



Managing your anxiety

Session Seven

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?

So far on this course we have looked at switching our attention away from looking for and monitoring threat. We've looked at turning towards and welcoming our experience with mindfulness and acceptance techniques to help us be more aware of what is happening in our bodies and minds, react less to it on automatic pilot, and give us space to become clearer about the best course of action. We've looked at identifying and changing anxious thinking. We've covered behavioural experiments to test anxious assumptions.

In this session we will be focusing on understanding worry and breaking up cycles of worry.

What is worry?

Worry is the process of getting caught up in anxious thinking and trying to arrive at a sense of certainty in our own mind that we have things under control and nothing will go wrong.

It involves lots of "what if..." thoughts, followed by thoughts about what we can do to stop those "what if..." thoughts from coming true. It aims to make us feel less anxious by giving us more certainty that things will be okay.

Unfortunately, it often has the opposite effect and we feel less certain, rather than more certain, and as such, we feel more anxious. We can feel that we are going around and around in circles, like a dog chasing its tail.



In CBT we identify two different sorts of worries and understanding the difference between them is the key to breaking cycles of worry.

Practical Worries

Current, tangible situations
Problems that actually exist
What do I need to do?

Hypothetical Worries

Imagined future events that
may or may not happen
What if this happens...?

Both of these sorts of worries involve feeling anxious and being motivated to act so that things are under control and we feel safe again.

The difference between the two is that for practical worries, anxiety motivates a problem-solving process that will usually lead to a resolution of the problem and a reduction in anxiety.

For hypothetical worries a resolution can't be found and so the anxiety and sense of not being in control is more open-ended and we locked into ongoing worry and anxiety until the situation resolves itself.

An example of a practical worry:

I have several extra bills this month and I haven't got enough money to pay them. This makes me anxious because I know that not paying my bills could have consequences. So I might engage my problem-solving skills and come up with a list of potential solutions: I could ask a family member if they can lend me some money, I could talk to my boss about doing some overtime, I could talk to my bank about getting an overdraft.

Once I've tried these solutions and found one that works, I feel that I'm back in control of my circumstances and my anxiety diminishes.

An example of a Hypothetical worry:

Imagine that I have to get to a business meeting and that the traffic is moving very slow. I have the thoughts, "What if I'm late for the meeting?", "What if people think I'm unprofessional?", "What if this damages my reputation?" As it

happens, the traffic starts to move again and I get to the meeting in plenty of time.

Question: At what point would this turn into a practical worry?

Worry Quiz:

Can you identify whether the following are examples of hypothetical or practical worries?

- When I travel tomorrow, I have 6 minutes to make my connection and change trains. What if my first train gets in late and I miss my connection?
- My radiator is leaking and I have concerns that the floor will be damaged.
- A lump has come up on my leg over the last week. I don't know what the lump is and I have concerns about it.
- I've not been performing at my best recently. What if I don't meet my targets at work and I get into trouble?
- I'm working from home and my broadband keeps going down. I have concerns that it will impact on my work.
- My friends are coming over to my home for a meal later. It's the first time I've cooked for them. What if they don't like my cooking and don't want to come again?

More about hypothetical worries:

People who have a lot of hypothetical worries tend to worry about many situations in which the outcome of a situation is uncertain and the actual problem to be solved is at best ambiguous or isn't within our power to resolve.

The worry and anxiety only get resolved when the outcome to the event being worried about is known. Here are some examples:

- Will my partner arrive home safely driving in the rain and in the dark?
- Even if I prepare well, will the interview panel like me and offer me a job?
- Will my children be safe when they go away on the school trip?

The process of worrying about hypothetical worries goes something like this:

Anxious thought: What if my partner is in an accident driving home in the rain and in the dark?

Attempt to feel safe: I'll ask her to drive safely.

Am I certain that nothing will go wrong? – No

Attempt to feel safe: I'll plan a route for her that is well lit and suggest she follows it.

Am I certain that nothing will go wrong? – No

Attempt to feel safe: I'll suggest that she doesn't listen to music so that she isn't distracted and that she keeps a safe distance from the car in front of her at all times.

Am I certain that nothing will go wrong? – No

No matter how much I worry and try to arrive at certainty in the example above, my worry will only be resolved when my partner arrives home safely.

Using worry in an attempt to arrive at certainty for a hypothetical worry is a bit like trying to *build a castle in the air*, a saying that refers to creating plans that can't be realised. In the case of hypothetical worries we can't realise our desire to feel safe because we can't think and plan our way into feeling in control of a

situation that hasn't happened and that isn't in our control anyway. In fact the more we try to arrive at a sense of control and certainty for hypothetical worries, the more we are faced with not feeling in control and the more anxious and out of control we may feel.



Exercise:

Can you think of 5 things that you were worried would happen in the past that didn't actually happen?

1)

2)

3)

4)

5)

Another feature of hypothetical worries is that they hardly ever come true. To quote Mark Twain,

“I have spent most of my life worrying about things that have never happened.”

When we are prone to hypothetical worrying, it is like our mind has been hijacked by the contingency planning department at a large corporation that exists to anticipate possible risks and have plans in place to deal with them.



The problem with this is that we are not like corporations that can define the parameters of what they need to prepare for in concrete terms and have procedures for what to do written down in a manual. When we are prone to hypothetical worrying, we have no definite parameters around what we might worry about, so we often end up worrying about anything and everything. We are also unable to plan for and prepare for every eventuality and so our anxiety is never resolved. Our minds become shaped over time to habitually worry and this takes over our lives.

Breaking cycles of worry:

We're going to look at two main strategies to break cycles of worry:

1) To recognise that hypothetical worrying doesn't resolve our anxiety and so isn't worth doing.

2) To recognise that our hypothetical worries almost never come true and so worrying about them isn't worth doing.

Keeping a worry diary:

Date and time		Worry	Anxiety 0 to 10 (<i>None to extreme</i>)	Worry type (<i>current problem or hypothetical situation</i>)
<i>Date</i>	<i>Time</i>			
15/4	08.10	What if we're late getting to school?	5	Hypothetical
	11.40	What if mum is unwell at the weekend and cancels her visit?	6	Hypothetical
	14.50	The radiator pipe is leaking, I can see that the floor is getting damaged	6	Practical
	19.10	What if the takeaway I ordered doesn't get delivered?	4	Hypothetical

Keeping a worry diary is a useful way for us to become familiar with what we worry about. Most importantly, it is a way to identify whether our worries are about current practical problems that we can solve or about hypothetical situations that we can't resolve or that are beyond our control.

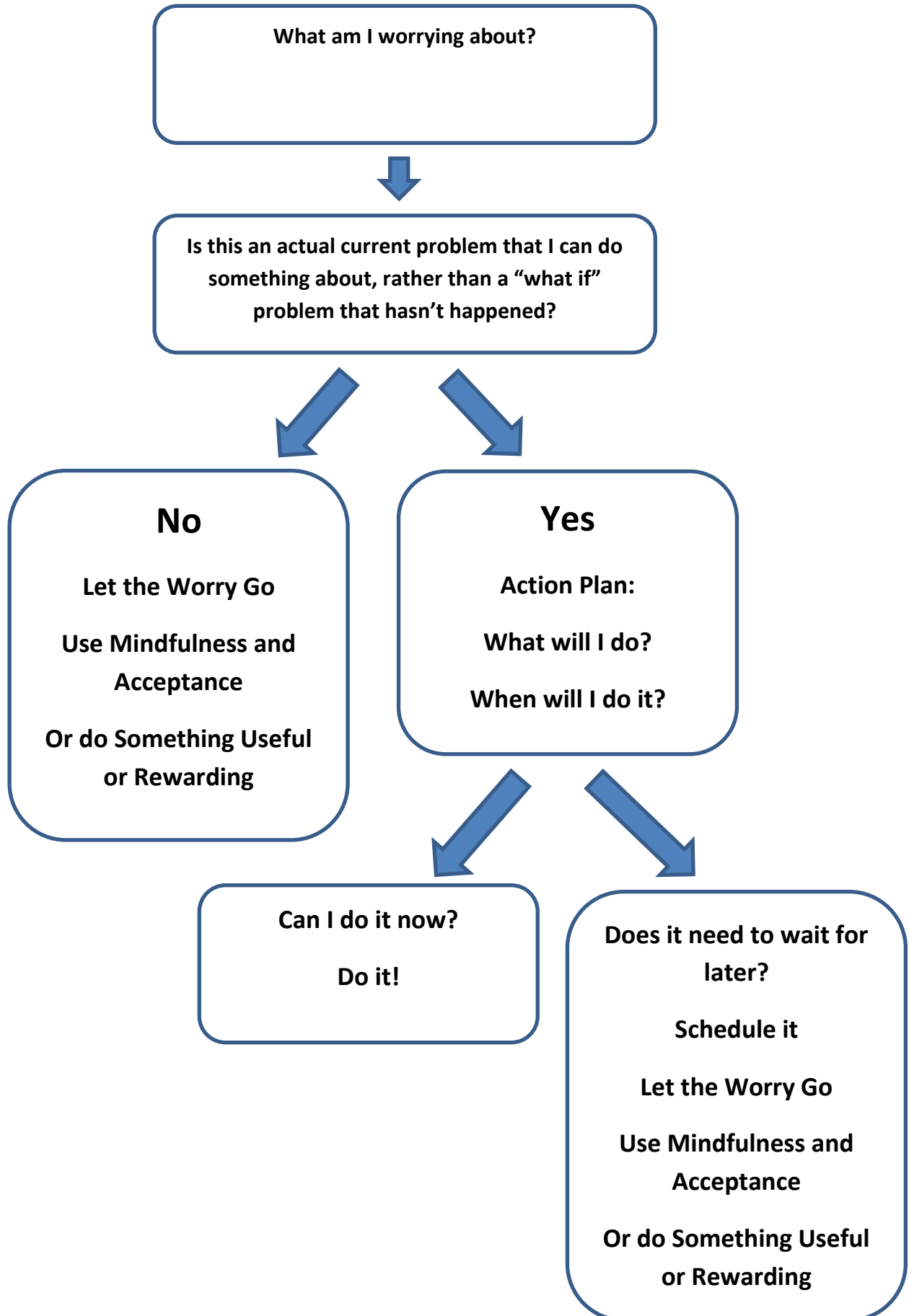
Most people find that the majority of what they worry about falls into the category of hypothetical worry.

When you think that what you are worrying about might be a hypothetical worry, ask yourself the following questions:

- Am I thinking about something that might happen in the future, but hasn't actually yet happened?
- Is it a situation that I have control over?
- Is there a clear cut solution that I can put in place now that will resolve my worry?
- Will worrying about it make it clearer?
- Will worrying change anything?
- Will worrying about it make me feel better?

For hypothetical worries the answer to these questions is almost always going to be "no". If that is the case, is continuing to worry something useful?

Worry Tree



The Worry Tree:

The worry tree is a decision making and guidance tool that helps us to identify what to do when we are worrying.

It asks us to notice what we are worrying about and whether it is a practical worry or a hypothetical one.

If it is a practical problem that we can solve, then it asks us to decide what to do and when to do it.

If it's a hypothetical problem that we can't resolve, it asks to let the worry go, use mindfulness and acceptance practices or do something useful or rewarding instead of worrying.

The worry diary and the worry tree can be used together to help us become more aware of when we are worrying, what kind of worry it is and whether we need to address a problem or consider letting the worry go. With practice, we can recognise that worrying about hypothetical worries doesn't make us feel better and we can get better at letting these worries go.

Keeping a Worry Outcome Diary:

A worry outcome diary is designed to show us that our hypothetical worries hardly ever come true, and if they occasionally do, then we cope with the situation much better than we thought we would or people are more supportive than we expected.

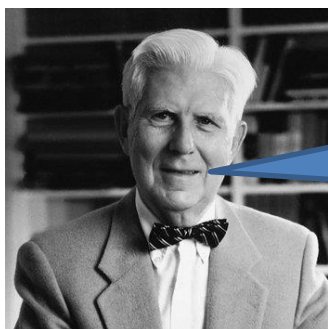
In the long-term, this helps us to stop worrying, as we come to recognise that the "what if...?" thoughts that drive our hypothetical worry are not really worth taking seriously.

On the next page there is an example of how to complete a worry outcome diary.

What am I worrying about? (Word or phrase)	How much do I believe it will happen? (0-10)	What actually happened?	If something did go wrong, how well did I cope?	Did my anxious thoughts predict what actually happened?
Fail driving test	6	I passed	N/A	No
Get into trouble at work	6	I actually got praised	N/A	No
Late for Dentist – removed from list	7	I was late	I just apologised and they were fine about it	No



Home Practice



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

Summary of Session Seven

In session seven we looked at what worry is, what it aims to do and the two different types of worry identified in CBT.

We looked at how anxiety in practical worries is resolved by solving problems.

We explored how anxiety related to hypothetical situations can't be resolved by worry and that over time we can learn to let these worries go.

Write down one key point that you have learnt today:

Suggested Home Practice for Week Seven

- Continue with any of the techniques we have covered so far that you find useful and that are helping you reduce your anxiety.
- Keep a worry diary to help you notice what you worry about and what kind of worries you have. Limit yourself to recording four worries a day.
- Use the worry tree as a guide to how to respond to your worries.
- Use a worry outcome diary to gather evidence that your hypothetical worries very seldom come true. If they do, you will probably find that things turn out better than you feared. This will help you feel less inclined to worry when you have “what if...?” thoughts, as you won’t feel that you need to take them as seriously as before.

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

1)

2)

3)

Date and time		Worry	Anxiety 0 to 10 (<i>None to extreme</i>)	Worry type (<i>current problem or hypothetical situation</i>)
Date	Time			

What am I worrying about? (Word or phrase)	How much do I believe it will happen? (0-10)	What actually happened?	If something did go wrong, how well did I cope?	Did my anxious thoughts predict what actually happened?

