

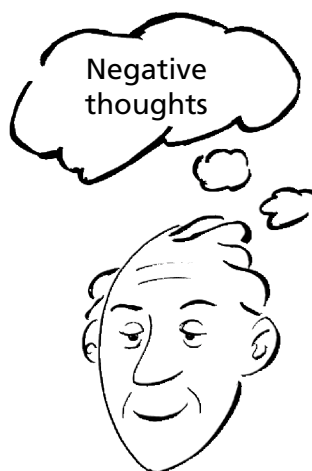
## **Section 4 - Dealing with Anxious Thinking**



## How do we challenge our unhelpful thoughts?

Anxiety may decrease if we closely examine how realistic and true our unhelpful/negative thoughts are. We may find that the actual threat we are faced with is not as bad as we thought or completely unrealistic. Even if there is a real threat, we may overestimate it and underestimate our capacity to deal with it.

We learned in the last section that our negative thoughts are automatic – they pop into our heads. It would be unhelpful to try to stop them happening, although over time as you begin working on your problems the negative thoughts should become less of a problem. Although we cannot stop unhelpful, negative thoughts happening in anxious situations, we can learn to question them. Unhelpful, anxious thoughts are very powerful and seem true at the time we feel most anxious, but sometimes when we are out of the anxious situation and feel more relaxed we realise things were not as bad as we thought at the time.



It is often very difficult to challenge your negative thinking whilst you are in a stressful situation and when you feel most anxious. You may look back when you are out of the situation and have calmed down and see things more realistically. We suggest that you begin challenging your negative thinking after the stressful event, when you can look back at it and reflect on it. Over time you should then be more able to challenge your negative thinking during anxious situations.

## So how do we begin to look at things in a balanced and realistic way?

To begin with you should use the 'Monitoring and evaluating thoughts diary' (found in section 4 worksheets) to identify your anxious thoughts and evaluate them. Then, you should use the 'Questioning unhelpful thoughts' worksheet (found in section 4 worksheets) to help you to question and challenge your unhelpful thoughts and replace them with more helpful thoughts.

The following questions can help us to challenge our unhelpful thoughts:

- Question 1:** Am I getting things out of proportion?
- Question 2:** What happened the last time I was in this situation?
- Question 3:** What would other people think in this situation?
- Question 4:** Are my thoughts predicting the future in an unhelpful way?
- Question 5:** What is the evidence for and against this thought?
- Question 6:** Am I trying to read other people's minds?
- Question 7:** Is this another example of my typical negative thinking?

To help you understand these questions in more depth, below are some fuller descriptions of them. The aim of these descriptions is to help you to question your unhelpful thoughts using 'Questioning unhelpful thoughts' worksheet located in section 4 worksheets.

**Question 1: Am I getting things out of proportion?**

There are a number of ways in which we can get things out of proportion, (see page 3.5 on thinking errors) for example, after an unsuccessful job application we might think, "I'll never get a job". In this example we are over generalising, so after one negative experience we think the same thing will happen every time. Another common way of getting things out of proportion is when we make a mountain out of a molehill and see a minor event as a catastrophe.

**Question 2: What happened the last time I was in this situation?**

Look back and think about what happened last time you were in the same situation. For example, if you are feeling really anxious on a busy bus, think about times in the past when you have been on a busy bus. Did something terrible happen or did you handle it? If something went wrong in some way, was it as bad as you imagined? If you did handle it, this is the evidence that you can handle it again. If you felt that you didn't handle it last time, think about the skills that you have learned in this pack and use them to help you overcome it.

**Question 3: What would other people think in this situation?**

Often, when you put yourself in someone else's position, you can see things from a different and more realistic perspective. A similar idea is to ask yourself what a good friend would say to you about your thinking. Both these help you step outside your own thoughts and consider alternatives.

**Question 4: Are my thoughts predicting the future in an unhelpful way?**

This is particularly useful if the thoughts were about something that hadn't yet happened, for example, "at the party no one will want to talk to me", "I'll be completely stuck for something to say", "I'll feel so bad I will pass out and make a fool of myself". In these three examples we are making predictions about future threatening events. As we have said before, such threats often do not occur.

**Question 5: What is the evidence for and against this thought?**

This is a very useful way of evaluating thoughts. Often when you weigh up the evidence for and against the thought, you realise it is unlikely. You may immediately feel less anxious once you have gone through this exercise.

Below are two examples of weighing up the evidence for and against a thought.

**Example 1**

**Situation:**

You experience a racing heart and begin sweating

**Thought:**

"I'm about to have a heart attack"

This is an example of the sort of thought someone might have during a panic attack.

**Evidence for the thought:**

My heart is racing and I'm sweating

**Evidence against the thought:**

The symptoms are always worse when I am anxious and stressed

The doctor has checked me out and told me my heart is fine

I don't get these symptoms when I'm relaxed

A racing heart doesn't mean I am having a heart attack – think of athletes, their hearts race a lot and they are healthy

I know a racing heart and sweating can be symptoms of anxiety

**Example 2**

**Situation:**

You walk past someone you know well and they walk past you without acknowledging you.

**Thought:**

"they're ignoring me, they don't like me"

This is an example of reading someone's mind, making an assumption about what they are thinking.

**Evidence for the thought:**

They walked straight past me

**Evidence against the thought:**

They looked deep in thought

They were not looking in my direction

They were OK with me when we last met

I've done nothing to offend them

They can be a bit moody at times

**Question 6: Am I trying to read people's minds?**

Some people make assumptions about what others are thinking although there is no evidence. For example, "they hate me now", "they must think I'm stupid". Remember these thoughts are assumptions and often there is no evidence for them. In fact, when you consider it you often realise that there is evidence against your thought.

**Question 7: Is this another example of my typical negative thinking?**

After a while, you will begin to notice typical negative thoughts that occur again and again. You may also notice themes that link different thoughts, such as having a negative thought about how others see you (mind reading), worrying about something going wrong in the future, always blaming yourself when things go wrong and imagining the worst possible thing happening (catastrophising). Some of these are listed in the thinking errors on page 3.5. It is useful to identify these typical ways of thinking because it helps you see that the thoughts are not necessarily true.

The example below demonstrates how to question and challenge an unhelpful thought and change it into a more helpful thought using the 7 questions above:

**Unhelpful thought:** "I know I'll never be able to travel on a bus."

| Question  | Response   |
|---|--|
| 1. Am I getting things out of proportion?                     | Yes, the fact that I've said "never" immediately makes it seem worse than it really is. If I take it step by step I will make progress.  |
| 2. What happened the last time I was in this situation?       | The last time I was on a bus I felt anxious but nothing terrible happened.   |
| 3. What would other people think in this situation?           | Other people may be more optimistic than me about making at least some progress.   |
| 4. Are my thoughts predicting the future in an unhelpful way? | Yes, I'm predicting the future by thinking, "I know I'll never". I don't know, I can't see into the future.  |
| 5. What is the evidence for and against this thought?         | <b>For:</b> I find it difficult to travel on a bus at the moment.<br><b>Against:</b> I haven't always been anxious on a bus, so in the future I may not be anxious. I can't see into the future! If I take it step by step I'll see how much progress I'll make. |
| 6. Am I trying to read other people's minds?                  | (Not relevant to this thought).  |
| 7. Is this another example of my typical negative thinking?   | This is typical of the way I think. I'm always pessimistic about the chances of things improving.  |

**Helpful thought:** "I was anxious last time I got on a bus, however, nothing terrible happened. If I practice relaxation, controlled breathing, distraction and helpful thinking and take it step by step I will be able to cope with it again."

By questioning and challenging our unhelpful thoughts we are less likely to believe them and more likely to think in more helpful ways.

Below is a brief example to illustrate how stresses, unhelpful thoughts, feelings, physical symptoms and behaviour changes such as avoidance can combine to cause problems (we look at the behaviour changes in more detail in the next section).

### **Miss Learning**

Miss Learning is very stressed. She has lost her job, has money problems and has recently had her house repossessed. All of her problems have resulted in Miss Learning feeling very anxious.

She goes to the supermarket to do her weekly shopping and begins to feel her general anxiety increasing. Miss Learning feels her heart pounding, her stomach churning, her breathing rate increasing and she begins to feel dizzy and thinks she's about to collapse. She is in fact having a panic attack. This is not surprising considering that she believes her anxiety symptoms mean that she is going to collapse. Miss Learning wrongly thinks her anxiety and the panic attack is due to the crowds in the supermarket. In fact it's due to her stresses and her thoughts that she will collapse and make a fool of herself. Consequently Miss Learning starts to associate her increased anxiety with the crowds in the supermarket. This is known as association anxiety.

Miss Learning rushes out of the store and feels a relief when she gets outside into the fresh air. Her anxiety is reduced and the panic attack subsides. This strengthens her belief that it was the crowds in the supermarket that caused her anxiety.

Next time Miss Learning is getting ready to go to the supermarket she recalls how she felt last time she went and begins to feel very anxious. This is known as anticipatory anxiety. Once she makes the decision not to go her anxiety begins to reduce.

A friend asks Miss Learning if she would like to go shopping with her to a nearby shopping centre. Again, Miss Learning begins to feel anxious so she makes an excuse and tells her friend she is unable to make it. This is known as avoidant behaviour. Once she makes the decision to avoid going shopping her anxiety is reduced. Each time she avoids the feared situation this strengthens the fear and makes it more difficult to face the situation next time. She has now "miss-learned" that all crowds make her anxious. Consequently the learning and the fear has generalised from supermarkets to crowds in all stores and shopping centres.

As Miss Learning lives in a large city it is difficult to avoid crowds. Due to the fact that Miss Learning has now learned to be anxious in crowds her anxiety is frequently triggered. She therefore starts to spend an increasing amount of time at home escaping and trying to avoid any anxiety. Over time this actually increases her fear and anxiety. This prevents her from doing things she used to enjoy which restricts her enjoyment and independence. She begins to feel frustrated and depressed.

The only way that Miss Learning will learn that crowds are not threatening is to stay in them long enough to discover that her anxiety reduces in time (refer to next section). By doing this in a graded way and using coping strategies she begins to learn that she can cope in crowds without collapsing. She also finds the more she succeeds in this the less anxious she becomes. As her confidence grows Miss Learning realises that many factors in her life have contributed to her feeling stressed and anxious, such as her

money problems. Over time she manages to get another job and her confidence improves further. Re-learning begins to take place for Miss Learning. Hopefully in the future if similar stresses occur she would be better prepared to prevent anxiety and avoidance escalating.



## Key Points

- By closely examining how realistic our unhelpful thoughts are, our anxiety may decrease
- Although we cannot stop unhelpful thoughts happening, we can learn how to change them
- Unhelpful, negative thoughts are often not true
- We can challenge our unhelpful thoughts by evaluating them and weighing up the evidence for and against



**Please tick when you have completed the following tasks**  
*(Most tasks can be found in Section 4 worksheets)*

- Complete the quiz on page 4.9 [ ]
- Complete the 'Monitoring and evaluating thoughts diary' [ ]
- Complete the 'Questioning unhelpful thoughts' worksheet [ ]
- Complete the 'Challenging unhelpful thoughts' worksheet [ ]
- Complete the 'Anxiety diary (challenging unhelpful thoughts)' [ ]

**In addition you may wish to:**

- Use the 'Task and time diary' if you find it useful [ ]
- Continue to practice relaxation using the relaxation CD/tape provided [ ]
- Continue to monitor your relaxation progress using the 'Relaxation diary' [ ]

## ***Section 4 : Worksheets***

# 4





**Quiz – Dealing with our anxious thinking**

The following questions are for you to check your own understanding of the 'Dealing with our anxious thinking' section.

1. List two unhelpful thoughts about events that have not yet happened:

1) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. Why is it useful to think about what others might think in the same situation?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. List two examples of unhelpful thoughts about trying to read people's minds:

1) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Answers to Quiz (section 4)  
Dealing with our anxious thinking**

1. Any two of the following, or any others you can think of:  
"At the party no one will want to talk to me"  
"I'll be completely stuck for something to say"  
"I'll feel so bad I will pass out and make a fool of myself"

2. It helps you see things from a different and more realistic perspective.

3. Any of the following, or any others you can think of:  
"They hate me now"  
"They must think I'm stupid"

## Monitoring and evaluating thoughts diary

### Instructions

As with the 'Monitoring thoughts diary' in section 3 worksheets, this exercise will help you to recognise your thoughts by recording them and taking it a stage further by looking at how the situation actually turned out. When you are feeling anxious write down the situation you are in and the thoughts and images that are going through your mind. Then, note down your mood (how you felt at the time) and rate it on a scale of 0-100. After that, ask yourself if the situation turned out as bad as you imagined. Keep using this diary for as long as you need to. After a while you may find that when you are feeling anxious you automatically notice the thoughts going through your mind and you automatically evaluate how likely it is to turn out as imagined. Section 6 contains blank copies of all the worksheets.

| Situation  | Thoughts & Images <i>(What went through your mind at the time)</i>  | Mood <i>(How you felt at the time) and mood rating (0-100)</i> | Did the situation turn out as bad as imagined?   |
|--|---|--|--|
| Monday 8.30am, I've slept in and am running late | "Oh no, I'm going to be late for work"<br>"I have a meeting at 9am, everyone will be waiting for me - I'll be so embarrassed" "I'm so stupid" | Anxious (90)   | No, I phoned in to let them know I was going to be late. I just missed the beginning of the meeting. |
|  |   |  |  |
|  |   |  |  |
|  |   |  |  |
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|  |   |  |  |

## Questioning unhelpful thoughts

### Instructions

- This exercise is designed to help you question your unhelpful thoughts.
- You should complete table 1 below, imagining that you had the unhelpful thought that is stated at the top.
- Ask all 7 questions for each thought, writing your responses in the table.
- Finally, you should replace each unhelpful thought with one that is more helpful.
- After completing table 1, use table 2 to challenge an unhelpful thought of your own.

There is an example of a completed table on p 4.4 of the anxiety pack that you can refer to if you wish.

At first you may feel unwilling to have a go at this exercise, thinking that it is “too hard” or “not worthwhile”. However, remember that these are exactly the kind of unhelpful thoughts that this exercise aims to identify and question. It is by challenging these thoughts that we are able to stop them from making us feel so anxious and from maintaining our anxiety. Section 6 contains blank copies of all the worksheets.

Use the following questions to help you challenge the unhelpful thoughts:

- Question 1:** Am I getting things out of proportion?
- Question 2:** What happened the last time I was in this situation?
- Question 3:** What would other people think in this situation?
- Question 4:** Are my thoughts predicting the future in an unhelpful way?
- Question 5:** What is the evidence for and against this thought?
- Question 6:** Am I trying to read other people’s minds?
- Question 7:** Is this another example of my typical negative thinking?

**Table 1: Unhelpful thought:** “Everybody will ignore me at the party. I can’t talk to anybody. I know they’ll all think I’m boring.”

| Question | Response         |
|----------|------------------|
| 1        |                  |
| 2        |                  |
| 3        |                  |
| 4        |                  |
| 5        | For:<br>Against: |
| 6        |                  |
| 7        |                  |

**Helpful thought:**

Table 2: Unhelpful thought:

| Question | Response                       |
|----------|--------------------------------|
| 1        |                                |
| 2        |                                |
| 3        |                                |
| 4        |                                |
| 5        | <b>For:</b><br><b>Against:</b> |
| 6        |                                |
| 7        |                                |

Helpful thought:



## Challenging unhelpful thoughts

### Instructions

This exercise will help you to challenge your unhelpful thoughts and look for more helpful ways of thinking. Write down the situation that has led to unhelpful thinking. Write down the unhelpful thoughts. Then, referring to page 3.5, note down the type of thinking errors you have made (number and name). Next, replace your unhelpful thoughts with more reasonable, logical, objective and helpful thoughts.

EXAMPLE:

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <b>Situation</b>                            | The team you play for loses a football match  |
| <b>Unhelpful Thoughts</b>                   | "Oh god! It's all my fault. I should have stopped that goal. Nobody will want me to play in the team again. I'm useless".<br>(These type of thoughts are unhelpful and are likely to cause you anxiety) |
| <b>Type of Thinking Errors (from p 3.5)</b> | 7. Self Blaming, 4. Must/Ought/Should thinking, 1. Assuming the worst   |
| <b>Helpful Thoughts</b>                     | Ok, so we lost the match. I wish I'd have stopped that goal but I didn't. I think we played well the rest of the match.<br>(These type of thoughts are more helpful)                                    |

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>Situation</b>                            |  |
| <b>Unhelpful Thoughts</b>                   | <br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br>(These type of thoughts are unhelpful and are likely to cause you anxiety) |
| <b>Type of Thinking Errors (from p 3.5)</b> |  |
| <b>Helpful Thoughts</b>                     | <br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br>(These type of thoughts are more helpful)                                  |

