

Managing anxiety

It's important to know that anxiety is a natural process. Our mind is trying to help us to not feel discomfort, pain or sadness so it helps us to prepare by putting us on alert to danger.

Sometimes our mind can get used to this and become overactive and we end up living in a constant state of alert; then our safety behaviours kick in to help us cope. In other words we become experts at worrying. Safety behaviours are great in the physical world, we know a fire can burn us therefore we stay away from it. We clean our teeth to avoid cavities. The problem is anxiety isn't a problem of danger, it's a problem of worrying about danger.

Sometimes worry is a false alarm.

Where's the evidence?

To start to manage anxiety we first have to know the difference between a real threat and a false alarm. We do this by asking questions and following evidence.

"My son is 5 minutes late, he must have been in an accident, I need to start phoning hospitals"

Ask yourself "Do I know that this terrible thing is going to happen?" The answer is almost always "I don't know, at least not for sure".

This is because worry is about thinking or feeling and not about knowing.

The first question when you recognise a worry should always be "Where is the evidence?"

Thought distortions (see separate sheet)

We are often worrying because when our alarm is triggered we think, therefore we believe we are in danger even if we're not.

The debate

When you get practised at recognising the thinking errors we can challenge them by talking back to our worry. Worry tends to win because even when we try to convince ourselves the bad thing won't happen, there's still "Are you sure?" to deal with and because we're not sure we lose the fight and continue worrying.

To combat this we answer simply "No I'm not sure and that's ok because we can never be 100% sure either way". For example,

"My son is 5 minutes late, he must have been in an accident, I need to start phoning hospitals"

"Where is the evidence?"

"There is no evidence, he does sometimes get delayed / take a later bus / forget to text me so it's unlikely he has been in an accident"

"Are you sure?"

“No I’m not sure but the chances are very small and I can live with that”

Shifting attention

So, once you’ve told worry everything is ok and manageable, it goes away right? Not always. Ignoring that voice is difficult, so we don’t. Trying to push it away often makes things worse. Instead we acknowledge it’s happening, observe the feelings and accept that we feel this way, in other words we remember the truth and let it just hang there until it goes away, and it will go away. No thought exists forever. For example,

“Are you sure?”

“No I’m not sure but the chances are very small and I can live with that”

“There’s those parental nerves again, my heart is pounding and I know that’s my amygdala sounding an alarm, I wish I didn’t feel this way but I’ll wait it out until it goes”.

Stop obeying the worry

That last part is called exposure. When we listen to our worries and create behaviours that stop the worry, for example, “I’m not going out in the rain because the last time I slipped and broke my arm”. This is the perfect trap for worry, by obeying the worry you don’t then realise that the possible danger wasn’t actual danger and so the cycle continues with other situations.

For example, “I choked on a fish bone so I won’t eat fish again”. This could lead to “what if I choke on [insert other examples of food!!!]” and you start cutting all sorts of food from your diet. Exposure is just that, exposing yourself to the perceived danger to prove to yourself and your “worry” that it was a one off and it won’t happen every time.

Summary

Following an ever expanding set of safety behaviours will restrict your life until it’s all you think about and plan for. Worry wants you to be 100% sure about everything and totally 100% safe and comfortable all of the time. We know that this isn’t possible so we have to live with uncertainty and know that it will probably be ok, most of the time. When we expose ourselves to the discomfort, our brain finally stops paying attention to it and filing it as danger. It’s important to know that even if something bad does happen we are probably able to cope with that too.