

COPING WITH ANXIETY



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WHAT ARE SIGNS OF ANXIETY?

“If I interview for this job, I might freeze and make a fool of myself!”

“I haven’t heard from [a family member]. What if something happened? What if he was in an accident? What if... What if... ?”

“If I don’t leave, I’ll get more and more anxious. If I have a panic attack, I might die!”

“I’d better think about what might go wrong.”

“If I think about [a feared event], I’ll fall apart!”

“If I don’t [engage in this compulsive behavior], something bad might happen and it’ll be all my fault.”

Such are the thoughts that sweep over those who suffer from anxiety disorders. Anxiety indicates fear of some type of danger. This sense of threat is often accompanied by a wide range of physical symptoms, which are distressing in themselves: shortness of breath, increased heart rate, dizziness, nausea, sweating, dry mouth, tight throat, muscle tension, etc.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF ANXIETY?

Emotions communicate information and motivate us for action. Anxiety tells us that we’re facing a challenging situation and provides us with the physiological energy to meet that challenge. Everybody experiences some degree of anxiety, which can be helpful. For example, having anxiety before a big presentation at work will likely motivate you to prepare more thoroughly, hopefully leading to a better performance. However, anxiety can be problematic when it’s disproportionate to the situation. People who suffer from disproportionate anxiety have certain characteristics in common. They perceive situations or experiences as dangerous in some way and predict negative or threatening outcomes. Usually, they try to avoid these situations or experiences. Often, they become anxious about feeling anxious.

As long as they can avoid certain situations or experiences, they experience temporary relief from anxiety. In the long run, though, avoidance keeps the anxiety disorder going. People think, “If I hadn’t been able to avoid this, then something bad would have happened.”

Sometimes, anxiety is helpful. It may spur us to work a little harder or to be careful in a risky situation. But people who suffer from excessive anxiety do not have an accurate view of their situation. They may anticipate a threat to their wellbeing when there is little likelihood that it will occur.

When anxious people are facing a challenge of some sort—an exam or job interview—they tend to exaggerate the difficulties they face and dwell on the potential consequences of a negative outcome. At the same time, they tend to underestimate or discount their own ability to cope with whatever they fear might happen. In other words, they overestimate the likelihood that a threatening situation or experience will occur and they overestimate how severe or intense it will be. They also underestimate their internal and external resources and their ability to cope effectively. To make matters worse, when severely anxious people become intensely aware of their own unpleasant physical and emotional reactions,

they may begin to dread and fear the symptoms themselves even more than the situation that triggers them. The more upset they get, the more intense their symptoms become, and they become involved in a self-perpetuating spiral of increasingly intense emotional and physical suffering.

HOW DOES COGNITIVE BEHAVIOR THERAPY WORK?

In the following example, you may notice the way in which anxiety-related thinking can have a negative impact. A lonely high school student wants to talk to classmates to make friends. But every time she has the opportunity, anxious thoughts show up: “They’ll see how nervous I am. They’ll think I’m stupid and awkward.” As these thoughts flood her mind, her throat tightens, her mouth goes dry, and she thinks she won’t be able to say a word. She copes by sitting by herself and does not try to start a conversation. She then thinks, “I’m a loser,” and is likely to continue avoiding talking to classmates in the future.

Cognitive Behavior Therapy teaches you to recognize the mistakes in your thinking about what would happen if you dared to act in a way that aligns with your values. Through therapy, you will learn to apply your reasoning skills and powers of observation to situations in your life that are leading to anxiety. Like a scientist, you will learn how to test your ideas to determine how realistic they are. When you reduce the distortions and inaccuracies in your thinking, you will decrease your anxiety and develop a more helpful approach to dealing with situations you fear.



WHAT WILL I LEARN IN COGNITIVE BEHAVIOR THERAPY?

You will learn to recognize your thoughts when you feel anxious or notice the physical signs of anxiety. Often these thoughts seem to pop up automatically and may have been triggered by an immediate challenge—the need to give a talk, visit a doctor, take on a new responsibility at work, or interact with others. Or you may have thoughts related to the possibility of a more distant event, such as getting married or divorced, having a heart attack or accident, or failing in your job. In Cognitive Behavior Therapy, these thoughts are called automatic thoughts.

When you notice that you are becoming anxious or that your anxiety has suddenly increased, ask yourself:

“What just went through my mind?”

Look for thoughts and mental pictures. Remind yourself:

Even though my thoughts and images seem accurate, they may not be. Because of anxiety, I may be overestimating threat and underestimating my ability to effectively cope.

Having learned to identify your automatic thoughts, you will now begin to evaluate them. You will learn:

- To look for evidence that supports or negates your thoughts
- To consider the most likely or realistic future outcomes



- To consider the consequences of repeating anxiety-related thoughts to yourself
- To apply advice you would give to friends or family members in the same situation
- To problem solve what to do next

You will also learn that each anxiety experience is time-limited and that you have skills to tolerate it, making you less fearful of experiencing anxiety, and increasing your self-confidence. You will also focus on some key problems in your life and develop greater skills in solving problems, which leads to living a life that is more consistent with your aspirations and values. The student mentioned previously brainstormed with her therapist to come up with a number of ways to start a conversation, used role-playing to practice, and read “coping cards” (which they had composed in therapy)



immediately prior to talking to classmates.

You will find out whether you have some dysfunctional ideas about anxiety. For example, some people with anxiety disorders believe, “If I worry about something, maybe it won’t happen.” Or they may believe, “If I think of all the things that could go wrong and try to fix them in advance, then I won’t be responsible if something bad does happen.” You may also have beliefs about the experience of anxiety: “If I start to feel anxious, I’ll fall apart.” Or, “If I get physical signs of anxiety like a pounding heart, I might have a heart attack.” In therapy, you will learn to test and respond to these ideas. You may also learn how to become more accepting of anxiety through mindfulness practices. Mindfulness involves being aware of present moment experiences in

a more accepting and non-judgmental manner. Mindfulness practices for anxiety can help you feel less overwhelmed with emotion and learn that when you give up trying to control anxiety, it becomes less distressing.

WHAT ARE TYPICAL THINKING ERRORS?

When you keep track of your anxiety-producing thoughts, you may find that the errors in your thinking fall into these general categories:

Exaggerating: People often have a magnified sense of threat, even in the face of objective evidence to the contrary. A parent had a fear that her child was going to die while she was out of town. Her anxiety led her to search out and read news articles about teens dying. She could not recognize the actual probability of the death of an adolescent. Furthermore, she underestimated her child’s positive qualities, like their street smarts and sense of responsibility.

Catastrophizing: When anxious people anticipate danger or difficulty, they sometimes perceive disaster as the probable outcome. An anxious man facing a relatively simple surgical procedure fears that he will be incapacitated or die.

Over-generalizing: One negative experience, such as being turned down for a promotion, may translate into a law governing one’s entire existence: “I’ll never get anywhere in life. What if I don’t succeed?”

Ignoring the Positive: Anxious people overlook or discount the indications of their own ability to cope successfully, forget the positive experiences and successes of the past, and

anticipate only insurmountable problems and unendurable suffering in the future. An anxious musician forgets about or discounts his record of good performances. He also ignores the fact that he shares the responsibility of a good performance with his fellow band members.

HOW IS THE ACTION PLAN USED?

The action plan is an important part of therapy and consists of making changes between sessions. Since you will be learning methods for coping that will be applicable throughout life, carrying out action plan assignments not only strengthens your ability to use the strategies developed in therapy but also provides a way to test your beliefs in real-life situations. In addition to evaluating your automatic thoughts, you will learn how to enter anxiety-producing situations that are in line with your aspirations and values in a systematic, manageable way. Here are some of the ideas you can keep in mind as you practice your new techniques:

1. Before confronting a valued anxiety-producing situation, consider your strengths and resources. What do you have going for you?
2. You may be thinking about only the worst possible outcome of a situation. Ask yourself, “How likely is it that this will happen? How could I cope if it did happen?” Then think about what the best possible outcome might be. Finally, look for something in between—what is the most realistic outcome of this situation?
3. It is very important that you stop avoiding

feared situations. Remind yourself why following through with this situation is consistent with your values and aspirations in life. If you feel overwhelmed, do it gradually. For instance, if you have a fear of elevators, you can “practice” with a friend or your therapist, just a few floors at a time.

4. When you are already in the midst of a challenging situation and anxiety begins to take hold, remind yourself that while anxiety is uncomfortable, it is not dangerous. It does not necessarily mean that there is any danger. It’s worth experiencing anxiety if it means you’re living a life that’s meaningful. Practice tolerating—and accepting—the anxiety and give yourself credit when you do so.

HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF THERAPY

Setting goals provides motivation to change. If you have a clear picture of how you would like your life to be if you were free of anxiety, you will know what you are working toward. Share your ideas with your therapist so they can help you reach your goals.

Remember that you can only get out what you put in. Significant changes require effort. It will take time and effort to isolate old thought patterns and develop ways to counteract and modify them, especially if you have been suffering from anxiety for a long time.

Be aware that there are usually others who can lend a helping hand if you need them. Your extended family, relatives, friends,



and anxiety recedes, that spark of hope will kindle a new enthusiasm for daily living. Be prepared to work for it.

coworkers, health professionals, and others interested in your wellbeing are all potential participants in your progress. Learn to call upon them for understanding and help.

Be conscientious in the use of techniques learned in therapy. Although therapy itself is time-limited, the methods you learn are applicable throughout life. No one is forever free of emotional problems, but you will find that anxiety need not dominate your existence.

And, finally, permit yourself the pleasure of feeling excited about exploring new ways to meet life's challenges. The very fact that you have shown enough initiative to seek help indicates hope and expectation. As therapy progresses

CBT RESOURCES

BECK INSTITUTE

The nonprofit Beck Institute for Cognitive Behavior Therapy was established in 1994 by Dr. Aaron T. Beck and Dr. Judith S. Beck as a setting for state-of-the-art psychotherapy and professional training in CBT. In our 25-year history, Beck Institute has built exceptional in-person and online trainings in CBT, trained thousands of professionals from around the world, and created a global community of CBT practitioners.

PSYCHOTHERAPY

Cognitive behavior therapists can help you identify, evaluate, and modify your unhelpful ideas and behavior that lead to negative conclusions about yourself and others. They can also help you figure out ways to more effectively manage day-to-day problems. With your effort and their guidance, you can learn skills to reduce anxiety and help you feel better and stay better. To learn more about clinical services at Beck Institute, call 610.664.3020 or email intake@beckinstitute.org.

ONLINE RESOURCES:

- Visit beckinstitute.org for webinars, video clips and multimedia resources
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