



# Wellbeing with Fatigue

Booklet for Participants

Session 7 Managing Anxiety by Changing the Way We Think

**steps2wellbeing**  
Southampton & Dorset

[Pick the date]

# Action Plan

- Home Practice review
- What is Anxiety
- Attention Switching
- Role of Thinking in Anxiety
- Thought Challenge
- Summary and Home Practice

## Questions?

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?



# What is anxiety?

## Anxiety - a friend or foe?

We all experience anxiety; it is a natural human state and a vital part of our lives. Anxiety helps us to recognise and react to danger in the 'fight or flight' mode. It can motivate us to deal with challenging day to day tasks. The 'right' amount of anxiety can help us perform better and stimulate action and creativity. But there is another side to anxiety. Persistent anxiety can lead to us becoming unwell and, at worst, developing anxiety disorders such as panic disorder, general anxiety disorder, phobias. Anxiety at this level can have an anguished and debilitating impact on our lives, on our mental as well as physical health.

- How does anxiety affect your life?
- How do you cope with anxiety?

**Bring to mind a minor difficulty or source of anxiety, which doesn't score more than 2-3/10 on the anxiety rating scale (where 10 = highly anxiety provoking). Focus on any sensations of anxiety arising in your body. Locate where you feel the sensations most strongly and to concentrate on those sensations as much as possible for a couple of minutes.**

**Rate your anxiety from 0-10.**

**Now change your focus of attention to the sounds that you can hear around you, noticing what you can hear in the room, in the building and outside of the building. Notice whether sounds are continuous or intermittent, whether they are loud or quiet and notice what direction they come from. Focus on the sounds for 2-3 minutes.**

**Rescore your anxiety from 0-10**

**What did you notice? What happened to your anxiety when you changed your focus of attention from the experience of anxiety in your body to the experience of the sounds around you?**

# Attention Switching

## Attention Bias: Focusing on Threat

One feature of anxiety is the tendency to be hyper-alert for possible threat. This means that we may focus our attention on possible sources of threat. This can include the things that usually trigger our anxiety, as well as some of the symptoms of anxiety itself. If we are worried about our health, we may focus on sensations of discomfort or pain in our bodies.

### By looking for and focusing on threat we

- Often find that physical symptoms of discomfort, pain or anxiety get stronger just because we are focusing on them.
- Get into cycles of anxious thinking that leads to increased symptoms of anxiety that in turn leads to increased anxious thinking.



- By simply switching our attention from threat to something neutral, we cut straight across the vicious cycle of anxiety.
- Depending on what you find useful, you can switch your attention to:

## 5 Senses – Ask Yourself

What can you **see** around you?

What can you **hear** around you?

What can you **smell**?

What can you **taste**?

What can you **touch** right now?



## Mundane Task Focusing

Sometimes when we are doing everyday mundane tasks we are often on autopilot and do not focus on the task at hand e.g. washing up, cleaning teeth, driving. We can use these tasks to practise strengthening our attention like a muscle.

The good thing about mundane task focusing is that you do not do anything extra in your day, it is just about changing how you pay attention to things you are already doing.

Really pay attention to what is happening in that present moment.

*Choose one thing to focus on. Listen out for a specific word in a conversation. Focus on only the drums in a song on the radio. The warmth of the water when washing up.*



With mundane task focussing, the goal is to gradually practice sustaining your attention on a mundane activity for longer and longer periods of time – thus giving your attention a good workout.

Take a moment to think about some everyday household activities that you engage in where your mind might wander frequently (e.g., doing the dishes, ironing, gardening, taking a shower, vacuuming, eating a meal). Pick one of these tasks for your first attention workout

Now, start the task without intentionally trying to work your attention. You may wish to gauge your 'pre-workout' attention levels by rating the percentage of your attention that is currently focussed on yourself (including on your own thoughts, and bothersome symptoms and sensations) versus the percentage currently focussed on the task at hand.

Now, whilst continuing the task, you can officially start your attention workout. Each time you notice your mind has wandered off the task, anchor your attention back to the task by focussing on the following:

**Touch:** What does the activity feel like? What is the texture like (e.g., rough, smooth)? Where on your body do you have contact with it? Are there areas of your body with more or less contact with the task?

**Sight:** What do you notice about the task? What catches your eye? How does the task appear? What about the light... the shadows... the contours... the colours?

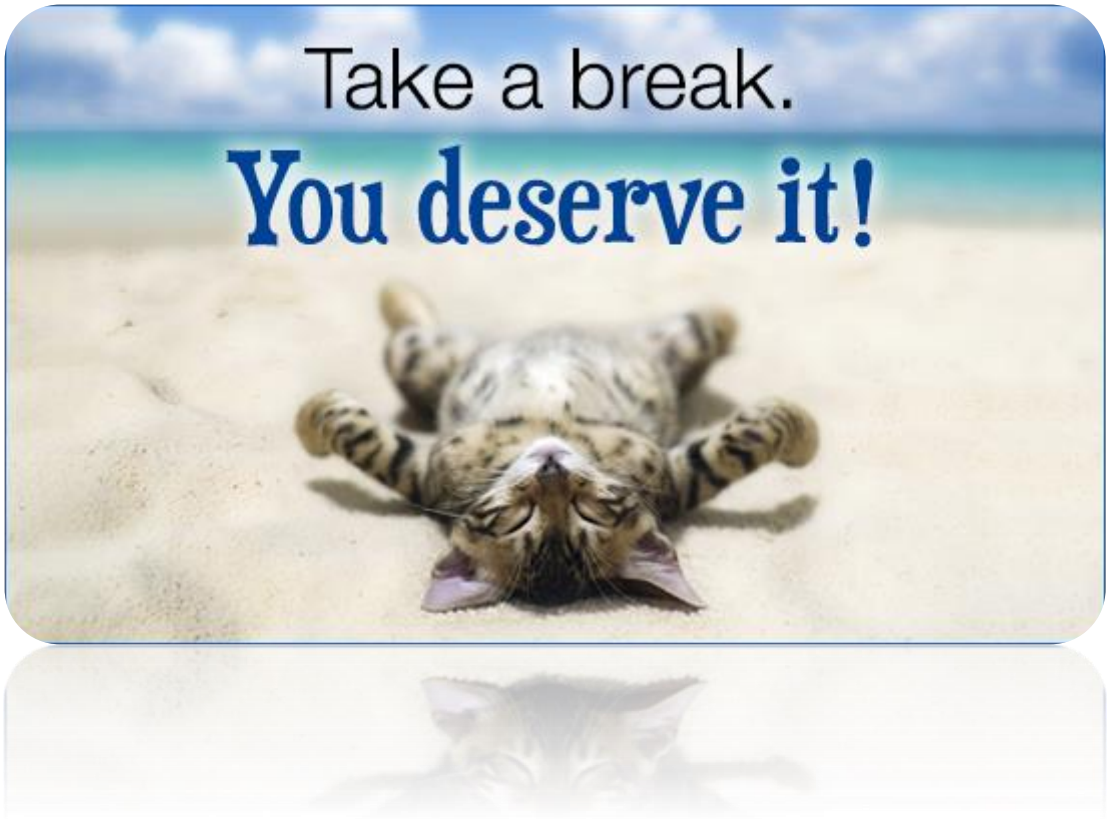
**Hearing:** What sounds do you notice? What kinds of noises are associated with the task?

**Smell:** What smells do you notice? Do they change during the task? How many smells are there?

**Taste:** What flavours do you notice? Do they change during the task? What is the quality of the flavours?

Once you have completed the mundane task focusing activity, you may wish to re-rate how much of your attention was self versus task focused, and think about what you have learned from completing the activity.

Take a break.  
**You deserve it!**



# Role of Thinking in Anxiety

## Our thoughts make us anxious

The first thing to recognise about anxiety is that external factors are not making us anxious, our internal thoughts are. And if our internal thoughts are causing the problem, we can change the way we think about the situation. The first step is to understand how our thoughts are responsible for the way we feel.

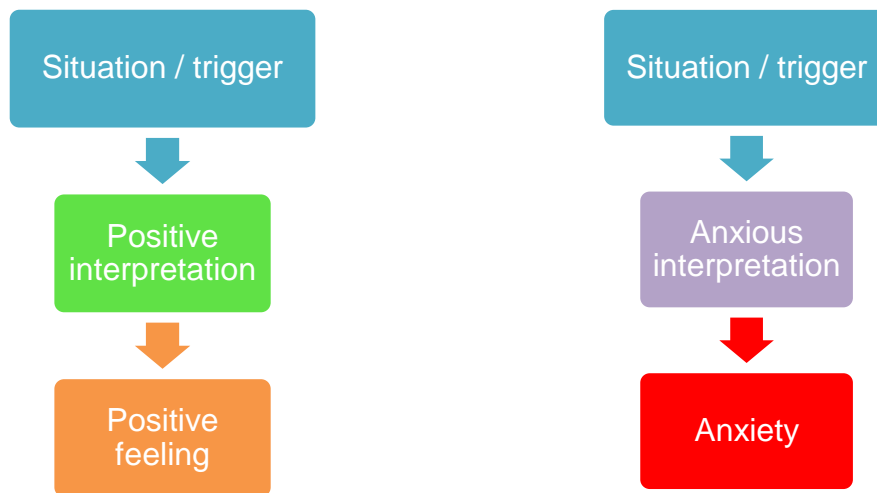
Let's look at the pictures. Let's imagine that you are doing these activities...



**What thoughts do you have? How do you feel emotionally? What sensations do you have in your body?**

**What would you do want to do? What would have made it an easier experience?**





**The figure above illustrates what happens inside us when something occurs and we interpret it in a positive way. We have positive feelings and don't feel anxious.**

**This is what happens when we don't feel threatened.**

**When something happens and we interpret it in a way that is threatening, we have anxious thoughts.**

**These thoughts trigger the fight, flight or freeze response – the automatic and very rapid reaction to threat that happens before we become fully consciously aware of the trigger and how we have interpreted it.**

### **Thoughts cannot hurt us!**

You're having a panic attack and you feel as you're going to die. In a social situation, a person with social anxiety might think they're going to collapse.

How do we get to such extreme physical sensations from a single thought? Because we interpreted the situation as threatening and this triggered the fight and flight response.

But think – thoughts cannot hurt you. Look around you now. Focus on a book or a lamp and say to yourself "Oh my God if I look at that book, I'll faint." No amount of you thinking it will make it happen.

The next time you feel anxious, remember: just because you think it, it doesn't mean you can make it happen.



# Coping with anxious thoughts

## Challenging Anxious Thoughts

### Step 1 Identify Anxious Thoughts

If we know that our interpretations of a stressful situation makes us anxious, not the situation itself, then we can start changing the way we think about the situation. To start the process we need to identify anxious thoughts that we need to challenge and become more aware of them. Keeping a diary can help!

Event	Thoughts	Feelings 0-10	Bodily sensations
Mild headache	Here we go again. If my headache is here, my other symptoms are sure to follow.	Anxiety 6/10	Tension in my shoulders Rapid breathing
Waiting for my doctor to call me back	What if she says she can't help me anymore? I'll not be able to cope with this!	Anxiety 8/10	Head spinning Tingling sensation in my hands and feet

- A thought diary requires us to describe situations that we experience, record the thought we had during that situation, and then the resulting feeling (s).
- Without practice identifying how thoughts and emotions are linked, the most important thoughts will pass by unnoticed and unchallenged.
- In this case, we should focus on thoughts that contribute to anxiety.

## Step 2 Reflect on the thought

When we notice our anxious thoughts it is likely that we accept that they are true. But we don't have to just accept them! We can take a step back and question the thoughts. It is often useful to look at the situation and thought from another perspective or another person's point of view.

### Thought challenge

#### ➤ Identify Unhelpful Thinking Style



- ❖ **Catastrophic thinking** – imagining 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,
- ❖ **Mindreading** – assuming that we know what people are or will be thinking about us, or what their intentions are.

#### ➤ Question the Thought



- ❖ **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?
- ❖ **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?
- ❖ **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?

❖ **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?

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- Come up with a new balanced and helpful conclusion

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- Re-rate your feelings

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- Try to let it be

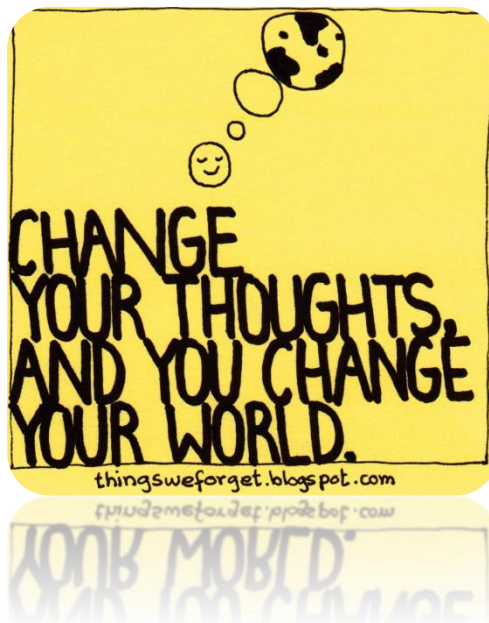
- ❖ Choose not to turn it over again and again

- Choose to act against the unhelpful thought

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- ❖ For example, if the thought says to you 'Don't speak to your doctor, he will say he won't help you' – then make a call and book an appointment with your doctor.

- ❖ The most powerful action we can do to test the accuracy of the balanced conclusion is **to act on the balanced conclusion!**





Event	Thoughts	Feelings 0-10  Bodily sensations	Unhelpful thinking style	Balanced perspective	Feelings Re-rate	Plan for putting the balanced conclusion into practice
Mild headache	Here we go again. If my headache is here, my other symptoms are sure to follow.	Anxiety 6/10 Tension in my shoulders  Rapid breathing	Catastrophising	It might be 'just a common headache.' I don't have to jump into a conclusion that my other symptoms will start! I can't see the future!	Anxiety 2/10	Take paracetamol tablets. Refocus my attention away from my headache to work.
Waiting for my doctor to call me back	What if she says she can't help me anymore? I'll not be able to cope with this!	Anxiety 8/10 Head spinning  Tingling sensation in my hands and feet	Mindreading  Underestimating coping	I don't know what she will say! She might have some new information. I coped before, and I will now!	Anxiety 4/10	Call my surgery and make an appointment with my doctor.



# Over to You: Choose and Practice

## Summary Session Seven

In this session we focused on the way in which we think about situation can feel threatening or safe. We looked at how we can change the way we think to reduce anxiety. We also talked about and practised Attention Switching.

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

### Suggested Home Practice

You may find useful to read this handbook, reflect upon your thoughts and the psychological techniques discussed.

When you experience anxiety in the week, you may choose to use the format we practiced today to challenge your thoughts.

Notice what happens if you shift your focus of attention to 5 Senses or Mundane Task.