



Managing your anxiety

Session Six

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?

In session five we looked at how the way that we think affects how we feel. We practiced different ways of thinking about situations that reduce anxiety.

We also introduced the idea of *anxious assumptions* and looked at how what we do to stay safe is based on these assumptions.

In this session we are going to focus on changing how we think about situations by directly testing our anxious assumptions. We do this by not acting according to our anxious assumptions to find out what actually happens, compared with what we predict will happen.

This approach is called the *behavioural experiment*. It is perhaps the most powerful approach to reducing anxiety in CBT and it is the key treatment method for all forms of anxiety.

In session four we asked the following light-hearted question:

I had a thought that I might be bitten by a vampire when I was asleep. Everyone knows that vampires don't like garlic, so I hung garlic up all around my bedroom – by the doors and windows, the chimney and around the bed. This morning when I woke up, I hadn't been bitten by a vampire. Obviously this was because of the garlic. Do you agree?



In this example, the anxious assumption is: Unless I take measures to protect myself when I'm asleep, then I will be bitten by a vampire.

The safety-seeking behaviour that came from this assumption was for me to hang garlic up around my bedroom.

When I woke up, and hadn't been bitten by a vampire, my conclusion was that this was because of the garlic. However, what if I'm, wrong? What if the garlic has nothing to do with it? How would I find out?

I could find out by doing a behavioural experiment. This involves testing the validity of my anxious assumption by dropping my safety-seeking behaviour(s) and finding out what actually happens, compared with what I predict will happen.

In this case I could remove the garlic before going to bed and if I hadn't been bitten by a vampire the next morning, I could conclude that my anxious assumption was incorrect.

If it turns out that I don't need to protect myself against vampires, then in time my whole belief system about vampires will change. I'll no longer be on alert looking out for them and taking measures to protect myself from them. As a result, I'll no longer be anxious about them. The whole cycle of anxiety will end, rather than needing to be managed.

In session four we also asked the question: What should you do if a monster comes to your door and demands to be fed?

In this analogy, feeding the monster could be seen as a safety-seeking behaviour, based on the assumption, "unless I feed the monster, it will be unhappy and it might hurt me". However, we noted that if we feed the monster it is likely to grow bigger and stronger, demand to be fed more often and it may invite its friends or family along and demand that they are fed too.

This is the process that happens to our anxiety when we use safety-seeking behaviours. If safety-seeking behaviours worked, we would stop feeling anxious altogether and we'd just be able to get on with our lives. What actually happens is that we spend more time anticipating and preparing for what might go wrong and more time doing things to prevent things going wrong. Our lives get narrower and narrower and our anxiety levels increase overall.

In session five we introduced some examples of anxious assumptions. Now we are going to look at how we can create behavioural experiments to test some of these assumptions.

Let's start with, "Unless I carefully monitor what I say, and only speak when I'm sure that it won't be foolish, then it is better to stay quiet"

With this assumption we have to think about what we will say in advance and have some way of deciding whether it might be seen as foolish by others before we say it. The most likely thing that others would see if they were observing us would be us mainly being quiet and perhaps seeming preoccupied. If we did speak, we might not share our own views or opinions. We might say very neutral or noncommittal things. We might also closely monitor the reactions of others to what we say to check for any signs of judgement.

We could carry out a behavioural experiment in which we don't think about what we are going to say before we say it. We could join in the conversation and share our opinions and note whether people do appear to judge us. We would need to define the criteria that we would use to decide whether we are being judged, otherwise we might assume that we are being judged when we are not – an example of the mind reading thinking bias.

Because this will probably feel like quite a scary thing to do, we need to plan our behavioural experiment carefully. We need to think about the right circumstances in which to do our experiment. One way to do this is to grade our experiments, starting with less challenging experiments and gradually working towards more challenging ones. In this case, sharing our opinions with one or two close friends might be a less challenging experiment than one involving going to a meeting of senior managers at work and pitching our ideas about a major project.

We also need to bear in mind that sometimes experiments might not go as well as we hoped. It might just be that when we take the risk of sharing our opinion with others that we do get a judgemental response. Or, we may feel so anxious that someone notices and comments. The form on the next page sets out a way that we can design and record our behavioural experiments.

Situation:	I'm with friends in a café-bar having a conversation.
Anxious Assumption:	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.
Safety-seeking Behaviour(s):	Think carefully about whether what I think might be judged by others if I say it during the conversation. Only say neutral things to avoid drawing attention to my views. Only speak as much as I need to so that people don't comment that I'm being very quiet.
What could I do to test this assumption:	Share my opinion about the topic of conversation. For example, if we are talking about what we watched on television last night. Join in the conversation more, rather than only speaking occasionally.
How would I know that nothing went wrong when I didn't use my safety-seeking behaviour(s)?	Nobody would question what I said, say it was weird or laugh at me. The conversation would just carry on as usual and I would be treated the same as everyone else.
What might go wrong? What do I need to remember if it does go wrong?	People may be so used to me not saying anything that they might comment on this. People might poke fun at what I say. I need to remember that these are my friends, I've known them a long time and I know that they are caring people. If anyone does comment it is most likely to be friendly banter.
What happened when I did things differently?	Nobody made any negative comments. Two of my friends agreed with me when I shared my opinions about one of the characters in the program we were discussing. It felt good to join in the conversation, even if I was anxious about doing it.
What does this tell me about my anxious assumption?	In this case it wasn't true. I could just say what I thought and not censor it. Nobody judged me.

In this example, the experiment was successful. However, it is unlikely to bring about a deep change if it is just done once.

We usually need quite a lot of evidence, gathered in quite a short space of time to bring about deep and lasting belief change.

If we were going to design a series of graded behavioural experiments to test the assumption, “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”, starting with the one above, what might a series of graded steps look like?

Step one: Share an opinion about a television program with a few close friends

Step two:

Step three:

Step four:

Step five:

When designing behavioural experiments, it is useful to bear in mind the following:

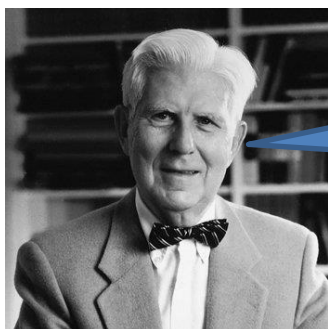
- ✓ Be clear about the anxious assumption you are testing and what the specific safety-seeking behaviours are that you are going to drop and what you will do instead.
- ✓ Be clear about the evidence you would use to know that nothing bad happened when you didn’t use safety-seeking behaviours.

- ✓ Start with a less challenging experiment that won't push you too far out of your comfort zone.
- ✓ Recognise that occasionally you may have an experience that seems to prove that your anxious assumption was right and that you do need to use safety-seeking behaviours. Think about alternative explanations for what this would mean in advance, so if it happens it doesn't feel overwhelming.
- ✓ Carry out a series of graded experiments, moving from less challenging to more challenging. Aim for a balance in which you don't push yourself too far too fast, yet don't avoid pushing yourself out of your comfort zone. Carry out your experiments without large gaps between them so that you can get sufficient evidence that your anxious assumptions aren't true.
- ✓ If you believe your anxious assumptions less, then your anxiety will reduce. However, it is natural to feel anxious before and during experiments until you have evidence that nothing went wrong.
- ✓ It's okay to use basic anxiety management techniques such as deep breathing to start with when doing behavioural experiments. In the longer-term these can turn into safety-seeking behaviours and prevent us proving that our initial anxious assumption is wrong. It's important to stop using anxiety management techniques when we can.
- ✓ The more challenging experiments will be easier to do once you have done a number of less challenging experiments on the same assumption.

On the next page is a blank behavioural experiment record. Let's complete it together, designing a basic experiment to test the anxious assumption, "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".

Situation:	
Anxious Assumption:	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
Safety Behaviour(s):	
What could I do to test this assumption?	
How would I know that nothing went wrong when I didn't use my safety behaviour(s)?	
What might go wrong? What do I need to remember if it does go wrong?	
What happened when I did things differently?	
What does this tell me about my anxious assumption?	

Home Practice



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

Summary of Session Six

Our main focus in this session was on testing anxious assumptions through carrying out behavioural experiments that involve dropping safety-seeking behaviours.

This is the key technique in CBT for reducing anxiety and is the most effective part of the treatment.

It is also the most challenging part of the treatment, so it is important to design experiments well and do them in a graded way.

Behavioural experiments need to be done frequently to have the best chance of bringing about deep belief change and eliminating the cycle of anxiety.

Write down one key point that you have learnt today:

Suggested Home Practice for Week Six

- 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.
- Continue to identify and change your automatic, anxious thoughts to less threatening ones, where possible identifying the thinking bias involved too.
- Use the behavioural experiment record below to design and carry out one behavioural experiment between now and next week. Start with a relatively less challenging experiment that doesn't feel overwhelming.
- Create a list of graded experiments to test the same anxious assumption that you can carry out over time.

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

1)

2)

3)

Situation:	
Anxious Assumption:	
Safety Behaviour(s):	
What could I do to test this assumption?	
How would I know that nothing went wrong when I didn't use my safety behaviour(s)?	
What might go wrong? What do I need to remember if it does go wrong?	
What happened when I did things differently?	
What does this tell me about my anxious assumption?	

Graded behavioural experiments to test my anxious assumption:

Building on the initial experiment above, what would be a series of behavioural experiments that I could do, starting with less challenging and gradually moving towards more challenging?

1)

2)

3)

4)