



Wellbeing with Fatigue

Booklet for Participants

Session 8. Facing Your Fears.

steps2wellbeing
Southampton & Dorset

Action Plan

- Home Practice review
- Avoidance and Safety-Seeking Behaviours
- Overcoming Avoidance and Safety-Seeking Behaviours
- Behavioural Experiment
- 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?



Face Your Fears

In session seven we looked at how the way we think affects how we feel. We practiced different ways of thinking about situations that reduce anxiety. Today we are going to focus on overcoming anxiety through reducing avoidance and dropping safety-seeking behaviours. We will practice perhaps the most powerful approach to reduce anxiety in CBT, **the behavioural experiment**.

- **Have you ever experienced a negative life event? Something traumatic, unpleasant or stressful?**



- **How many of you when you've looked back on that stressful life event, maybe a day, a month, a year later or maybe a few years later, believe in some way or another that it's had a positive impact on your life?**

Maybe it made you wiser, better or better equipped to deal with other stress events?

If you wish write your reflections here...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MHnYpcmc2m0>



Jump Out of a Plane*

(not literally)

To live our best lives we all need to overcome some fears and anxieties. We all need to step out of our comfort zones and test our limits. And what we will, hopefully, find that we can do and be much more than we ever thought. What fear you would really like to face up to and overcome?

➤ **To help you establish what fear you would like to tackle, it helps to ask yourself this question “What am I avoiding?”**

- ❖ What situations do I avoid because they make me anxious?
- ❖ Is there anywhere I feel I can't go or anything I can't do because of anxiety or worry?
- ❖ Do I avoid socialising with others?
- ❖ Are there any situations at work/ in my relationships with others that I am avoiding?
- ❖ Am I avoiding something because of my symptoms of CFS or worry about the symptoms?

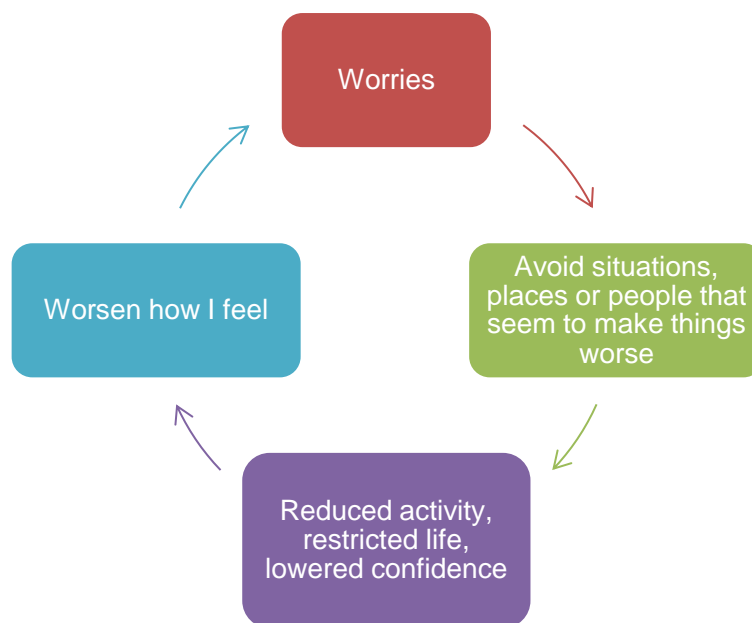
Write your answers to these questions here



Avoidance and Safety Behaviours

Overcoming Avoidance and Safety-Seeking Behaviours

When we feel anxious, we usually want to get away from the difficult situation as quickly as possible or do something to make the situation safer. In a truly dangerous situation, this response would be sensible. It would also be useful for us to avoid similar situations or use similar strategies to 'stay safe' in the future. Problems start when we try to escape or avoid situations that **aren't really dangerous**.



The vicious circle of avoidance

Consequences of avoidance

The more we try to escape or avoid anxiety provoking situation, the more we reinforce the idea that there is something to be scared of.

In long term, this means that we become more and more scared of things, and we avoid more and more things.

We never discover that the situation was not that bad, or that we would have coped with it.

Safety- seeking behaviours don't make you safe.

If we cannot escape or avoid anxiety-provoking situation, it seems natural to try to make the scary situation safer. Therefore the next best thing may be to do whatever we can to minimise the chances of something going wrong. The things that we do to prevent things going wrong are called safety-seeking behaviours. For example, a person who finds social events make them anxious, might stay close to a friend, or avoid talking very much.

- In the first table, list some of the apparent advantages of safety-seeking behaviours.
- What might be the disadvantages of safety-seeking behaviours? List those.
- How might using them lead to difficulties in the longer-term?

Advantages of Safety Behaviours

Disadvantages of Safety Behaviours



Overcoming Avoidance and Safety Behaviours

Avoiding or escaping situations that trigger anxiety, or using safety behaviours to control anxiety, may make us feel better in the short term. But in the long term, the more you use these strategies, the more the fear grows. Over time, the number of situations that cause anxiety tend to increase and it becomes increasingly more difficult to have a fulfilling life. In order to reduce anxiety in the long term, we need to break the pattern of avoidance and safety seeking behaviours.



How to break the vicious cycles of avoidance/safety seeking behaviours?

STEP 1 Identify the problem

- What situations do I avoid because they make me anxious?
- Do I have 'tricks' that I use to make me feel more comfortable in anxiety provoking situations?
- If it helps, try to make two lists 1) things that you have been avoiding, that you would like to start doing again, 2) safety seeking behaviours that you have been using but want to get rid of.



STEP 2 Ask yourself ‘why?’

- What kind of thoughts leading me to avoid these situations?
- What am I worrying about?
- What am I predicting that will happen?
- Write your answers down.



STEP 3 Put your anxious interpretation to test (behavioural experiment)

- Choose one anxious assumption/ worrisome thought as your target
- Identify safety-seeking behaviours/avoidance strategy
- Ask yourself
 - 1) What could I do to test this assumption?
 - 2) How would I know that nothing went wrong when I didn't use my safety-seeking behaviour(s)?
 - 3) What might go wrong? What do I need to remember if it does go wrong?


Step 4 Evaluate

- What happened when I did things differently?
- What does this tell me about my anxious assumption/worry?

EXAMPLE

Situation:	I'm with friends having a conversation through Zoom. Worrying about experiencing brain fog symptoms. Worrying about not being able to remember words while speaking.
Anxious Assumption:	If my friends see that I can't remember words they will think I'm stupid. Unless I carefully monitor what I say, and only speak after rehearsing my part of conversation in my head, then it is better to stay quiet.
Safety-seeking Behaviour(s):	Think carefully about what I think I want to say it during the conversation. Mentally rehearsing parts of our conversation in my head. 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:	Say things without rehearsing first in my mind. 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 say I was stupid when I could not remember a word 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 notice that I struggle to remember some words. People may comment about this. People might poke fun at my difficulty. 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 a friendly banter.
What happened when I did things differently?	I couldn't remember couple of words, but nobody made any negative comments. It felt good to join in the conversation, even if I was anxious about doing it. I felt more involved in the conversation and enjoyed the meeting more.
What does this tell me about my anxious assumption?	In this case it wasn't true. I could just join the conversation without rehearsing things in my head. Nobody judged me.

Behavioural Experiment Worksheet



Tips for designing behavioural experiments

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.

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.





Over to You: Choose and Practice

Summary Session Eight

Our main focus in this session was on identifying our fears and testing them through carrying out behavioural experiments that involve dropping safety-seeking behaviours and reducing avoidance.

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 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.

Consider using 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.

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?	