



Managing your anxiety

Session Five

PLEASE REMEMBER

Changes take time, patience and hard work.

The more you put in whilst completing the course, the more you get out of it.

Do you have any questions from last week's session?



Home Practice Review

How did your home practice go? Did you achieve your goals?

What did you learn from your home practice?

The Role of Thinking in Anxiety

In session two we looked at how our interpretation of situations affects how we feel. If we think about an event in a positive way, are likely to have little or no anxiety. In comparison, if we think about the same event in a more negative or catastrophic way we are likely to experience distress.

In this session we will be looking at the thinking patterns that are linked to feeling anxious in more depth. We will look at the *anxiety equation*, which is a way of understanding the degree of anxiety we feel about a situation.

We will look at *thinking biases* which are automatic ways in which we interpret events in threatening ways. We will also look at *anxious assumptions*, which are the rules that drive our behaviour when we are anxious.

Then we will look at various ways in which we can think about situations differently so that they seem less threatening.

Anxious Thinking Exercise:

Imagine that you are tired, not feeling great and that you are walking down the street. You see two people coming towards you. They seem to glance in your direction and then they burst out laughing.

Bearing in mind that we are looking for your initial, automatic reaction, rather than your rational perspective once you've thought things through:

1. What would be your initial thoughts when the people seemed to glance in your direction and burst out laughing?

2. What emotions would you feel?

3. What would you want to do?

4. What would have made it an easier experience?

This exercise aims to illustrate the following points:

- There are many ways to interpret the same situation – this suggests that our own way of thinking about events may not be the only way or the most useful way to think about a situation on some occasions.
- The way that we interpret an event affects what we feel – for example in the imaginary scenario above, different ways of interpreting the event in a threatening way could lead to feeling anxious, angry or embarrassed / ashamed.
- The action we want to take to return to safety will be different depending on what we feel. In our scenario, we might want to turn around and walk in the other direction, confront the people, or we may want to hide and not go out again.
- Things that may have made the situation easier might include having had a supportive person with us, feeling less tired and being in a better mood.
- If we interpreted the event in a non-threatening way, we would not have felt anxious and would not have felt the need to do anything to feel safe again.

The Anxiety Equation:

The degree of anxiety we feel is dependent on four factors:

- How likely we think something bad will happen
- How awful the outcome would be if it did happen
- How much we believe that we could cope
- How much support we think we would get from others

When we feel anxious, we tend to have what are called *catastrophic thoughts*. These tend to involve imaging the worst possible scenario. We also tend to assume that this scenario is definitely going to happen.

The first part of the anxiety equation captures our degree of anxious thinking:

Perceived likelihood that it will happen x *Perceived awfulness if it did*

The more likely we think something bad will happen multiplied by how awful we think it would be if it did happen = the more anxiety we feel.

The anxiety we feel when we anticipate things going wrong can be reduced if we believe in our resilience and ability to cope. It can also be reduced if we believe that people would come to our aid and be supportive. These are called moderating factors.

The second part of the anxiety equation captures our perceived moderating factors:

Perceived ability to cope + *Perceived support from others if it does happen*

The full anxiety equation looks like this:

$$\begin{array}{l} \text{Perceived likelihood it will happen} \quad \times \quad \text{Perceived 'Awfulness' if it did} \\ \hline \text{Perceived ability to cope} \quad + \quad \text{Perceived support} \quad = \quad \text{Anxiety Felt} \end{array}$$

Thinking Biases:

Thinking biases are automatic. The immediate thoughts that we have in any situation linked to feeling bad are usually biased towards negative interpretations of what we are experiencing.

Listed below are some of the main thinking biases linked to feeling anxious.

Catastrophic thinking – imaging the worst case scenario – that something awful will happen.

Amplification - overestimating the likelihood that something will happen.

Underestimating coping – not recognising our strengths and abilities to respond effectively if something bad does happen.

Underestimating support – not recognising that people can be supportive, understanding and kind and may come to our aid.

Personalising – interpreting events as being directed at us.

Mindreading – Assuming that we know what people are or will be thinking about us, or what their intentions are.

Most people have one or two thinking biases that are more common for them. Do you recognise any of the biases in the list above as occurring more often in your anxious thinking than the others? If so, write them below:

Anxious Assumptions:

In addition to thinking biases, the other form of thinking that is important in understanding anxiety is anxious assumptions.

These are phrased ***unless.... then....***

Here are some examples:

- Unless I can be completely sure that nothing bad will happen if I go out, then it is safer to stay at home.
- Unless I carefully monitor what I say, and only speak when I'm sure that what I say won't be foolish, then it is better to stay quiet.
- Unless I monitor my body for any signs that I might be ill, then I'll miss something important and it will be too late to get successful treatment.
- Unless I worry, then I won't be prepared if something goes wrong.
- Unless I check when I have the thought that I haven't locked the door, it will be unlocked, I'll get robbed and it will be my fault.
- Unless I hold onto something or sit down when I feel dizzy, then I'll fall over and people will think that I'm drunk.

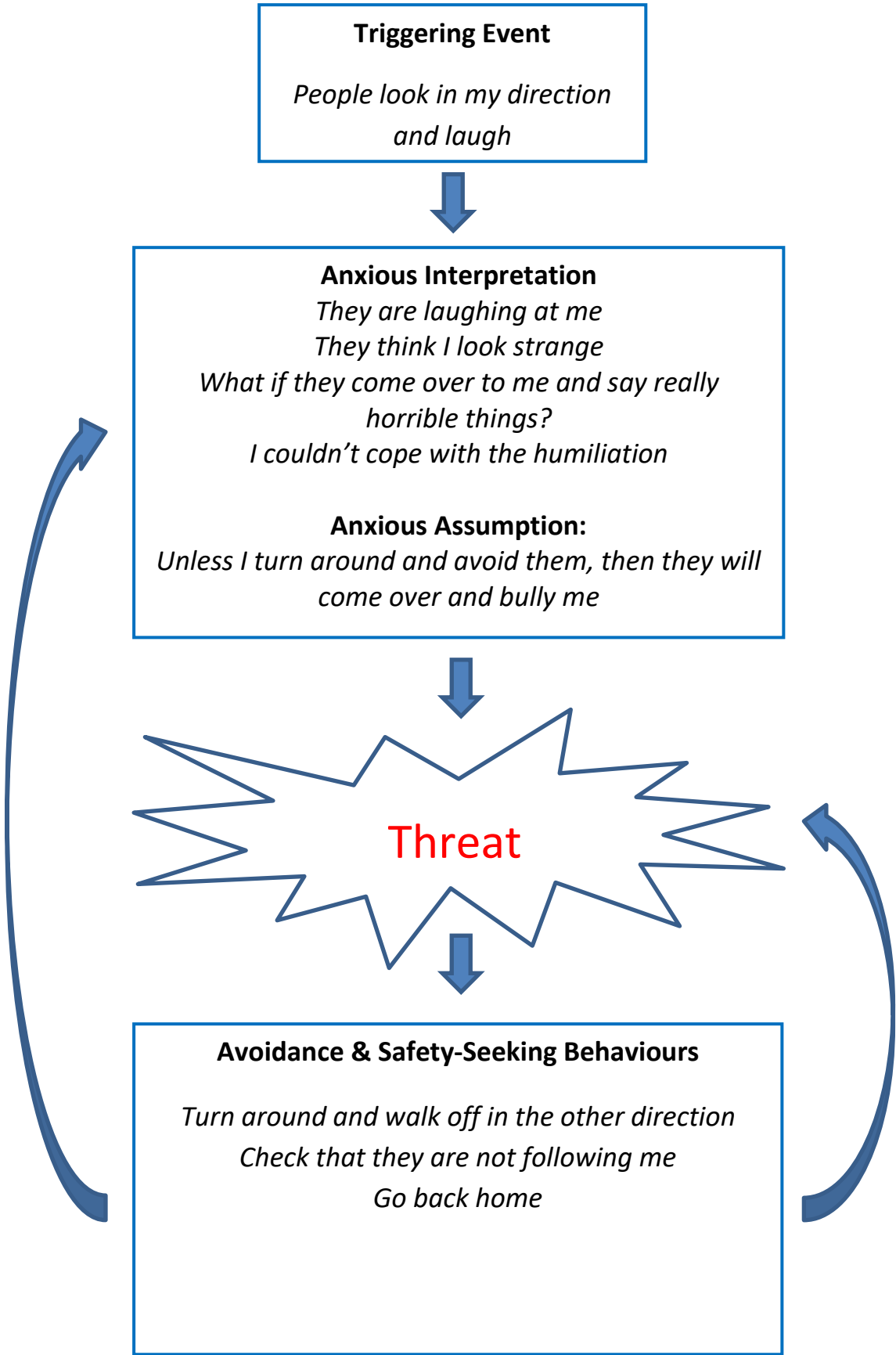
When we look at the actions we take to reduce our anxiety – avoidance and safety behaviours – we can see that they are expressions of our anxious assumptions.

On the next page is an example of a formulation for one way that we might interpret the event we imagined in the first exercise today. This time we have expanded the formulation to include anxious thoughts and anxious assumptions, along with the actions taken to try to feel safe.

Following this formulation is an exercise in identifying the thinking biases in the formulation.

A key way of reducing anxiety in CBT is to develop alternative ways of thinking about situations so that our interpretation of the event doesn't make us feel threatened. This will be the focus of the rest of this session, with the emphasis on changing thoughts linked to thinking biases.

We will return to working with anxious assumptions in session six.



For each of the thoughts in the table below, which are taken from the formulation above, see if you can identify which of the thinking biases each thought is an example of.

Thought	Thinking Bias
They are laughing at me	
They think I look strange	
What if they come over to me and say really horrible things?	
I couldn't cope with the humiliation	

So far on the course, we have looked at:

Understanding Anxiety: The fight, flight and freeze response; the role of interpretation in feeling threatened; the role of behaviour in making us feel safer in the short-term, yet more anxious in the long-term; the anxiety equation; thinking biases and anxious assumptions; bringing all of this together in a formulation.

Attention Switching: Deliberately breaking our tendency to look for and focus on threatening events by placing our attention elsewhere.

Mindfulness and Acceptance: Deliberately turning towards our experience and naming it whilst creating a sense of spaciousness, friendliness and acceptance towards it. This helps us become aware of what is happening before we react on automatic pilot and act in ways that inadvertently reinforce our anxiety in the longer-term. It creates some space in which we can consciously decide what to do.

Now we are going to look at how to work with our anxious thoughts, in particular those that are examples of thinking biases, so that we can reduce our anxiety by interpreting events in less threatening ways.

Thinking about things differently

Because our anxious thinking is automatic and habitual, we often don't recognise that it is happening and before we know it, we are feeling anxious and reacting automatically to do what we can to feel safe. If we can notice our anxious thoughts and change them, then we can break up the cycle of anxiety.

Identifying the right thoughts to change:

To successfully reduce anxiety by thinking differently, it is vital that we identify the right thoughts to change. Thoughts that are statements of fact can't easily be changed. Examples of these kinds of thoughts are:

Those people are laughing

I feel anxious

Thoughts that are interpretations can be changed. Examples of these kinds of thought are:

Those people are laughing at me

They think I look strange

Thoughts that are predictions can also be changed. Examples of these kinds of thoughts are:

What if they come over here and say really horrible things?

I couldn't cope with the humiliation

When looking for thoughts to change, look for interpretations and predictions.

Approaches to developing different ways of thinking:

We all know how to think clearly and rationally. We know how to weigh up evidence so that we can decide what is actually happening. We can all imagine what a situation would look like from a different point of view. These are the skills we use to develop different thoughts so that we can interpret events in non-threatening ways.

Basic thought changing questions:

1) Weighing up evidence:

Have I had experiences that contradict what I'm thinking?

Is there a less threatening way of thinking about this situation that reasonably explains what is happening?

2) Balanced thinking:

Could there be a less catastrophic outcome than the one I'm imagining?

How likely is it that the worst outcome is really going to occur?

3) Thinking of strengths and support:

If the worst did happen, what strengths do I have that would help me cope?

Have I coped with difficult situations in the past?

Have people been supportive in the past? Might they be supportive if things do go wrong?

4) Looking at things from a different point of view:

What would a friend say to me about what I'm thinking?

If I was feeling calm and at ease, what would I think?

We can use any of these questions, and many more to get a different perspective on things and develop a different way of thinking that reduces our anxiety in a particular situation. An example of changing thoughts is given below. This is followed by a partially completed thought changing sheet for us to complete together.

Situation (trigger)	Two people are walking towards me. They seem to be glancing in my direction when they burst out laughing
Thoughts about this situation	They are laughing at me
Thinking biases involved	Personalising
Anxiety level linked to these thoughts (0-10)	7
Alternative way of thinking	<p>They may just be having a private conversation which made them laugh at a time when they seemed to be looking in my direction</p> <p>If I was having a better day and was less tired, I would probably not think they were laughing at me</p> <p>When people have been laughing whilst walking towards me in the past, they didn't come over to me and pick on me – it's unlikely to happen now either</p>
Anxiety level linked to alternative thoughts (0-10)	4

Situation (trigger)	Two people are walking towards me. They seem to be glancing in my direction when they burst out laughing
Thoughts about this situation	What if they come over to me and say really horrible things?
Thinking biases involved	
Anxiety level linked to these thoughts (0-10)	9
Alternative way of thinking	
Anxiety level linked to alternative thoughts (0-10)	5

Home Practice



In order to get the most from CBT it helps to practice at home.

Summary of Session Five:

In this session we focused on the way in which we think about situations can feel threatening or safe.

We looked at the anxiety equation, which maps out how much anxiety we will feel in a situation, based on how we think about it.

We discussed thinking biases and anxious assumptions.

We looked at how we can change the way that we think to reduce our anxiety.

Write down one or more key points that you have learnt today:

Suggested Home Practice for Week Five:

- Continue with the mindfulness and acceptance practices if you find them useful. They tend to become more effective over time. On some days they may seem to be helpful and on other days less so; this is completely normal.
- When you experience anxiety in the week, use the format we practiced today to change your thoughts from automatic, threat-focused thoughts to less threatening thoughts. Rate your anxiety before and after you change your thoughts to get a sense of how effective changing thoughts is for reducing your anxiety. Two blank thought changing sheets are included for you to change two different anxious thoughts.

Are there any SMART goals that you want to set for yourself this week? If so, write them here:

1)

2)

3)

Situation (trigger)	
Thoughts about this situation	
Thinking biases involved	
Anxiety level linked to these thoughts (0-10)	
Alternative way of thinking	
Anxiety level linked to alternative thoughts (0-10)	

Situation (trigger)	
Thoughts about this situation	
Thinking biases involved	
Anxiety level linked to these thoughts (0-10)	
Alternative way of thinking	
Anxiety level linked to alternative thoughts (0-10)	

