Coping with Worry and Anxiety

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It's that tense, frightened feeling that people get when they feel threatened. Sometimes, it is described as being "scared," "nervous," " jittery," or "uneasy." Almost everyone has had this emotion at times although it is given many different names. It is a feeling which makes people want to get away or get out of a situation. Anxiety will occur at some point in everyone's life and be at least a minor problem.

The brain is programmed to feel anxious in certain circumstances, such as being at extreme heights or around wild animals. Thus, anxiety can be a helpful emotion in situations where there is danger. The body is preparing for a threat and marshaling its resources to respond. The problem in anxiety disorders is that there is usually no real danger. Healthy anxiety helps persons be prepared for threatening situations while excessive, unhealthy anxiety is being triggered when there is really no need.

Anxiety can be caused biologically or psychologically. On a psychological level, it can be brought about by the perception that something dangerous is about to happen. On a physical level, there are areas of the brain which are responsible for translating perceptions of danger into anxiety. If genetic or biological flaws cause heightened activity in these areas of the brain, then there can be strong levels of anxiety even without danger being present.

There are a variety of types of anxiety as well as diagnoses for anxiety. This chapter/handout deals with what might be called general or "garden variety" anxiety. In technical terms, this is usually referred to as either Adjustment Disorder with Anxious Mood or Generalized Anxiety Disorder. Sometimes anxiety is clearly attached to one particular situation, as in an adjustment disorder. Other times it is not. It may be free-floating or attached to a variety of problems, as in Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD). Persons with GAD feel out of control and overwhelmed by their worries. Their minds tend to dwell on many different potential difficulties. GAD is more than just a feeling. It also involves a variety of other symptoms, some of which are more mental and psychological and others of which are more physical. There is no clear division between brain, mind, and body in anxiety. In addition to worry, persons with GAD tend to have difficulty concentrating and problems with irritability. Examples of physical symptoms of anxiety include being restless or "keyed up," fatigue, muscle tension or aches, and difficulty sleeping.

Adjustment Disorder with Anxious Mood is defined as occurring when there is anxiety in response to an identifiable stressor that has occurred in the last 3 months. The anxiety has to be either in excess of what would normally be expected, or there has to be "significant impairment" arising from it, such as at home, socially, at work, or at school.

This chapter/handout will deal with Generalized Anxiety Disorder and Adjustment Disorder with Anxious Mood. Other chapter/handouts deal with Panic Disorder (acute attacks of acute anxiety), Phobic Disorder (avoidance of specific situations), Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (the

compulsion to repeat certain actions over and over to prevent anxiety), and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (anxiety symptoms which persist long after a major or life-threatening trauma).

Did You Know...

--More than 23 million people have some type of anxiety disorder in any particular year.
--Over the course of a lifetime one out of four persons in the United States will have an anxiety disorder.
--Three to four percent of the persons in the U.S. have Generalized Anxiety Disorder.
--It is estimated that the direct costs (such as treatment) and indirect costs (such as missed days of work) for all forms of anxiety to our society may reach $46 billion ($46,000,000,000) dollars per year.
--The majority of people with anxiety disorders never seek treatment.
--Anxiety and depression often occur together. When they do occur together, the anxiety usually comes first.

Understanding Anxiety

There are several important things to understand about anxiety including:

--The nature of the problem and how it affects the body
--How it affects a person's ability to perform
--Actions that will help one cope with anxiety

Some persons experience a sense of shame regarding their anxiety. A first step in overcoming this problem any sense of guilt or inadequacy stemming from it. Persons with anxiety often feel that they are weak or defective and may treat it like a secret which must be hidden in a closet. Anxiety is a normal bodily reaction which has become exaggerated. When a person feels ashamed of such feelings, it creates a problem on top of a problem. Shame blocks the ability of persons to view the anxiety problem clearly and to deal with it as they would deal with any other difficulty.

To understand the nature of anxiety, it is helpful to think about how a person in the stone age (the "Cave Man") would have responded to the world around him. His world would have been fairly dangerous, even more so than the one we live in today. Threats from wild animals would be very real. There would also be threats from natural disasters and other men. There would be very little protection except what he could provide for himself. In this situation. When in danger his body would need some way of mobilizing its resources very quickly for "fight or flight." The person would not have the time to think, "Let's see, there's a saber tooth tiger over there. I need to tense my muscles up so that I can be ready to run or to fight." The body would have to become mobilized for action almost instantaneously. This was and still is accomplished through the sympathetic part of the autonomic nervous system. The autonomic nervous system is the part of the nervous system over which persons have no control. It governs such bodily processes as heart rate, breathing, and digestion. The sympathetic part of the autonomic nervous system is

designed to gear up the body for fight or flight by pumping adrenalin into the blood stream. This mobilization response can literally save the person's life in times of emergency with increased heart action, faster breathing, increased muscle tension, and increased blood pressure. The pupils dilate so that objects can be seen better in the dark. The blood in our body is channeled away from the surface of the skin and is shunted toward deeper muscle tissue where it is needed for movement. Blood is channeled away from the surface of the skin down into the muscle, causing colder feet and hands.

Understand Your Fight or Flight Response
Cardiovascular effects (rapid beating of the heart) Rapid breathing Increase in perspiration Increase in muscle tone Decrease in digestion Decrease in salivation Widening of pupils Cognitive/perceptual searching for danger Drive to escape ("I've got to get out of here" feeling)

While the fight or flight response helped humans survive all of these years, in a modern situation, this response can actually get in the way. People don't always benefit from a fight or flight response. The dangers that we face today are often more psychological, social, or financial rather than physical. The threats of losing a job or losing a relationship are usually not helped by the fight or flight response. They are better prepared for by action of a different sort. Imagine, for example, sitting behind your desk when the boss walks in. He informs you that there are going to be major layoffs in the company and that you are going to be one of the persons laid off. You may feel some immediate anxiety. Perhaps your heart starts pumping blood more quickly. Your respiration and breathing might increase. If you are of the angry, volatile sort, you might even want to walk around your desk and try to physically intimidate your boss (we don't recommend this). None of these bodily responses would be useful in that situation although they were adaptive for early humans.

There are some situations where the fight or flight response can still be helpful, however. Imagine that you are walking down a dark street. A mugger or someone who appears menacing begins to move towards you. Now your fight or flight responses are very healthy and adaptive. Your body is quickly mobilized to run away or to turn and fight. In this situation the anxiety you are experiencing is directly related to a very healthy response within your body. The anxiety is a signal that you need to do something. It helps motivates the mind and body for immediate action.

Read at Your Own Risk!!! Technical information in the next paragraph!!!

Understand What is Going on in Your Body

During stress, a chain reaction of physical and chemical processes prepares the body for a fight or flight situation. After the logical, thinking part of the brain recognizes that danger is present, another part of the brain, the hypothalamus releases Corticotrophic Hormone Releasing Factor (CRF). This in turn stimulates the pituitary (the "master gland") to release Adrenocorticotrophic Hormone (ACTH). The release of ACTH triggers the secretion of cortisol from the adrenal cortex (the adrenals are located on the kidneys) to provide energy and to help suppress inflammation. Through a neural pathway (that is, via a nerve rather than chemical release in the blood stream), the adrenals are also stimulated to produce more chemicals called catecholamines (adrenalin and noradrenalin). These in turn serve to accelerate the pulse rate, elevate blood pressure, and stimulate the central nervous system. Noradrenalin constricts the peripheral blood vessels and inhibits gastrointestinal activity. The net effect of the catecholamines is increased blood pressure and blood flow to skeletal muscles as the body prepares for flight or fight.

Whew! That was technical. So, why is all this important? The only reason this is mentioned here is because it can help you understand that you are just being human when anxiety and physical symptoms start to occur. There are straightforward reasons for all of the different types of anxiety symptoms. Another reason why it is important to understand the physical nature of anxiety is that unfortunately, friends, family and even counselors or physicians have a way of telling individuals with psychological disorders that their problems are "in their minds." Nothing could be further from the truth--at least with anxiety. Anxiety is all in the mind, the brain, the body, the nerve cells, the bloodstream, and many other places in the body as well.

There is also growing evidence that a tendency towards excessive anxiety and physical and emotional reactivity may develop in the body as a result of repeated trauma in childhood. This tendency to overreact with fear is not a decision on the person's part. Instead, it is resultant effect of overwhelming stress in childhood which is encoded in some fashion in the brain.

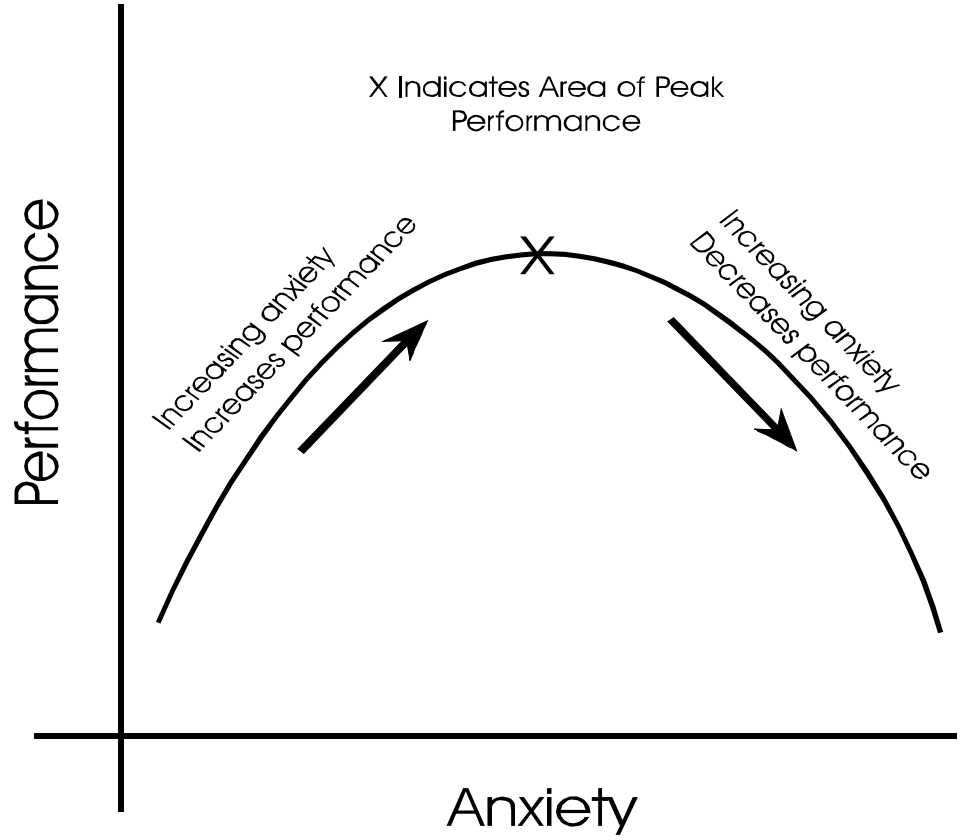
Thinking Processes Change in Anxiety Too

When persons are anxious, their minds are more likely to focus on dangerous and threatening situations. It becomes more difficult to think in a purely about neutral and positive information which is available. In addition, events which are not clearly either safe or harmful (ambiguous) are more likely to be interpreted by the mind as dangerous. This makes sense if the purpose of anxiety is considered. Anxiety is meant to help preserve the individual in dangerous situations. When faced with an ambiguous situation ("Is this is a stick or a snake? Is this harmful or not harmful?"), which interpretation is most likely to get the individual killed? Mistaking a dangerous animal for a non-dangerous one. Once the brain decides that a dangerous situation may be present and a state of anxiety is created, it quits being objective. It is willing to make a mistake on the side of caution. However, once anxiety becomes chronic and continues a particular danger, the usefulness of this mechanism is lost. Now, everything seems to be dangerous, and the person begins to avoid too many situations.

Understand How Worry and Anxiety Affect Your Ability to Perform

While anxiety is designed to help the individual survive, it can be self-defeating when it depletes psychological stamina and resources. Worrying often causes persons to freeze and to become passive rather than directing energy toward resolving their problems. Many individuals have some type of performance anxiety. Their nervousness gets in the way of something they need to do or want to do in front of other people. Small amounts of anxiety can help a person get "psyched up" to do something. As physical and psychological arousal increases, at first energy levels can be raised and concentration can be sharpened. These in turn increase a person's ability to perform. But the increase in performance as anxiety increases only works up to a point. After that, there begins to be a decrease in effectiveness. Once the anxiety is too high, persons will actually need to lower their nervousness and arousal. In a performance situation, it is important to remember that the goal is not to maximize drive, arousal, and anxiety (that is, pushing oneself harder and harder), but to maximize performance.

Performance and anxiety often correspond according to what is called an upside down "U shaped" curve. As anxiety first starts to increase, then performance increases. However, as anxiety continues to go up, a person may start to become panicked. Thinking processes may become fuzzy or stop entirely. Many individuals have had this experience on a test. One student, for example, studied intensively for a major exam. He studied hours on end and throughout the entire night before the test. In his mind it was extremely important. But when he walked in to take the test, his mind went blank. He was just too anxious to be able to perform.



The idea that one can do better by driving oneself less is difficult for some persons to understand. They may have learned to put extra pressure on themselves to heighten their performance. However, this strategy of pushing oneself harder and building up the importance of the task in one's mind can eventually backfire. If a person is coming into therapy with performance anxiety, then usually one of two things has happened. Either they have driven themselves to new heights of arousal and anxiety (so that performance has decreased), or their tolerance for anxiety has decreased, so that what used to produce optimal performance is now excessive. For this reason, sometimes the best way to perform better is to play down the importance of a situation.

FAQ: Frequently asked questions

Isn't it better to worry about something and be prepared for it rather than being caught off guard?

Some people feel that it is better not to be "blind sided" by situations, and for this reason they will worry almost constantly. However, the problem with this strategy is that constant negative thinking produces anxiety and depression. There is even some evidence that persistent worry somehow brings about real life negative events and thus becomes a "self-fulfilling prophecy."

What about using anti-anxiety medications (tranquilizers) for my nervousness?

Mental health professionals have a variety of opinions about this issue. For many severely anxious individuals the use of anti-anxiety medications may be extremely important for a short while, since psychological techniques may not work immediately, or they may not work sufficiently themselves. See Chapter/handout 17 on "Using Medications for Depression and Anxiety." Several of the anti-anxiety medications have to be used cautiously because of their potential to cause addiction. The use of anti anxiety medications needs to be temporary if possible. Most individuals can eventually handle their anxiety using psychological means alone.

Can a person inherit "nervousness?"

There is some evidence that anxiety disorders can be inherited. What is less clear is whether specific anxiety disorders are inherited or whether it is simply the tendency towards excessive anxiety that is passed on between generations.

Points to Ponder

If worry and negative thinking make us feel bad, why do we continue to do them? We don't touch a hot iron or a hot stove because we know what it is like to burned and feel the resultant pain. But we will continue to worry and to bombard ourselves with negative thoughts until we are very anxious. What is the difference between these two situations?

Coping with Anxiety

Now that you understand some basic concepts about anxiety, the next question is what to do about it. Here are some basic steps in coping with this problem.

Normalize Your Anxiety and Learn about It

It is important to overcome any feelings of shame, inadequacy, or guilt that you are experiencing because of anxiety. An anxiety disorder is not a moral weakness. It simply means that a process in your brain is too strong or has gotten out of hand. It may be due to being under excessive stress. Or it may be that you have inherited some tendency from your parents for high levels of anxiety. It may indicate that you need to learn some additional ways of coping. But it is not something of which to be ashamed. It is just a problem, and like any other problem it needs to be addressed.

Everything in this chapter/handout so far has been designed to help you learn about the nature of anxiety and to put its symptoms into the framework of being relatively normal bodily responses. Every time a person learns more about anxiety, it becomes less and less a mysterious "mental problem" and more and more just "a problem." This can make the difference as to whether you overcome it or whether it continues to terrify you. Most individuals would not make a big issue out of having a flat tire. It is neither mystical nor a "big deal." A problem with your car engine might be a rather large issue, and it might be a little mystifying to you. But most people don't feel that there is anything stigmatizing about it. It is still just a problem. In the same way, everything in this chapter/handout thus far has been designed to help translate anxiety into just another "problem." This is the first step in coping.

Intercept It Early

Worrying serves no purpose unless it leads to some type of constructive action. It often causes the individual to enter into a cycle of anxiety. The farther the individual goes into this whirlpool, the more difficult it is for them to bring themselves back up out of it. The key point to intercept

this downward cycle is as early in the process as possible. The power of the individual to control negative thinking decreases as the anxiety increases. Just like a ball that is starting to roll down a hill, the time to stop it is at the very beginning before it has gathered momentum.

Restrict Your Times for Worry and Thinking about Your Problems

It is also important to choose and limit the times you are going to think about your problems. Some individuals find that they awaken during the night and then begin worrying as they think about their difficulties. This makes it hard for them to go back to sleep and can be very upsetting. Usually, this is not a good time to think about problems. It is a time of low ebb physically and psychologically. Lying in bed in the dark without any external stimulation leads the mind to focus inward instead of outward. This allows anxiety and depression to flood the mind with negative thoughts. It also robs the person of sleep and can cause them to feel fatigued the next day. Many people find that a much better time to think about problems is when they are fully awake and at the peak of their energy. You may find that you have some part of the day in which you are most "up". During this time, you are likely to feel more capable of dealing with problems and less powerless. One solution if you find yourself worrying excessively while lying in bed at night is to promise yourself that you will think about your problems--but at a particular later time when you know that you will better able to take an active problem solving approach to your difficulties.

Using Relaxation to Counter Anxiety

In many ways, relaxation is the opposite of anxiety. Anxiety tenses muscles; relaxation helps them release and let go. Anxious tension can cause muscle discomfort and cramping. Relaxation is generally a pleasant sensation. Relaxation generally shifts the brain and body away from the fight or flight response (sympathetic activation) and towards a calmer mode of functioning (parasympathetic activation).

But how does a person go about achieving a state of relaxation? Below are some special techniques and exercises to help you learn to relax. However, relaxation is not just something which can occur during special times and places when you are performing the exercises. It is a skill which can be learned and used in everyday life. Moreover, relaxation is more than just letting go of muscle tension. For it to work, a person must also let go of the worries and negative thoughts which may be causing their tension in the first place.

The following exercises are meant to help you learn to relax better. By practicing these over a period of time, you will become better at them. These exercises are just like everything else in your life--the more you practice, the better you will become.

In becoming relaxed, it is helpful to breathe in a relaxed manner as well. The form of breathing which tends to be most associated with anxiety is rapid, shallow breathing in the upper chest area. Some studies have shown that persons who are more relaxed breathe slowly and deeply from their abdomens.

Time for Practice

Lie down on a bed or couch. Place your hand on your abdomen. Start with a deep, relaxing sigh. Breathe down low into the abdominal area and then let out the air slowly. Place your hand on that area of your stomach. Keep breathing slowly causing your hand to go up and down. Do this until it seems natural to you. Shift to upper chest breathing and breathe in a shallow and rapid manner. How does that make you feel? Now shift back again to slow breathing down low. How does that make you feel?

We gain the most control over a behavior when we can do both it and its opposite. Learn how to make yourself breathe in your diaphragm. Then practice breathing in your chest. Then by shifting back and forth, you will learn the difference in the two types of breathing.

To help slow your respiration, try breathing in through your nose and then, pursing your lips to blow out between them. This will make a gentle swishing sound and will slow your exhaling. For many persons, this produces a calming sensation.

Once you become adept at relaxation and slow breathing, you will find that you can do it in almost any situation without it being noticeable to others. You will be able to relax and breathe slowly even in a standing position.

Think to yourself: "Breathe in relaxation and blow out the tension. The tension is leaving my body each time I exhale. Each time I inhale, I am breathing in clean, fresh air that will relax me. I am blowing out my tension into the air."

Rate your relaxation before and after these exercises. Don't expect it to go down to zero, but strive to decrease your tension by several points on a 10 point scale.

More Practice

The Tense and Release Method of Relaxation

A common technique for relaxation is to tighten and release each muscle group one at a time. By causing the muscles to feel fatigued, this method makes it easier to let go of physical tension and to relax. It becomes pleasantly soothing to let go. An alternative is to focus directly on relaxing and to think of "letting go" of tension without first going through the tensing step.

The following exercise can be done with the muscle tightening and relaxing technique or by letting go of tension and relaxing each muscle group directly:

Get into a comfortable position in a place where there is little noise and subdued light. Clear your mind of thoughts. If you are feeling anxious, it may be difficult to calm your mind at first, but to the best of your ability, let go of anxiety producing thoughts. If you have been worrying over something and unable to stop your mind from dwelling on problems, tell yourself that you will go back to worrying about it later--that there is nothing gained by thinking about your problems over the next ten to fifteen minutes. If you are still having trouble getting negative thoughts out of your mind, try replacing them with pleasant images.

Start with your feet. Tense the muscles in them until they feel pleasantly tired but not until they cramp (approximately five to ten seconds). When the tired feeling starts to occur, then let go of the tension.

Imagine that the tension in your feet is just draining out of your body, flowing out into the air and leaving you. Or imagine that the tension is disappearing. Imagine what it is like when you dissolve sugar into water. It just disappears! You may want to imagine that your tension is just dissolving away and leaving your body.

Keep repeating in your mind that you are letting go of your tension.

Now proceed to your calves--first tensing them until they feel slightly tired and then letting go. There is no need to go fast. In fact, you may want to slow yourself down, spending 30 seconds to a minute on each muscle group. Fifteen minutes overall appears to be a good length of time for relaxation. For some people, listening to the ticking of a clock is a way of pacing themselves (counting out fifteen or thirty seconds per muscle group), and it may also be very calming. For other people, clocks represent time and the urgent need to do something, thus keeping them tense. So depending upon your particular personality, a clock may or may not be helpful.

Proceed to your thighs, hips, abdomen, chest, shoulders, upper arms, forearms, palms, and fingers. Then relax the neck, the jaw, your cheeks, around you mouth, around your eyes, your forehead, and your scalp.

Pay attention to areas which remain tense after you are through. These may be problem areas that you will need to spend more time on in the future.

Rate your tension from 0-10. Also note your anxiety. How has it changed from when you started?

Using Visual Imagery to Calm Yourself

Another way to relax yourself is through using pleasant, soothing images in your mind. Remembering a place and time which was safe and enjoyable can go a long ways towards calming anxiety. Almost everyone has had some experience at a place such as this. For one individual it might be a grandparent's house. For another, it might be a vacation spot in the mountains or at the beach. Scenes and images from childhood are often especially useful in this regard, although not for everyone.

Time for Practice

Again, place yourself in a comfortable position. Try to get rid of any noise or distraction. You may want to go through some of the relaxation exercise above in order to calm your mind and body, even if you don't have time to go through the entire relaxation procedure.
Now, image the scene which is most comforting to you. Use whatever image you wish. It doesn't have to be like any of the ones mentioned above. It is whatever calms you.

It can be helpful to reexperience the situation using as many of your senses as possible. If you are particularly good at visual imagery, you may be able to see some of the small details in the scene. Note the colors, the shapes, and the textures. Then move on to the sounds. What are you hearing in the scene? Even a calm mountain lake has some type of sounds associated with it, such as wind in the trees. At the beach, there are the sounds of the gulls and the waves coming in one after another.

What are you feeling on your skin? Is it the warmth of the beach and the sun? Or the soothing coolness of the mountain air?

Are there any tastes or smells in your scene?

And most of all, remember the good feelings that you had internally--feelings of happiness there. Allow yourself to soak these up, too.

On different occasions try using different scenes to see which ones are most effective for you.

Combat Anxiety by Changing Negative Thinking

In Chapter/handout #3 ("Coping with Negative Thoughts"), some specific ways of dealing with negative thinking are presented. Some types of negative thoughts are especially likely to lead to anxiety.

"Mind reading". This form of negative thinking involves beliefs that others are having unfriendly or critical thoughts towards the person. This can cause social anxiety and make it difficult to be around other people. Here is an example of a mind reading thought that might lead to anxiety in a public speaking situation:

> "I am going to bungle this. The people in the audience look bored. They are not interested in what I am saying. Now my voice is shaking. They probably feel I shouldn't even be up here. They are thinking that I should just sit down and quit wasting their time."

"Fortune telling." This is a type of worrying in which persons project negative outcomes into the future. They worry about what might happen as if it were a foregone conclusion or as if it had already happened. As a result, this type of thought causes people to feel anxious and upset about something that has not happened and may never happen. Here is an example of a fortune telling thought:

> "This job interview is going to be really terrible. I'm probably going to stammer, and my mind will freeze up."

It is not hard to imagine that this thought could actually become a self-fulfilling prophecy, and that the job applicant would be so nervous that she could actually cause the thought to come true.

If a person worries about the future, two things can happen. One is that the worries don't come true and that the person is making themselves miserable over something that will never happen. The other is that their worries will come true, but rather than going through the unpleasantness only once in the future, they will go through it over and over in their minds for weeks or months.

Many people who worry do not learn from experience. If something bad fails to materialize, then they breathe a sigh of relief and go on. Then the next time they are worried and concerned, they forget that the last time they worried, they were wrong about what was going to happen. They again believe that they know what is about to occur. Then when it fails to materialize--again--they breathe a sigh of relief and go on. And so it goes. What does it take for people to realize that they are not good fortune tellers? One way to overcome this problem is to make the mind clearly face the results of predictions, paying attention to what really happens. This can be accomplished by keeping a written list of everything that is worried about and what later occurs. If you are having fortune telling thoughts, generate testable predictions. Do you think you know what is going to happen in the next hour, the next day, the next week, etc.? Test these thoughts out and record the results. Then, later on when you are having fortune telling thoughts again, remind yourself of the outcome of past worries.

Time for Practice

Make a list of significant fortune telling thoughts. Record whether each one does or does not come true.

Fortune Telling Thought	*Outcome*

Points to Ponder

When I look back on all these worries I remember the story of the old man who said on his deathbed that he had had a lot of trouble in his life, most of which had never happened.

Winston Churchill, from Their Finest Hour

Catastrophizing. Exaggerating a threat may actually be the mind's attempt to ready itself for danger. However, this only tends to create more problems and more upset. When we catastrophize, we are over preparing. If we have to meet with our child's principal, we might catastrophize and "know" that he is going to "chew us out" or kick our child out of school. If there are rumors of job layoffs, we may feel sure that we are going to lose our job, our house, and everything else. In one sense, catastrophizing is simply fortune telling which has proceeded to the worst possible conclusion. The person is anticipating horrendous outcomes. As a result, she may start to feel immobilized.

Catastrophizing thoughts can be stacked one on top of another. Here is an example of such a chain of thoughts:

> "The company I work for is not doing well. It will probably have to cut back. I will lose my job. I will not be able to find another job. I will have to change my lifestyle, etc. My life as I have known it up until now will change for the worse and never be the same again. My wife will leave me. She'll take the kids. I'll be all alone. I'll probably go back to drinking."

For some clients, it is useful to look at the actual likelihood of an event by carefully multiplying out all of the probabilities. This is especially useful if a person is very comfortable with numbers and computation. Let's say that an individual is worried that he has made a mistake in his work and that he will get fired because of it. The first thing that has to happen is that a mistake has indeed been made. The next necessary step in the chain of events would have to be that the mistake caused a problem. The boss would also have to find out about it and take notice of it. The boss would have to become upset about it. The final step would be whether the boss decided that it was a big enough mistake to fire the person over it.

The probabilities might look like this:

Worry	**What is the Probability?**
I have made a mistake at work.	50% chance (.50)
It will cause a problem.	10% chance (.10)
The boss will notice.	70% chance (.70)
If he notices, he will be upset.	20% chance (.20)
If he is upset, he will fire me.	10% chance (.10)
Total probability (=.5 x.1 x.7 x.2 x.1)	.0007 or .07% or less than one chance in a thousand

In other words, the chances of him being fired by his own estimate are 7 out of ten thousand or less than one in one thousand! When a person focuses on an ultimate catastrophic outcome, it

starts to seem more and more likely that it will occur. However, if one looks at every event along the way which would have to happen, it becomes apparent that the final catastrophe is not likely to occur.

Another technique for working on catastrophizing and fortune telling is turning the tables on anxiety--desiring for the negative outcome to occur. When a person is anxious, the very fearfulness and negativity of the outcome actually seem to increase the feeling that it is likely to happen. By reversing whether the situation seems positive or negative, it is sometimes possible to alter the internal feeling of whether the event is likely to happen or not. This technique involves imagining that one actually wants the event to happen. There is an old TV show called "The Millionaire." In it, an eccentric billionaire gives away a million dollars each week to some individual. Now imagine that if your worries came true--if you were fired, flunked the test, left by your girlfriend, or whatever it is that you were worried about--then you would get one of those million dollar gifts. For some worries, this positive outcome would dwarf the feared event. The million dollars would more than compensate. So now instead of fearing the event, the worrier might (in her imagination) actually want it to happen. With a million dollars she wouldn't have to worry about getting a job. Her life would be easy. (Let's forget for the moment all of the philosophical issues that life might be less satisfying without work. After all, this is just a fantasy.) The tables have now been turned. The feared outcome is now a positive outcome because it will bring with it a million dollars. But now, all of a sudden, the chances of getting the million dollars may seem to fade as she begins to realize that the catastrophe is not likely to occur after all. Something will get in the way of her getting her fortune. The stupid teacher is likely to grade on the curve, and she won't flunk the test. Or the teacher will show mercy and not fail her after all. There goes the million dollars out the window. When a person imagines wanting the feared outcome to happen, they may find that they are suddenly pessimistic about whether it will occur. This is called turning the tables on anxiety.

A similar approach would be to ask oneself, "Would I bet a lot of money (or my house or something else important to me) that this feared outcome will really happen?" Oftentimes, when money enters the equation, people become more realistic. If you were to have to wager on whether the feared outcome was going to happen or was not going to happen, which way would you bet?

Emotional Reasoning. In anxiety, people may feel a sense of danger so strongly that they don't feel they need any concrete evidence that something bad is really about to happen. It is as if the person is saying to themselves, "I feel that there is some danger here; therefore it must be." This is basing the thought on the feeling rather than the feeling on the thought. The most logical way to react to a situation is to look at all the evidence and then come to a conclusion about whether it poses a threat. After reaching a conclusion in this way, then it may be logical to feel anxious. Human beings, however, don't always react logically, and in emotional reasoning thoughts are based on feelings rather than the other way around. For example, imagine a mother lets her son take the car after he has first gotten his drivers license. He is supposed to be home in an hour sharp. But at 6:15 he is still not home. She begins to feel anxious. By 6:30, she is so anxious that she starts to intuitively "feel" that something bad has happened. The more nervous she gets,

the more she believes that he has been in a wreck. After all, she considers herself an intuitive person. Then at 6:40, he walks in, the victim of nothing worse than a traffic jam, or perhaps bad judgement on his part.

All or Nothing Thinking

This type of thinking sees success and failure as the only two possible outcomes of any effort. One must always do one's best. Mistakes are failures, and minor failures are big failures. Simply doing average work is seen as mediocre. This line of thought leads to so much pressure for the individual that they sometimes experience excessive performance anxiety. The speech being given or the test being taken are not just tasks to be performed adequately or competently. They must be completed perfectly or else the person believes that they will have failed. By raising the stakes in this way, a situation which might only have produced mild stress can now cause considerable nervousness and even panic. Paradoxically, by relaxing perfectionistic, all or nothing standards, a person may actually do better than before. As mentioned earlier, as a person becomes less anxious, they may be shifting their position on the upside down U shaped curve so that their performance comes out on a higher level.

Here would be an example of an "all or nothing" thought that could lead to or aggravate anxiety:

> "This is the first presentation that I'm making at this new job. I need to do everything just right. I've got to be better than everybody else. I can't have a single mistake if I am going to survive at this place. If I make a mistake, I'll look like a blubbering idiot. It will be all over then. My competition will never let me recover."

Applying Cognitive Therapy Methods Using the Four Column Technique

The four column method was explained and demonstrated in chapter/handout #3, "Coping with Negative Thinking." It is a means of analyzing thoughts are producing anxiety and depression and then challenging those thoughts. Here is an example of the technique with a client who was worried about whether she would be able to complete nursing school and about what would happen to her if she couldn't.

Objective Situation (The "Event")	Automatic Negative Thoughts	Negative Consequences	Realistic, Logical Thoughts
Being within a few weeks of beginning school.	I need to pass my courses and complete school, but I don't think I can. If I don't get this degree, then I won't be able to support myself. I don't know how I will live.	Anxiety Difficulty concentrating Feeling "paralyzed," i.e., not being able to plan and get things done	This is fortune telling to tell myself that I can't do it. I won't know that until I start school. Moreover, if I keep thinking this way, it could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. I could become so anxious that I wouldn't be able to concentrate. If I become a nurse, then I will make more money, but I have job skills I can use. I'll be able to support myself. I can fall back on my other skills. I could be a certified nursing assistant with the courses I have already completed.

In this example, the person is jumping to conclusions about the future. If she were to enter school with these thoughts and feelings, then she would be lowering her chances of success. Moreover, she is not considering that she has other skills which she can use. This is typical in anxiety--the person does not look at the situation objectively. Instead, they tend to dwell on the worst possible outcome scenario.

In Summary: Questions to Ask Yourself During Stressful Situations

Am I overreacting to this situation in any way?
What are the positives to the situation that I may be overlooking?

What are the resources that I have to draw upon?
Am I jumping to conclusions in any way?
Am I mind reading, fortune telling, or catastrophizing?
If I am fortune telling, what is the evidence that this is going to happen?
Have I been in this situation before and did my worries come true then?

Getting Personal

Make a list of your most typical types of negative thinking when you worry--mind reading, fortune telling, catastrophizing, emotional reasoning, or all or nothing thinking.

_____
_____
_____

Resolve to Quit Avoiding the Sources of Your Anxiety

The natural effect of anxiety is to avoid what is feared. Avoidance may be useful as a short term strategy, but in the long term, it prevents persons from dealing with problem situations. It is almost impossible to overcome anxiety about something if one never encounters it. Avoidance can prevent persons from getting what they want out of life. They gradually constrict their activities and retreat from more and more situations. This is an insidious process. That is, it is slow, not necessarily obvious, and creates major problems for the individual.

Imagine the front at a World War I battlefield. The different forces are dug in. There is very little movement one way or another because both sides are so entrenched. If territory is given up, it must be won back at great cost. Anxiety is somewhat like that. It is much easier to give up a part of one's life than to get it back. It is important to refuse to give an inch of your life to anxiety. If you are doing public speaking and it causes you anxiety, don't stop. If you are socializing, don't stop. If you are taking tests in a course, don't stop. The one exception to this would be if your anxiety is so disabling that by staying in the situation you may cause further problems for yourself in the future (such as making an "F").

Overcoming avoidance has three purposes. The first is to decrease the anxiety itself. For many persons, exposure to anxiety provoking situations eventually retrains the brain not to be afraid of them. This is called exposure. Secondly, overcoming avoidance means that you, and not your anxiety, are in control of your life. Left unchecked, avoidance can be like the Blob in the old monster films. It just keeps taking and growing and taking and growing... Finally, when persons are attempting to work on negative thoughts causing anxiety and avoidance, it is often not clear exactly what the thoughts are. Avoidance may have resulted in the original negative thoughts fading into the background. To be able to work on negative thought patterns, it is necessary to know what the thoughts are, and this may require you to approach the feared situations.

Getting Personal

List the things you avoid because of anxiety. Is it helpful or harmful for you to avoid these things? What kinds of problems does your avoidance cause?

Activity or object avoided	*Problems Caused by Avoidance*
Example: Elevators	I have to always use the stairs, even in very tall buildings. This is embarrassing, exhausting, and sometimes inconveniences the people who are with me since they have to wait for me.

Stop Worrying and Start Solving Problems

One of the common symptoms of anxiety is worry. People attempt to anticipate and solve problems before they occur. Benjamin Franklin said that "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure," and that is true. Unfortunately, in worrying, people generally put in a pound of prevention and get an ounce of cure. A problem solving approach is actually different from worrying. To explain the differences between the two, it is first necessary to explain what problem-solving is. It is a logical, straight forward approach which outlines the exact nature of the problem, identifies possible solutions, evaluates the possible solutions, chooses one (or more), implements the solution(s), and evaluates the results. Here is an example of what the process might look like:

1. Identifying the problem	"My son is making D's and F's in school."
2. Generating alternatives	A. I could talk with his teacher. B. I could spank him. (This solution is mentioned here but not because we recommend corporal punishment. It is listed because for many people, this would come to mind as an alternative. Even though it may not be a good alternative, by getting it down on paper, the person is getting it out of their mind and attention so that they can move on to other ideas. If it stays in their mind rather than on the paper, it may lead to the person being "stuck" in terms of generating alternatives. In addition, putting it on paper may help one become more objective about the solution.) C. I could reward him for good semester grades. D. I could reward him for good papers and not just for good semester grades. E. I could insist on him spending an hour a night working on homework before he plays. F. I could help him with his homework. G. I could get him a tutor. H. I could pay him more allowance if his grades come up. I. I could give him more phone privileges if his grades come up. J. I could encourage him to study with the boy next door. He make good grades.
III. Evaluating solutions and choosing one.	Talk to his teacher and reward him for good daily grades
IV. Implementation of the solution	

V. Evaluation of the solution	The solution appears to be working. His daily grades are improving. The teacher was pleased that I wanted a conference with her. We have agreed that she will let me know if his work begins to deteriorate again. He appeared to be motivated by the daily reward. However, the candy I chose as a reward appears to be a poor choice, so I will reward him with attention and time with me instead.

Now that the problem solving process is clearer, the differences between it and worrying can be better explained. In problem-solving, after identifying the problem, the person moves on to generating and implementing solutions. In worrying, we identify the problem, and we identify the problem, and we identify the problem. We often don't get past the first step.

A second difference is that in problem-solving we deal with the realistic problem at hand. Worrying tends to jump ahead and get involved in fortunetelling about the future. In the example above of the child having difficulty in school, the mother's worrying might involve dwelling on the possibility that her son would fail the grade and have to repeat it. She might start thinking that he would drop out of school. Or she might become absorbed by the idea that he would become a very poor student throughout school and that he would not be able to get a good job--very distant and unlikely possibilities.

Another way of saying this is that problem solving does not spend very much time on thinking about the worst possible outcome (WPO), but worrying does. While some time can be reasonably spent preparing for the worst eventualities, the worst usually does not happen. Therefore it is self-defeating to continue to think very much about it. Moreover, there are situations where we really do not know how to deal with the WPO but we can imagine coping with the most likely outcome (MLO). Focus away from the most feared outcome and place your attention instead on the most likely outcome. If you are prone to worry about the worst thing that can happen, turn that around and ask yourself, "What is the best thing that can happen in this situation if absolutely everything went right? Then ask yourself, "What is the most likely thing to happen?" Usually, the most likely outcome is somewhere in between the worst possible and the best possible outcomes.

A third difference between problem-solving and worrying is that in problem-solving, after a solution has been implemented there is a period of waiting to see how effective the solution has been. During this time, the concern about the problem is to some degree shelved, while waiting to see how well the solutions work. In worrying, people are generally not able to put things "on the shelf" and to come back to them later. They tend to worry about problems more or less continuously. It is as if they are saying to themselves, "If the problem continues to exist, then I should continue to think and worry about it." While it is important to have times to be actively

working on a problem, it is also important to have other times for resting. Problem-solving has a natural pause from thinking about the problem during the implementation phase. In addition, the person knows that they have actively done something about the problem. They also know that they will come back to it in the future to take another look at it after the chosen solutions are implemented.

If a person finds himself or herself in a situation where there is little or no control (such as a loved one dying from cancer), problem solving focuses on the issues which still remain in the person's control. This could include, for example, learning how to make the person's pain less, supporting them emotionally, finding emotional support for one's self, taking care of financial arrangements, supporting others affected by the person's illness, and so on.

Time for Practice

Problem-Solving

Using the outline below, fill in each step for a problem you are facing. The first time you try this process, it is probably best choose a minor problem. After you feel comfortable with the steps, then it will be easier to tackle a more difficult situation.

I. Identify what your problem is. Be as specific as possible. Don't use vague terms.

2. Identify possible solutions

1._____

2._____

3._____

4._____

5._____

6._____

7._____

8._____

9._____

10._____

3. Choose between one and three solutions which you consider to be best:

1._____

2._____

3._____

4. Decide what you have to do specifically to implement the solution(s).
5. (To be done later) How well did the solution work? What changes need to be made in it?

Examine the Cost and the Benefits that Come from Your Worry and Anxiety

One important step in coping with worry is to realize exactly what it costs you. What is the benefit of dwelling on problems versus the disadvantage of doing this? On the positive side, worry keeps people prepared to deal with possible problems. It also sometimes motivates people to work on their difficulties, and the anxiety which results from worry can stimulate the body so that it is prepared for quick physical action.

Now what is the downside of worry and anxiety?

1. It can cause great discomfort.
2. It can impair performance.
3. It can keep persons focused on the worst possible outcome rather than the most likely outcome--hence, they may be unprepared when the most likely outcome occurs.
4. It can cause physical symptoms, such as muscle tension, insomnia, heart palpitations, rapid breathing, headaches, stomachaches, backaches, perspiration, etc. Persons may develop self-consciousness because of these symptoms.
5. It can cause people to avoid situations that might be unpleasant but need to be addressed.
6. It tends to elevate safety above personal satisfaction and growth. It can cause persons to give up on trying to live a pleasurable, meaningful life, and settle for just being "safe."

Getting Personal

Now, write down for yourself what you consider to be the benefits and costs of worrying from your perspective.

Benefits	*Costs*

Other chapters which you may find helpful and are relevant to coping with worry and anxiety include:

Chapter 2 Learning to Cope with Stress
Chapter 3 Coping with Negative Thoughts
Chapter 6 Coping with Negative Thinking in Depression
Chapter 9 Coping with Panic Attacks and Agoraphobia
Chapter 10 Coping with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
Chapter 11 Coping with Trauma and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
Chapter 12 Coping With Phobias
Chapter 13 Coping with Social Anxiety
Chapter 17 Understanding and Using Medications for Depression and Anxiety

Further Reading for Clients

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Barlow, D.H., &Craske, M.G., & O'Leary, T. (1993). Mastery of your anxiety and worry: Client workbook. San Antonio: The Psychological Corporation.

Further Reading for Therapists

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