other similar situations
- examine other explanations for the event occurring
- ask yourself if you could be making a mistake in the way you are thinking.

Third, counter each unrealistic/negative thought with a more realistic, reassuring one:

- these should be different to the unrealistic belief
- try to come up with realistic statements
- try to produce as many counters as possible.

Examples

Please read the following example and then try to create your own examples. Try to find solutions to them using the same method.

SITUATION: Anxious eating in a restaurant

Unreasonable frightening or negative thoughts:

- I am sure they know that I am anxious and my fork is shaking.
- They will think that I am strange.
- They will think that I am a fool.
- I hope they will not tell anyone.
- I wish I could get out of here.

Resulting feelings: Panic

Balancing reassuring or positive thoughts:

- It is unlikely that they have noticed my anxiety.
- It is more noticeable to me than to them.
- If they were to think anything they would probably think that I was shy.
- Even if they did think that I was anxious they would not think badly of me.
- I will try to stay focused on the meal and our conversation.

Resulting feelings: Manageable anxiety

It is important that you make these statements even when you don't really believe them. If you make reassuring or positive statements often, you will find that the frightening or self-critical thoughts that used to occur automatically gradually disappear.

Now you can work through your own examples. Write down a situation that has made you anxious and any thoughts you may have had and the resulting feelings. Next, opposite each frightening thought, write down a more balanced thought and any new feelings. You will find that after practising this technique for a while, you get much better at balancing your thoughts.

Remember it will take time to change the way you think and feel.

ⁱ Adapted, with permission, from World Health Organization. *Mental Disorders in Primary Care, a WHO Education Package*, 1998.