

ANXIETY

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WHAT IS ANXIETY?

Anxiety is a normal part of the human experience. Throughout human evolution, anxiety has protected our ancestors. **Fear motivates us to avoid** situations that are dangerous, and the **physical reactions to fear prepare us** to deal with threats. In some situations, fear is a survival instinct that can occur in response to a realistically dangerous situation. For example, if we were approached by a tiger, we would experience fear and the body would prepare us to run, fight, or freeze in an effort to protect us. Sometimes however, the real physical danger isn't there but we believe we are in danger and experience the same fear response. For example, when talking in a group, we can overestimate how dangerous the situation is and experience anxiety.

GENERALIZED ANXIETY

- Uncontrollable and excessive worry occurring most days about ordinary activities.
- Intolerance of uncertainty. Intolerance of uncertainty may present as distress about situations where you do not know with certainty what will happen or what other people may think.

Examples:

- Worrying a lot about harm coming to their family members
- Worrying a lot about accidents – plane crashes, earthquakes, car accidents, etc.
- Worrying about crime – someone breaking into your phone, terrorism, being attacked, etc.
- Worrying about making a mistake – going to the store without a list, not doing well enough on a test, getting lost, etc.

SOCIAL ANXIETY

- Excessive or unrealistic fear of social situations or performance.
- Intolerance of embarrassment or scrutiny by others.
- An excessive fear of being judged negatively by other people.

Examples:

- A person is so shy that they cannot speak in a group.
- Fear of making a mistake in public – falling down, spilling food, saying the wrong thing, etc.
- Fear of being rejected – not getting a job after an interview, speaking to someone you may want to have a relationship with, etc.

PANIC

- Unexpected sudden surge of overwhelming anxiety and fear without an obvious trigger.
- Symptoms can include: pounding heart, sweating, trembling, and shortness of breath.
- Avoidance of situations where panic attacks have occurred.

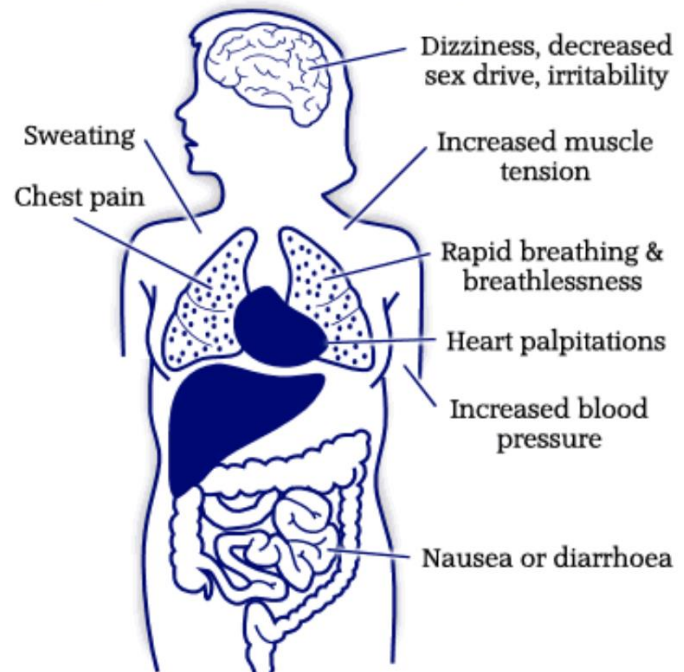
When a person's fight/flight/freeze response is activated there are three main types of responses: physical responses, thinking responses, and behavioral responses.

PHYSICAL RESPONSES

When we become anxious, in response to a real or perceived threat, **our bodies experience various physical changes**. For example, if you are fearful about attending a group with people you have not met, you might experience sweaty palms, shortness of breath, dry mouth, and tension in your chest. Although there is no real physical danger, our body can still activate a fear response.

CONSIDER SOME OF THE PHYSICAL RESPONSES YOU HAVE WHEN ANXIOUS AND LIST THEM BELOW:

We all experience these types of reactions when we experience fear or anxiety. Our bodies release certain chemicals when we believe that a threat exists that help us to run away, standstill, or prepare to fight.



- We feel as though our heart is pounding, increased heart rate enables blood and oxygen to be pumped around the body faster.
- Sweating makes your body more slippery allowing you to avoid being captured by a predator, and it also cools your body to allow greater exertion.
- With blood being pumped into your muscles, your digestion will slow and this can produce nausea and dry mouth.
- When our breathing accelerates we are increasing the body's supply of oxygen. We may also be sending less oxygen to the brain, which can cause dizziness, light-headedness, confusion, and hot flashes.
- Your muscles can tense in preparation for dealing with danger. This can result in pain, discomfort, shaking, and exhaustion.
- Your body may redirect blood from non-essential areas like your hands or feet producing a cold, clammy feeling.
- Widening of the pupils improves your ability to monitor your surroundings but it can also increase blurriness and other sensations.

THINKING/COGNITIVE

Often excessive anxiety is maintained by a variety of **unhelpful thinking responses**. **Excessive anxiety is the product of excessive worry**. Worrying can be defined as thinking about “what could go wrong” and trying to predict all of the negative outcomes in a situation. Sometimes people are unaware of their worries and believe their anxiety seemingly comes from nowhere. Often this is because the physical sensations of anxiety are so distracting. With training, we can increase our awareness of what is going on in our minds before, during, and after an anxiety provoking situation.

Excessive Worry = Excessive Anxiety

We are more likely to excessively worry when we:

- Over-estimate the probability of negative outcomes and how bad the outcomes will be if they do happen
- Under-estimate their ability to cope with challenges

Prior to a challenging situation we may experience “anticipatory anxiety.” When we are worried about a situation going badly, or some catastrophe occurring, before entering the situation, we are experiencing anticipatory anxiety.

In a challenging situation, we may inadvertently increase our anxiety by focusing our attention on cues that could suggest something bad is happening or about to happen. For example, when we experience social anxiety we sometimes report excessively monitoring their breathing, sweating, or shaking for any sign that they might have a panic attack. When we are worrying about our symptoms of anxiety like this, we may inadvertently cause more anxiety!

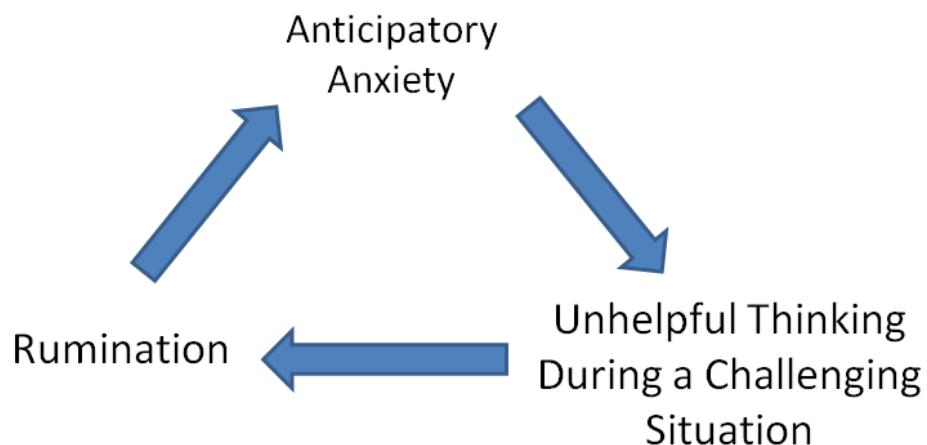
Worrying about anxiety symptoms
(breathing, sweating, shaking, etc.)



More anxiety symptoms

Even when we are not paying attention to our anxiety symptoms, we may be paying too much attention to evidence in our environment that something is going wrong or could go wrong. An example of this is when we speak in-front of a group and we focus on the one person who yawns, while ignoring all the people enthusiastically paying attention, and we conclude that we are boring and everyone is getting annoyed.

Following a challenging situation, we may “ruminate.” This is when we go over our performance, the reactions of others, and evaluate how a situation went. However, when we tend to under-estimate our performance and over-estimate the negative aspects of situations, rumination tends to cause greater levels of anxiety. This cycle then tends to increase the amount of anticipatory anxiety a person will experience prior to being exposed to a similar situation in the future.



BEHAVIORAL RESPONSES

People often attempt to cope with excessive anxiety by behaving in particular ways. Unfortunately some of these behaviors may maintain or perpetuate high levels of anxiety.

Some include:

- Excessive list making
- Excessively checking doors, windows, the stove, etc.
- Excessively relying on others – seeking reassurance
- Engaging in unhealthy behaviors (excessive drinking or drug use)
- Wanting to do everything yourself and not delegating tasks to anyone else
- Looking for **an excessive amount** of information before proceeding with something

CONSIDER SOME OF THE BEHAVIORS YOU USE IN AN ATTEMPT TO COPE WITH ANXIETY.

AVOIDANCE

One of the most common ways people try and reduce anxiety is avoidance. Although it may reduce our anxiety in the short term, it can have unhelpful long term effects. Unfortunately, avoidance makes it difficult for us to learn that some of our assumptions about challenging situations, and our abilities to cope with challenges, may be distorted.

Consider a situation that has caused you a considerable amount of anxiety and summarize how you responded.

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RELAXATION STRATEGIES

Anxiety triggers a number of physical changes in our body. Relaxation strategies can help settle the fight, flight, freeze response and turn on the body's natural relaxation response.

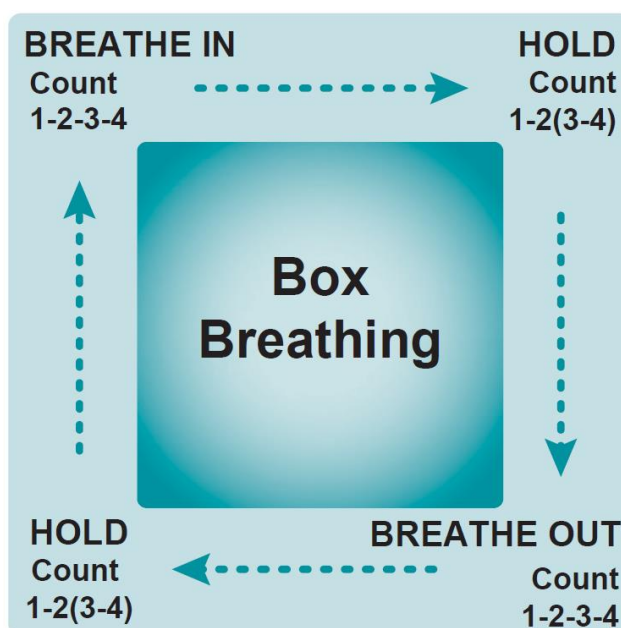
Three common relaxation strategies that can be used to reduce anxiety are: breathing exercises, sensory grounding and progressive muscle relaxation.

BREATHING

Changes in our breathing rate and depth can occur when we experience anxiety. When our breathing rate increases it can trigger a number of other physiological changes that can increase our anxiety. Therefore, we can reduce our symptoms of anxiety by normalizing our breathing rate and depth.

A balance between oxygen and CO₂ is essential for our bodies to run efficiently. When we breathe too much (hyperventilate) there is an increase in oxygen, when we breathe too little there are too high levels of CO₂. Over breathing can lead to symptoms of blurred vision, light-headedness, and dizziness.

BOX BREATHING



Box breathing can slow down the breath and prevent hyperventilation.

To practice box breathing we count to 4 as we breathe in, hold our breath for 2-4 seconds, breathe out while counting to 4, and pause for 2-4 seconds.

SENSORY GROUNDING

Sensory grounding, or "5-4-3-2-1", is another way to become more present in your body and in the moment. It involves using what you see, what you hear and what you feel. Begin by naming five things you see, five things you hear, and five things you feel. Repeat this process with four things, then three, then two, then one. You may repeat items several times.

The key of sensory grounding is bringing your attention to the present moment, without judgment. We are using our senses to simply focusing on the current situation. This skill can be done quickly, or for better results you can be more thorough.

PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION

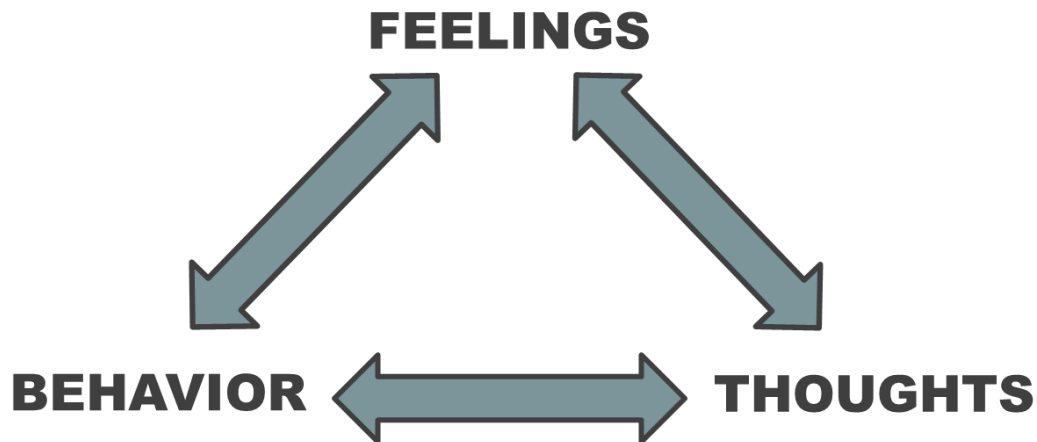
Progressive muscle relaxation teaches how to relax your muscles in a two-step process. It begins by **systematically tensing particular muscle groups**, such as your back and shoulders, and **releasing the tension and noticing** how your muscles feel when relaxed. This exercise can reduce physical problems associated with anxiety such as stomach aches, muscle tension, and headaches. It can also improve your sleep.

SCRIPT

1. Begin by taking a few deep and slow breaths to relax your body and mind.
2. When you are ready, tense the muscles in your lower arms and hand, hold the tension for 5-6 seconds, then suddenly, like turning off a light-switch, release the tension.
3. Notice how your arms and hands feel when relaxed.
4. Take a few deep breaths.
5. Then tense your upper arms and shoulders, hold for 5-6 seconds, then release.
6. Feel the relaxation radiating through your arms and shoulders, continue to breathe.
7. When you are ready, tense your facial muscles, hold, and release. Notice the relaxation.
8. Breathe.
9. Tense your chest and abdomen muscles for 5-6 seconds. Release suddenly and notice how your muscles feel when relaxed. Continue to take some slow and deep breaths.
10. Now we will tense your back muscles by pushing your shoulder blades together and pushing out your chest. Release after 5-6 seconds.
11. Now all of the muscle groups above your waist should be relaxed. Scan these muscles and if you notice any tension, repeat tensing and releasing after 5-6 seconds.
12. Tense and release the muscles around your pelvic area.
13. With your feet flat on the ground, tense your leg muscles. Hold the tension for 5-6 seconds and release this tension suddenly. Notice how your legs, pelvis, and upper body feel when relaxed.
14. Finally, tense your feet and toes. Feel the tension and release after 5-6 seconds. Notice the difference between tense and relaxed.
15. Do a final body scan noticing any tension you might be carrying, then tense and release as necessary. Notice how your body feels in its relaxed state.
16. As you go on with your day, try and notice when you are carrying any tension in your body. You can stretch the near-by muscles, release, and try and relax.

WHAT IS COGNITIVE BEHAVIORAL THERAPY? (CBT)

CBT is based on the idea that we can change how we **feel** by changing our **behavior** and/or our **thinking**.



We can use cognitive-behavioral strategies to reduce anxiety by identifying and challenging the patterns of behavior and thinking which maintain anxiety.

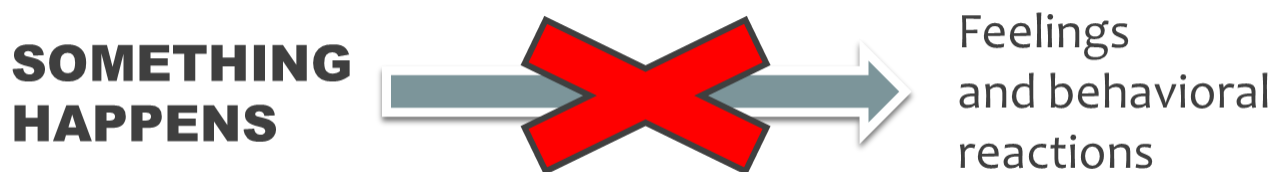
Some important principles of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy include:

- CBT focuses on our current patterns of thinking and behaving
- It aims to provide people with the tools that allow them to deal with their problems independently – it trains people to be their own therapists
- Between-session exercises are a very important part of CBT

THE A-B-C MODEL

We can use **the A-B-C model**, from CBT, to better understand how patterns of thinking and behaving, in situations, tend to cause us anxiety. The more awareness and understanding we have about these patterns, the more we can change them.

Many people believe that their anxiety and/or behaviors are directly caused by the situations they are in, things that have happened to them, other people, etc. However, CBT challenges these beliefs.



Instead, CBT suggests our thoughts cause how we feel and what we do. It is our beliefs, interpretations, and assumptions about what has happened that cause us to feel and act in particular ways.



This is called the A-B-C model. “A” stands for “activating event” – an event that “activates” or triggers our thoughts. “B” stands for “beliefs” and it includes beliefs, assumptions, interpretations, and automatic thoughts. “C” stands for “consequences” and typically refers to emotions or behaviors.



This means that we can change how we feel about things by changing how we think about them.

ACTIVATING EVENTS

LET'S FIRST CONSIDER SOME ANXIETY PROVOKING ACTIVATING EVENTS, PLEASE LIST BELOW. CONSIDER SPECIFIC EXAMPLES, SUCH AS "I WAS ANXIOUS WHEN I WENT TO THE STORE YESTERDAY", AS OPPOSED TO "GOING TO STORES."

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.



Activating event:

In a group

BELIEFS, THOUGHTS, EXPECTATIONS, ATTITUDES, ASSUMPTIONS, INTERPRETATIONS – SELF-TALK

CONSIDER EACH OF THE ACTIVATING EVENTS YOU LISTED ABOVE. BELOW WRITE WHAT YOU THINK YOUR SELF-TALK WAS IN EACH SITUATION, WHICH MAY HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO YOUR ANXIETY.

1.

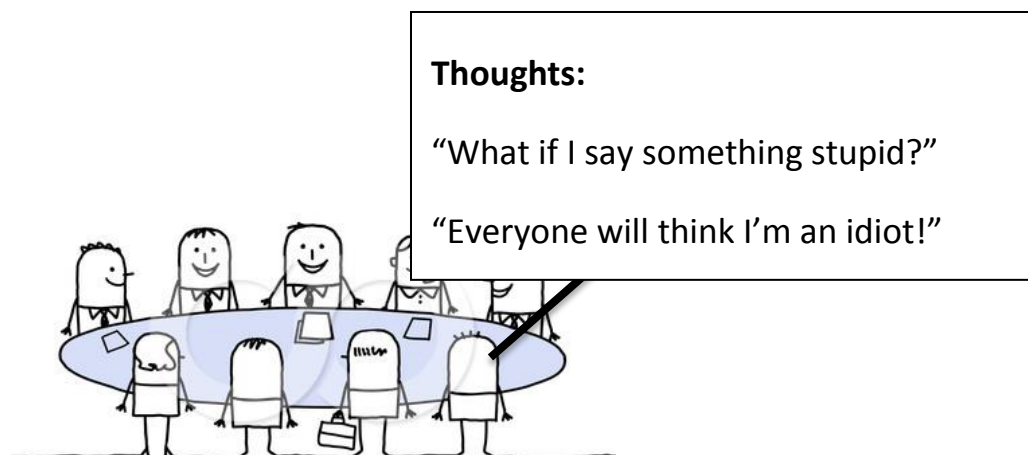
2.

3.

4.

5.

6.



CONSEQUENCES – BEHAVIORS, EMOTIONS, AND PHYSICAL SENSATIONS

CONSIDER WHAT YOU DID AND HOW YOU FELT IN EACH OF THE SITUATIONS LISTED ABOVE, AND LIST THEM BELOW.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

Consequences:

Sit quietly, avoid eye contact, try and suppress panic, and never come back



THE A-B-C MODEL SUMMARY

SELECT ONE ACTIVATING EVENT FROM ABOVE, YOUR BELIEFS IN THAT SITUATION, AND THE CONSEQUENCES OF THOSE BELIEFS.

Example:

Activating Event	Beliefs	Consequences
In a class about anxiety	What if I talk, I'll look stupid?	Anxious
		Terrified
	If I look stupid, everyone will think I'm an idiot	Heart pounding
	If everyone thinks I'm an idiot I'll be devastated.	Sweating
	If I am devastated, then I'll have a panic attack!	Avoid eye contact

Now you try!

Activating Event	Beliefs	Consequences

UNHELPFUL THINKING STYLES

The situations we find ourselves in don't cause our depressed feelings — our ways of thinking about them do. Here are some distorted ways of thinking that often increase depression. Check the ones that most relate to you.

FILTERING

Everyone's life has some negative things. If you focus only on the negative and filter out all positive or neutral things, your life will indeed seem depressing.

EMOTIONAL REASONING

Emotions are based on what we think and often not based on facts. Don't always believe what you feel. Feelings are not facts.

OVER-INCLUSIVE

You think of one problem, then another and another, until you feel completely overwhelmed. Or you may take on the problems of family members as your own.

BLACK OR WHITE THINKING

You think only in extremes or absolutes, forgetting that most things fall in the middle and are shades of grey.

JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS

You predict a negative outcome without adequate supporting evidence.

MIND READING

You believe that others are thinking and feeling badly about you and you react as if this is true.

PREDICTING THE FUTURE

You think that things may turn out badly and only focus on the bad things that might happen. You convince yourself that a bad outcome is sure to happen.

CATASTROPHIZING

You imagine the worst and make things seem like a bigger deal than they are. This increases your fear and makes it harder to deal with what is really going on.

SHOULD

You make rules for yourself and others about how things "should" be. You become angry or upset when these rules are not followed.

<u>Unhelpful thinking styles</u>	<u>Example</u>
Filtering	
Emotional reasoning	
Over-inclusive thinking	
Black or white thinking	
Jumping to conclusions	
Mind reading	
Predicting the future	
Catastrophizing	
Shoulds/musts	

DISPUTING A-B-C-D

We described CBT's A-B-C model above. Now we will "dispute" our unhelpful thinking to create a more balanced perspective. Some questions that might help us dispute our unhelpful thinking may be:

- How realistic are my thoughts, expectations, beliefs, and assumptions?
- If I were not anxious, how might I view the situation differently?
- What is the likelihood of my fears coming true?
- What is the evidence that supports or refutes my beliefs?
- So what if my feared situation happens?

Activating Event	Beliefs	Consequences
Participating in an anxiety group	What if I talk, I'll look stupid?	Anxious
	If I look stupid, everyone will think I'm an idiot	Terrified
	If everyone thinks I'm an idiot I'll be devastated.	Heart pounding
	If I am devastated, then I'll have a panic attack!	Sweating
Avoid eye contact		
Disputing		
Chances are other people are feeling the same way. Feeling some anxiety in uncertain situations is normal. Worrying excessively about what other people are thinking about me is not helpful. No one is perfect. Even if I did have a panic attack, I'd survive.		

Excellent, now you try!

Activating Event	Beliefs	Consequences
Disputing		

EXPOSURE

As we mentioned earlier, avoidance is one way in which we maintain anxiety. It is natural to want to avoid situations that make us uncomfortable. However, the more we avoid, the more restricted our lives can become. In some cases this can create new problems and we can come to avoid more and more. Therefore, in order to overcome our anxiety, we must expose ourselves to the things we avoid. We want to do this in a gradual way that does not result in overwhelming anxiety. This is called “graded exposure.”

GRADED EXPOSURE

HOW DOES GRADED EXPOSURE WORK?

1. Graded exposure gives you the chance to dispel your fears
2. It gives you the opportunity to use your skills
3. It gives you the chance to get used to situations that are uncertain or uncomfortable
4. It gives you the chance to improve your confidence in managing anxiety

HOW DO WE DO GRADED EXPOSURE?

1. Begin by identifying anxiety provoking situations that we may be avoiding
2. Rate the distress that we experience in each of these situations (SUD = “subjective units of distress”)

SUDS Rating	Description	Can you think of a situation when you've felt this way?
0	You feel absolutely no distress, you are calm and relaxed. Eg laying in the bath, having a massage, watching a funny movie.	
25-49	You feel a <i>mild</i> level of anxiety but you can still cope with the situation. You might feel like you're more alert or a little nervous. Eg. Athletes before a competition, and even confident speakers before a public presentation.	
50-64	You feel a <i>moderate</i> level of distress that is becoming difficult to cope with. You might be distracted by the anxiety, or behaving in ways to avoid anxiety eg avoiding eye contact, sitting quietly, but still attending to what's happening.	
65-84	You feel a <i>high</i> level of distress that is really difficult to cope with. You're more concerned with your anxiety and how to escape, and less able to concentrate on what's happening around you.	
85-100	You feel a <i>severe to extreme</i> level of distress and you think you cannot cope. Your body response is so overwhelming that you think you can't possible stay in the situation any longer.	

3. Select a situation that provokes a minimal amount of anxiety.
4. Plan how you may be able to expose yourself to that situation in a safe way.
 - a. Your plan should be specific and measurable/time bound.
 - b. You should also plan to do something you believe is important to stop avoiding.
5. Next we create a step ladder by breaking down each goal into smaller steps.

CONSIDER SOME OF THE THINGS YOU MAY AVOID IN AN ATTEMPT TO REDUCE YOUR ANXIETY AND LIST THEM BELOW.

Anxiety provoking situations	SUD (0-100)
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	
6.	
7.	
8.	
9.	
10.	
11.	
12.	
13.	
14.	

CLIMBING THE STEPS (PART 1)

Before you start, pick a goal with the lowest SUDs rating. Even if the goal only has a few steps it can still be a good opportunity for your body to get used to uncomfortable situations. Once you have selected the goal you would like to work on, consider the skills we have discussed so far to help you prepare for the process.

- Calming, Relaxation and Deep Breathing Techniques

Practicing these techniques as often as you can, will help you to access these skills more readily in anxiety provoking situations. It is important that you practice these skills to get your body to a relaxed level before you take the first step.

- Thought Diaries

We discussed various unhelpful thinking styles that can perpetuate anxiety. Before you start climbing the step ladder, consider some of the unhelpful thoughts you may be having about the situation and begin disputing these thoughts. Next create a more balanced perspective about the situation. It may be helpful to write this out on a card and take it with you.

Once you have prepared yourself for working towards your first step, set a time date and place that you will begin the process. The following points will help the process!

1. *Expect some initial anxiety or discomfort.* Starting with a small goal will help you to adjust to the higher level of anxiety and in doing so help you to be feel less overwhelmed.
2. *Use the skills!* Utilizing the relaxation and deep breathing strategies can help you to respond in a more relaxed way. Review your new balanced perspective or thought.
3. *Don't Leave!* It is normal to feel some anxiety and discomfort however it is important to stay in the situation until the anxiety reduces. By doing so you

may realize that the situation may not have been as frightening as you thought it would be.

4. *Be present.* It is important that you be present and stay involved in the situation so that you do not avoid the actual anxiety in the situation. For example, you may be inclined to avoid talking to anyone at a social situation. Doing so however, does not give you the real experience of challenging the anxiety in the moment.

CLIMBING THE STEPS (PART 2)

Once you have exposed yourself to an anxiety provoking situation, consider the following guidelines as you work towards the rest.

1. Take one step at a time. Focus only on completing the step you are working on and then gradually work your way up.
2. Repeat the step. Try to do a step over and over again so that you become comfortable with a situation before moving on to the next step.
3. Use your skills. As mentioned throughout this section, it is important that you utilize the relaxation strategies as well as challenge any unhelpful thoughts before, during, and after the event.
4. Be a positive coach to yourself and acknowledge the steps you have made.
5. Setbacks may happen. Sometimes a situation may not go as well as you would have hoped. Remember that everyone has up and down days. Just remember to challenge any unhelpful thoughts that may come up about the situation and commit to a day and time to try again. Remember its ok to go back and repeat the previous step as a 'refresher'.
6. Use a diary to record how each step went and what skills you used in the process.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Dates exposure was practiced:	Approximate duration (min):	Anxiety at end of exposure (0-100):

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Dates exposure was practiced:	Approximate duration (min):	Anxiety at end of exposure (0-100):

EXCESSIVE WORRYING AND ANXIETY

Researchers Dugas and Robichaud¹ provide us with a simple model explaining how thoughts and beliefs contribute to anxiety. Typically a situation will lead to a “what if...?” thought. For example, when in a class we might think “what if I say something stupid in class?” Then we begin excessively worrying about negative things happening (someone saying something rude to us, people in class being bored, the teacher saying something embarrassing about us, etc.) and this can lead to anxiety (the body preparing you to deal with these potential threats). If this pattern is repeated several times throughout the day, our bodies and minds get tired of preparing to deal with challenges. We may begin to feel sick, we might experience pain, we might become irritable with those in our families, etc.

If we cannot, or do not want to, problem solve to change the situation, we can change our self-talk (what we say to ourselves).



BELIEFS MAINTAINING WORRY

Many people overestimate the value of their worrying. Positive beliefs about worrying can keep a person “stuck” in anxiety because people are less likely to want to reduce their worrying, if they believe it has a helpful purpose. For example, some people dislike worrying in general, but also believe that some specific worries can be helpful.

¹ *Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment for Generalized Anxiety Disorder* by Dugas and Robichaud.

There are five common beliefs that maintain excessive worry:

1. **“Worrying helps find solutions to problems.”** While some occasional thinking about what might go wrong can be helpful, excessive worrying actually interferes with problem solving. This is because worrying involves thinking about all of the negative things that can happen, as opposed to effectively considering solutions to our problems. Excessively thinking about “what could go wrong” also interferes with our ability to select a reasonably good solution, try it out, and see what happens.
2. **“Worrying motivates me to get things done.”** This belief implies that worrying will ensure that we will get things done. However, excessive worrying can actually interfere with our ability to get things done. Anxiety can lead to procrastination, total avoidance, and decreased performance. For example, excessively worrying about doing poorly on a test can arouse significant anxiety, which then can decrease your performance.
3. **“Worrying prepares me for uncomfortable emotions.”** This belief reflects the idea that if we worry about something bad happening, we will be less disappointed, sad, or guilty should that bad thing happen. Unfortunately, this belief will keep us locked in an endless pattern of worrying “just in case.”
4. **“Worrying can prevent bad things from happening.”** Some people believe that if they just worry enough, “magical thinking” will prevent what we are worried about from happening. This is often due to selectively paying attention to the times when we have worried about a bad outcome, had that bad outcome not happen, then coming to the conclusion our worrying prevented the bad outcome.
5. **“Worrying is a positive part of my personality.”** This is when we believe that worrying shows we are caring, loving, or conscientious. However, being caring, loving, and conscientious is independent of how much we worry.

The five beliefs listed above will maintain patterns of excessive worrying. If we have these beliefs, we can use CBT techniques to dispute them.

EXCESSIVE WORRY = EXCESSIVE ANXIETY

Excessive anxiety is the product of excessive worrying. There are a number of techniques we can use to reduce excessive worrying. In order to change our worrying, we must first become more aware of our worrying habits.

Begin by listing some common worries you have:

Excellent, now begin by taking this list of worries and categorize them into one of two categories: (1) **Actual, current, real problems I can reasonably do something about today**, and (2) **possible, but hypothetical problems that might occur in the future, that I cannot reasonably do anything about today**. You might think that some of your worries could be put into both categories, but put them in the category you believe they **best** fit.

Actual, current, real problems I can reasonably do something about today	Possible, but hypothetical problems that might occur in the future, that I cannot reasonably do anything about today

By categorizing each worry into each category we are training ourselves to become more comfortable with uncertainty. Sometimes it can be very helpful to look at our worries and identify real problems we should spend our time and energy focusing on each day. This exercise is called “worry awareness training” because it can help us recognize when we are worrying about something we can’t do anything about in the present moment. From this exercise, some people learn that they are spending a ton of time and energy on things they cannot do anything about, or may never actually happen.

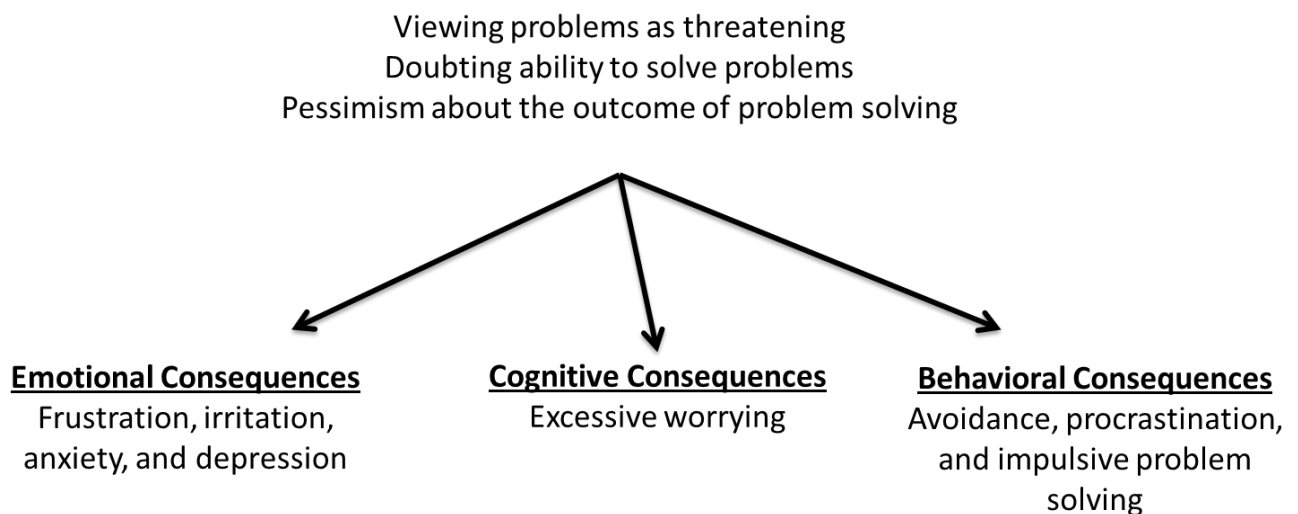
This worry awareness training can be practiced at home to help you become better at controlling excessive worrying.

PROBLEM SOLVING TO DEAL WITH REAL PROBLEMS

This section will teach skills for problem solving we can use on our actual, current, real problems, that way we can replace excessive worry with effective problem solving. However, first we will explore beliefs about problems.

BELIEFS ABOUT PROBLEMS

Three beliefs about problems that may impair problem solving are: (1) “problems are threatening”, (2) “I can’t handle problems effectively”, and (3) “problems will turn out badly regardless of what I do.” These beliefs typically lead people to think, feel, and behave in unhelpful ways. We can challenge these beliefs by seeing problems as normal and seeing the opportunities within the problems we face.



PROBLEMS ARE A NORMAL PART OF LIFE

One belief that can impair effective problem solving is the belief that problems are unusual or bad (“If I just worry enough, plan enough, and seek enough information, I should not have problems”). This can lead people to feel annoyed/depressed/angry about having problems, rather than facing them effectively (“why does **my** life have to be so bad?!?!”).

SEEING THE OPPORTUNITIES

We can also improve our beliefs about problems being overly threatening by seeing the opportunities presented by the situations we face. Sometimes a problem provides the opportunity to practice our problem solving skills, model how to effectively handle problems to others, and/or improve relationships with others.

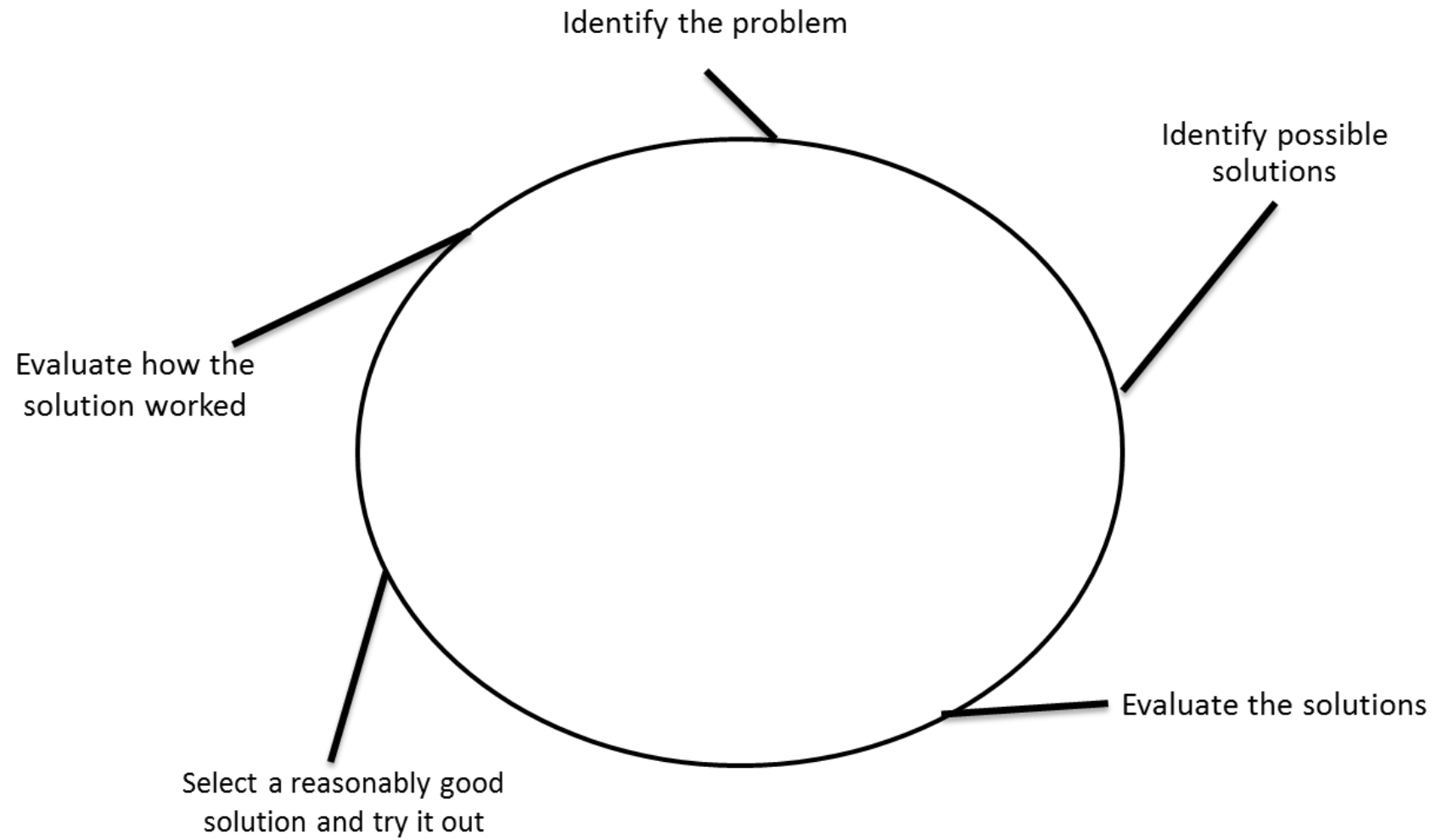
By focusing our attention on the opportunities presented by “problems” we create a more balanced perspective.

Examples:

- When we are attending a course, we are being given the opportunity to practice communication skills, perhaps create/strengthen relationships, practice our relaxation skills, and/or learn something new.
- A job interview provides us with the opportunity to practice communicating my strengths to others. I may even get the job. The interview also provides me with the opportunity to determine if the job might be a good fit for me.

PROBLEM SOLVING MODEL

A standard problem solving model typically includes five steps: (1) identify the problem, (2) identify possible solutions, (3) evaluate the solutions, (4) select a reasonably good solution and try it out, and (5) evaluate how the selected solution worked.

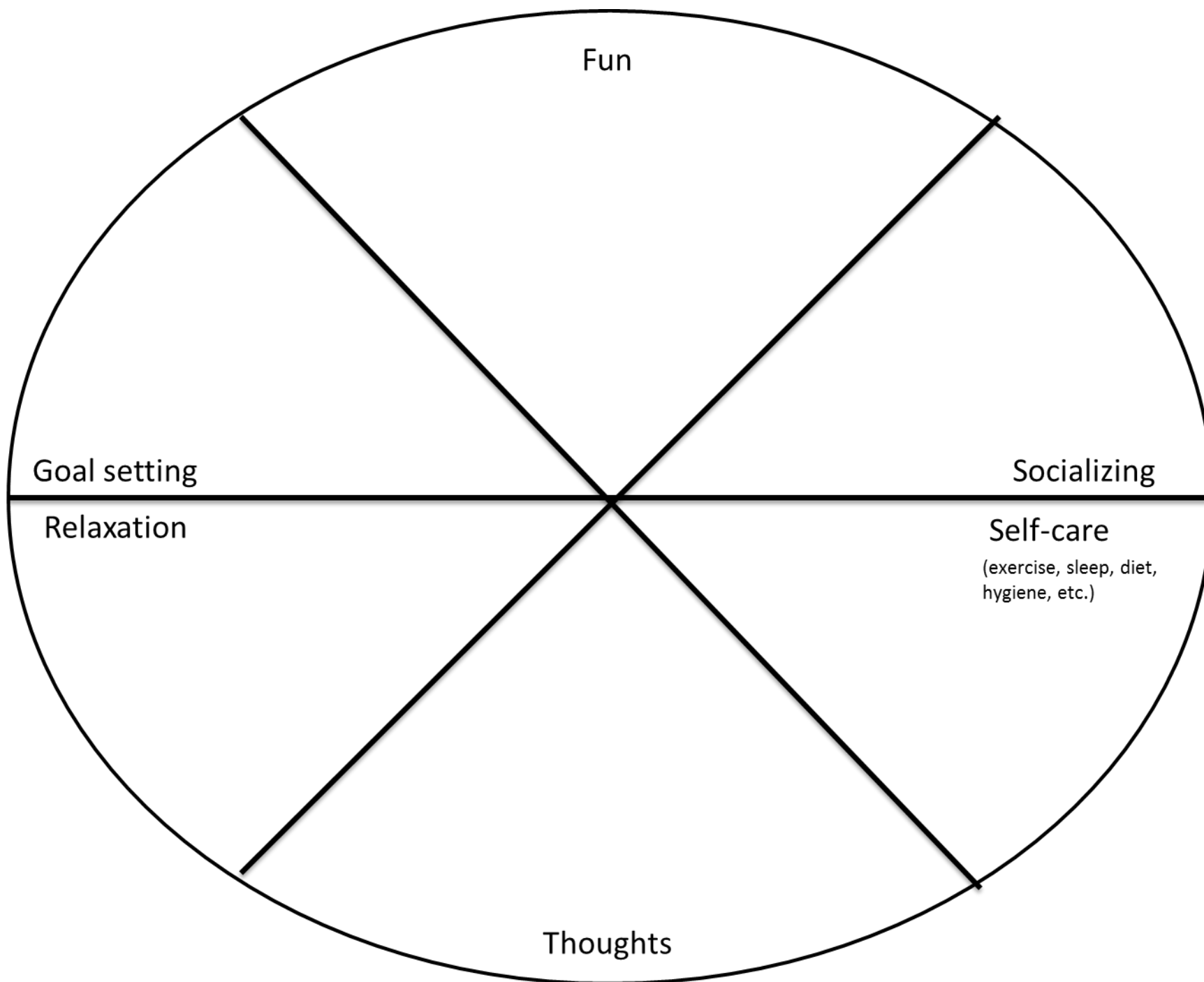


MAINTENANCE PLAN

One way to maintain the progress you make is to create a healthy wellness plan that encompasses different areas of your life. Take a moment to consider some ideas you can try to improve in each of the areas below.

While some people do not think their anxiety is related to their physical health, improving your self-care in each of these dimensions will help you cope with a wide variety of stressors. For example, it is generally much easier to get distressed when we are tired or hungry!

It is also important to continue with your graded exposure exercises. This way you will be reducing the probability of your anxiety returning. Generally, the more you practice the more confident you will become and the easier it will get.



SUMMARY

- Anxiety is a normal human response to perceived danger.
- The more we worry, the more we are thinking about potential dangers, this then triggers the anxiety response.
- We can practice skills like box breathing, 5-4-3-2-1 sensory grounding, and progressive muscle relaxation to cope with extreme anxiety.
- Cognitive behavioral therapy can help us reduce our anxiety.
- Our thoughts cause our emotions and behaviors, not situations. Therefore, our anxiety is being created by the story in our head, not the situation we are in.
- When we experience excessive anxiety we are usually engaging in unhelpful thinking styles.
- CBT teaches us to recognize our unhelpful thinking and then dispute irrational thoughts, replacing them with more helpful thoughts.
- Excessive worry fuels excessive anxiety. Sometimes we believe excessive worry can be a good thing, but these beliefs maintain worry.
- When we believe (1) “problems are threatening”, (2) “I can’t handle problems effectively”, and (3) “problems will turn out badly regardless of what I do” we are preventing effective problem solving. We can solve this by recognizing problems as a normal part of life and seeing the opportunities presented by our problems.
- A problem solving model can be used to help us effectively cope with challenges we can reasonably do something about.
- Graded exposure can be used to decrease the amount of anxiety we experience in situations. Graded exposure is a process by which we practice exposing ourselves to anxiety provoking situations, practicing and developing our skills, and gradually learning situations are not as threatening as our minds make them.
- We can improve our abilities to cope with stressors by maintaining a healthy self-care plan which includes diet, exercise, sleep, relaxation, work, socializing, thinking helpful thoughts, and goal setting.