

CHANGING THE WAY YOU THINK



How you think has an important effect on the way you feel and what you do. Thoughts like, "I can't cope", "I'm going to panic", or "I feel terrible" make you feel more anxious and unhappy and can make your anxiety worse.

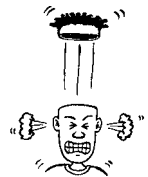
Becoming aware of your negative thoughts can help you to understand why you are anxious

It can also be the first step towards learning to think in a more helpful, positive way. Negative thoughts have certain characteristics:-

- Negative thoughts**
- spring to mind without any effort from you
 - are easy to believe
 - are often not true
 - can be difficult to stop
 - are unhelpful. They keep you anxious and make it difficult to change.

Feelings and thoughts

It can often be difficult to tell the difference between thoughts and feelings. For example you may say "I feel as if I am going to panic" but what you really mean is "I think I am going to panic". You may have body feelings of shakiness, light-headedness or your heart pounding but the thought that you are going to panic is in your mind, not in your body. To help to explain this, here are some examples of how body feelings and anxious thoughts can go together.



Body Feeling	Anxious Thought
Heart pounding	"I'm going to have a heart attack"
Dizziness	"I think I'm going to faint"
Breathlessness, tightness in chest	"I feel as if I'm going to die"
Everything seems unreal, confused	"I'm going mad"

Your negative thoughts



If you want to write in the space below what are the most important negative thoughts which you have when you are anxious. Look back at box on the previous page to get started with some common thoughts.

This can be difficult, try and put yourself in the situation and “catch” or “detect” what you were thinking at the time. It may be quite a new idea to try to remember what you were thinking when you were anxious and may take some practice before you get the hang of it.

Recording negative thoughts

When you are next in an anxious situation, or put yourself in one, to try and cope with situations better, then as soon as you have come out of the situation, fill in the form on the following page, describing what your body feelings and thoughts were,



- before you went into the situation,
- during the situation, and
- after you came out of the situation.

Here is an example of what the form could look like when you have filled it in.

Situation : Getting on a bus for one stop

	BEFORE	DURING	AFTER
How did my body feel?	Stomach churning Shaky	Heart pounding Stomach churning Feeling sweaty & shaky	Exhausted, tired, drained, miserable
What did I think?	I’m dreading this It will be crowded and hot. Everyone will look at me, it will be obvious that I’m panicking. What if I faint?	This is going to take ages. I’m going to have to get off. Everyone’s looking at me, I must look such an idiot. What’s the point of making myself do this? I wish I had stayed at home.	I was hopeless. It’s just not worth the effort. I am never going to get better. What a failure I am.

If you think in this way, its fairly easy to see how you can end up feeling anxious and unhappy.

Now use this form to write down your thoughts and feelings in an anxiety situation.

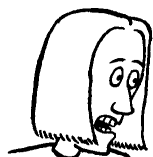
Situation: _____

	BEFORE	DURING	AFTER
How did my body feel?			
What did I think?			

Now that you know more about your negative thoughts you can begin to learn to change the way you think, and to replace the negative thoughts with more helpful, positive thoughts. We

will go on to explain how you can do this but first, here is an example of how somebody learnt to cope with their anxiety by changing the way they thought.

Aimee and her anxiety attacks



Aimee had a history of anxiety symptoms for several years. She complained of palpitations and sweating, and fear in public places, particularly school. She also felt very nervous, self conscious and embarrassed in social situations. She had experienced a number of panic attacks at school.

She was eventually referred as an out-patient to a Psychology Department where she was taught to control her feelings of anxiety and tension, and encouraged to use the techniques she learnt by going out and mixing socially. Eventually, she was able to go to school without worrying, go out to shops and mix easily, making new friends.

When last seen by a Psychologist she had not experienced a panic attack for over four months.

Before Treatment

These are the kinds of things that Aimee used to say to herself before treatment :

Before Aimee approached a crowd of people (eg, a queue) and she used to say to herself :
"Oh my God, look at those people".
"There are so many of them and some of them are looking at me -what the hell will I do?"
"I've got to run away - I know I mustn't - I'm going to panic and make a fool of myself - I wish I were dead!"

During or while she was in the situation she would say to herself :
"I've got to get out of here - look for the quickest way out".
"I hate people, they always make me panic - I just can't cope anymore".
"People are looking at me - turn your face away, don't look - run".

After "Why do I bother - what's the point, I just mess it up every time."
"Why is it that every time I meet people I panic, but that on some days things are a bit better. I must be going mad".
"I might as well be in a mental hospital as here at home".

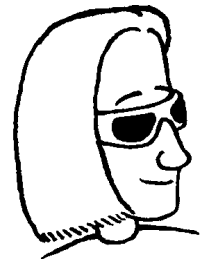
In the course of her treatment programme Aimee learnt to change the way she thought about things and this helped her to cope and to concentrate on what she had to do.

Aimee found it useful to write her lines on cards so that she could read them.

After Treatment

Before approaching a crowd:

- “Now OK, here’s a crowd of people so prepare yourself to use your coping skills”.
- “If I feel panicky that doesn’t mean I’m going to make a fool of myself - it’s a sign that I’ve got to use my coping skills”.
- “Now, come on, just prepare yourself calmly -breathe slowly in and out in and out. Good! Relax.”
- “Don’t run just walk normally. Don’t clench your fists, relax”.
- “Have a look in at things, how many colours can I see? How much would each cost?”



During

- “Now you realise that people aren’t looking at you - they may give the odd glance, but so what!”
- “You can do it if you try and stop those self-defeating thoughts taking over. Stick to what you have to do, don’t let your mind wander, CONCENTRATE!”
- “Right, calm down, there’s no reason to panic. Breathe slowly in out in out relax! Relax! Good! Well done, you’re trying to cope, that’s the important thing!”
- “Distract yourself again – count things, count the colours, work out the prices!”

After

- “Well done, - you tried hard and that’s important”.
- “Of course you can’t get it perfect - no-one can, but each time I try it makes things easier in the future - well done!”
- “I coped much better than I did before anyway”.
- “Next time perhaps I’ll try
- Aimee no longer thinks “panic or failure” and that she doesn’t allow her thoughts to get the better of her.
- See also how she talks herself through it in a positive coping way and although she realises that she can’t get it perfect - she praises herself for trying.

Positive Thinking



You have already taken the first step towards thinking positive by writing down your negative thoughts. The next step is to think of more realistic, positive answers to these pessimistic thoughts. Here are some questions to ask yourself when you start having thoughts which you suspect are negative.

- Does the thought make me feel more anxious/depressed?
- Does it stop me from doing what I want to do?
- Is it true?
- Is there another way I can look at this situation?

If the answer is yes to any of these questions, try to think of another thought which would help you to get through the situation and feel better about it. It may help to think of what someone else would say to you if you told them your negative thoughts.

Here are some examples of positive answers to negative thoughts.

Negative Thought	Positive Answer
"I'm going to faint"	"I've never fainted before so there's no reason to think that I will now. If I try to relax and breathe slowly I will feel less dizzy and things will gradually get better".
"I'm having a heart attack"	"I know that there is nothing wrong with my heart. My doctor told me so. My heart is only pounding because I'm anxious. If I stop thinking about it and concentrate on what I am doing, I will soon feel better".
"I can't cope with this"	"I know that it is only thinking this way that stops me from coping. It may be difficult, but I can cope if I use my relaxation, slow down and take my mind off these negative thoughts".

You should by now have a better idea of how answering your negative thoughts in a more helpful, realistic way can help you to cope with your anxiety. However, it can still be hard to think of positive, coping thoughts which will help you answer your own particular negative thoughts. To help you do this, here is a list of coping statements which may give you some more ideas. Read through the list and think about which statements might apply to you and help you to cope better with your anxiety.

Coping Statements



I'm going to approach this problem situation so that I can practice coping better.

It's unlikely that I'll be 100% satisfied, but the important thing is practising and building up my confidence.

I'll practice relaxation even before I attempt my test/ exam etc.

I know that worry about how my body feels makes me panic - I know my feelings can be controlled.

I've done this before and have come out of it alive/sane/still in one piece.



I'll take some slow, deep breaths like I learnt to do in class as soon as I feel the anxiety starting.

I'll pay more attention to what's going on around me, describe people, places, count cars, railings, hum a tune, anything to distract me from myself.

I know this works because it has done before.

I know I'll get better the more used I get to coping with anxiety.

I can imagine myself being in a play, being a calm, confident person - who's to know?

I'll feel so proud of myself when I feel myself getting calmer.

It feels good learning how to control anxious feelings.

I know that it's not the queue, supermarket, clock etc. which actually makes me anxious, it's just that I use these as signals to get tense.

I'm now learning to use these situations as signals to practice relaxation.

I'm deliberately going to change how I feel about time/crowds/buses/shops.

I don't like being tense, I'm proud of myself for having the courage and the patience to change.

Gosh, I haven't achieved so much since I sat my exams, started my first job etc.

Instead of dwelling on my tension I'm going to use my time to list all the positive things about myself that I can think of.

I'll treat myself to a nice cup of tea/cake/cigarette once I see myself through this.

I'll record this progress in my diary and watch my improvement over the following weeks.

-I deserve to be calm, I want to be calm,

I know I can be calm, I know it's up to me.

I'll think of all the things I'll do when I've got to grips with this tension.

I'm doing this for me.

I'm just helping the calm person in me escape.

Calm, calm, let go, don't fight it.

Accept, let go, it'll pass.

Don't run, don't run, count to 10, breathe slowly, there it goes

I've done it before, it'll be easier next time.

Maybe I'm having a bad day, no one knows I'm feeling shaky, what harm?

I'm only fighting myself - relax body, I'll take care of you



- Now practise writing down positive answers to some of the negative thoughts that you have just marked.

Your Negative Thought	Your Positive Answer

How to Use Positive Thinking When Anxious

The key to being able to think positively is to keep practising. Every time you become aware of negative thoughts going through your mind, try to stop yourself and think of a positive, realistic answer. At first it can help to write down both the negative thought and your answer to it.



When preparing to go into a situation that makes you anxious, think beforehand about what coping skills you will use (e.g. breathing exercises) and how you will answer any negative thoughts before, during and after the situation. Like Aimee it may be helpful to write your lines down on a card and take it with you so that you can read it if you begin to feel anxious.

Look at the rules for coping with panic. Take this with you and if you become panicky read it. It will remind you of what you need to do to keep calm.

Distraction Technique



distraction!!

Distraction is another coping skill that can help you to stop the stream of negative thoughts that keep you anxious. Many people say they can get relaxed, but can't relax mentally and shut out worrying, self-defeating thoughts. It is then difficult to cope with stressful situations because paying attention anxious thoughts can lead to a vicious circle of anxiety that can lead to a highly unpleasant panic attack.

It can be very difficult to shut out these worrying thoughts but by practising the distraction technique regularly whenever these thoughts come to mind you can gradually learn to alter the vicious circle of negative thoughts and feelings which stop you doing constructive, practical things to cope with and overcome anxiety problems.

The distraction technique works because it teaches you to train your concentration and attention on things happening or existing outside yourself. When your attention is truly focused on outside or external things or events you will find that you are unable to pay as much attention to feelings and thoughts which are internal i.e inside yourself. In fact, distraction is one of the major ways in which people who do not have anxiety problems learn to cope with stress. For example when young children fall and hurt themselves, parents will use distraction to take their minds off the pain. Athletes do the same, if injured, they are so occupied with the game that they only notice the pain much later when the game is over.

How to learn the Distraction Technique

Place yourself in a quiet room or somewhere where you will not be disturbed for several minutes when you are trying to learn the distraction technique. Practise at least two or three times a day.



(1) Close your eyes. Try to focus on some worrying thoughts which may have been on your mind earlier in the day or week. Repeat these worries over to yourself either mentally or out loud for about 1-2 minutes. You will probably find that as you summon up the worrying thoughts, you become more anxious. This is to be expected.

(2) When the worrying thoughts are clear in your mind, say STOP! either mentally or out loud to yourself, and OPEN YOUR EYES.



(3) IMMEDIATELY you open your eyes you must quickly begin to name and describe all the objects you can see in the room. You can describe out loud or mentally to yourself, whichever is easiest for you.

Imagine that you are describing the outlay of the room to a blind friend or relative.

Describe:

COLOURS of objects in detail, eg. light pink, sky blue;

SIZE of objects, eg. their width, length, breadth, estimated weight;

NUMBERS of objects or parts of objects, eg. number of panes of glass in window, shelves on bookcase, ornaments on shelf;

SHAPE of objects, eg. are they round, square, long, thin, etc?

and likely COST of objects.

Any other characteristics of the objects, eg. are they old, antique, broken, ugly, etc.

Imagine that the blind person is firing a lot of questions of this kind which you have to answer accurately and as quickly as possible.

Applying the Technique to Stress Situations

When you feel that you have understood and mastered the distraction technique, you can learn to apply it in situations in which you feel anxious. Apply distraction methods at any time, before, during or after approaching a stressful situation, whenever you notice a build up of anxiety.



You can apply the technique to describe characteristics of the situation you are in (eg. looking in detail at houses which you are walking past, reading the labels on tins at the supermarket) or to describe the characteristics of people around you (eg. their age, clothing, stature, likely occupations, etc)

People often find that they cannot practice this kind of distraction technique when talking with another person. One way of using the technique in this situation is to try to concentrate on what the other person is saying, perhaps imagining that you have to repeat the conversation to a friend afterwards.

Benefits of the Distraction Technique

There are two benefits of using distraction techniques for people with anxiety problems:

- (1) It trains attention to the outside world (events, objects and people) and draws attention away from internal anxiety feelings and thoughts.
- (2) It helps you see a new situation more clearly. Many anxious people seem to put on “blinkers” when they enter a stressful situation and therefore don’t notice what is going on around them, which can often make the situation seem more frightening and confusing than it really is. By re-training your attention you become a better observer and this often means that it becomes easier to make conversation and relax

