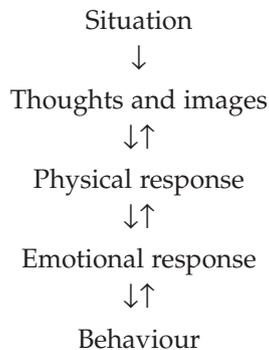


**Handout 6.1**

**Thoughts, emotions, and behaviour:  
how they work together**

In order to manage stress and anxiety effectively, we need to understand all the components of this experience. Just like links in a chain, each of the following events make up our experience:



**Stressful situations**

Specific situations, such as events where there is some risk of failure, harm, or criticism from others, may be the trigger that sets off a series of reactions leading to stress and anxiety. For example, the anticipation of an important performance, test, or task, may trigger stressful thoughts. Facing people with whom you have uneasy or unpleasant relationships, and facing an activity that was associated with a bad experience, such as returning to driving after a car accident, may also be triggers to a stressful response.

Several small stressors can also accumulate to cause problems. It is important to consider that more general sources of stress may cause greater vulnerability to stress and anxiety. Circumstances such as lack of sleep, illness, or having an argument with someone may make it more likely for stress and anxiety to be triggered. It can often be the case that events that we normally cope with cause a severe stress reaction at times when we are rundown.

**Thoughts**

Our response to any situation depends on the kind of thoughts we have about that situation. This explains why one person can enjoy an event and another person can't stand it or can't cope. For example, speaking to a group of people is something that many would find daunting, while others would relish the challenge. These responses are often shaped by previous experiences. A person that is practised in public speaking and has had many good experiences in the past might be thinking about how they are looking forward to impressing others and being the centre of attention. A person that has done very little of this, or had a very negative

experience in the past, might be anticipating possible failure, such as forgetting what to say, shaking or stuttering, and other people thinking poorly of them. This demonstrates how emotions like fear or enthusiasm are preceded by thoughts. This also means that if we have thoughts that lead to distressing emotions, if we modify or change the thoughts, we can modify or change the distressing emotions.

Identifying thoughts can be difficult because sometimes they occur automatically without us even being aware of them. Use the worksheets to record your thoughts at the time of feeling difficult emotions. The more you do this, the more aware of your thoughts you will become. If you are having difficulty, review the following questions to help uncover the relevant thoughts.

- Are you thinking of a negative outcome that could happen in the future?
- Are you thinking of a bad experience in the past?
- Are you thinking about not achieving your goals?
- Are you thinking of how others might see you?

### **Physical and emotional response**

Physical and emotional responses are the parts of our experience that cause us distress and pain. Some people may be better at recognising either the physical or the emotional part of their experience rather than noticing their thoughts.

Common physical manifestations of stress and anxiety are headaches, muscle tension, stomach discomfort, nausea, indigestion, feeling hot and sweaty, heart pounding, shortness of breath, and shaking.

Stress and anxiety are associated with a broad range of emotions. If you haven't been used to describing your emotions it may be difficult at first. If you are having difficulty describing a feeling select the few feelings that seem to fit best at the time. See Handouts 1.2 and 1.4 which list physical and emotional responses to stress and anxiety.

### **Behavioural response**

Our behavioural response is what we do to cope with a stressful experience. Reflecting on these behaviours can assist us to identify our positive and negative responses and coping patterns, and help us plan to use more helpful and effective strategies in the future.

There are a wide range of options for coping with stressful experiences. For example, when feeling anxious about going to an event, common responses might be to grit your teeth, remind yourself of why the event is important, go and face the fear, confide in a friend who will provide moral support and encouragement, start drinking wine as soon as you get there, or just stay at home and watch TV. See Handouts 1.2 and 1.4 for a list of common behavioural responses to stress and anxiety.

## **Recording your patterns of triggers, thoughts, and emotions**

Get to know your personal pattern of physical and emotional responses by recording them as they occur. Just recording the thoughts, feelings, physical responses, and behaviours associated with anxiety-provoking or stress-inducing situations is therapeutic in itself. It is an important part of managing stress and anxiety because it raises awareness about thought patterns and at the same time it reduces stress and anxiety levels.

Often emotional distress is the first thing that we notice about stress and anxiety; therefore, you may find it easiest to record how you feel first and then work back to the situation and thoughts that preceded the distress. Once you have recorded the situation, thoughts, physical responses, emotions, and behaviours, rate your level of distress on a scale of 0 to 100, where 0 is no distress, and 100 is the most severe distress imaginable. Your rating will give you an idea of where to start in terms of modifying thoughts and behaviours. Some people like to work on areas that cause the most distress while others like to start with something that causes less distress and work up to situations that cause the most distress. Both strategies have their benefits and it is helpful to talk through with your therapist what approach will best meet your needs.

**Handout 6.2**

## **Challenging unhelpful thoughts**

Everyone has unhelpful and unrealistic thoughts that can lead to intense and unpleasant emotions. Reviewing whether or not the thought is realistic or helpful and in turn making adjustments to your thoughts is an effective way of reducing emotional distress. The following describes ways in which thoughts can be unhelpful and offers suggestions for readjusting them.

### **Common examples of unhelpful thinking**

#### **Anticipating disaster**

You may find yourself predicting that a future negative event will occur without considering how likely this may be and disregarding the alternative positive or neutral outcomes that might occur.

#### **Perfectionistic thinking**

You may find yourself thinking that if you don't complete a task perfectly, you have failed or you will fail to achieve future goals. Because of these unrealistic expectations, you commonly think of yourself as a failure and often feel hopeless or frustrated. Striving for perfection is counterproductive as, in reality, people do not perform perfectly and need to make mistakes to learn.

#### **Global thinking**

If you often use words like *always* or *never*, *all* or *nothing*, *everything* or *nothing*, *everyone* or *no one*, you are likely to have a global style of thinking. This means that instead of describing and interpreting situations and events in a specific and realistic way, you tend to overgeneralise, exaggerate, and/or catastrophise the event and the impact of the event.

#### **Minimising strengths, maximising weaknesses**

You may pay more attention to your flaws and limitations—and ignore your assets and strengths—giving you a distorted, unbalanced view of yourself. Everyone has both strengths and weaknesses. Acknowledge those qualities that have helped you through difficult situations in the past, the attributes that other people admire, and the characteristics that make you unique.

#### **Worrying about what others think**

You may be overly concerned about how others perceive you or how others may react to your wants, needs, or behaviours. This can make you feel the need to please others all the time so they like you or it may make you too anxious to be around people. It is unlikely that others are as critical of you as you think; they are most likely more preoccupied with their own concerns and worries. However, if people are critical of you, that's also not the end of the world. It's important to decipher constructive criticism from damaging remarks and to learn how to respond effectively to both circumstances.

## Believing all your thoughts are true

Unhelpful, unrealistic, and anxiety-provoking thoughts are often related to messages and values learned during childhood, and therefore, were never questioned or challenged. These thoughts are often attached to strong feelings and memories making them seem true, valid, and indisputable. As an adult, it is important that you give yourself the opportunity to question and dispute these thoughts and beliefs using your life experience, knowledge, and common sense as a guide to developing your own value system.

Here are some questions you can ask yourself regarding your thoughts and beliefs:

- Is there any evidence to suggest that your anxiety-provoking thought might be inaccurate or exaggerated?
- Have you experienced similar situations before and performed reasonably well?
- Even if things don't go well, is it likely that you could cope with it or get assistance or support?
- Are you dwelling on thoughts of negative experiences from the past without also remembering positive experiences from the past?
- Are you worrying about possible negative events in the future that you can't possibly predict or prepare for now? Are you considering all the positive events that could happen in the future?
- Check the words that you are using for your anxiety-provoking thought. Are you thinking that you will *always* have a particular problem, or that you will *never* achieve a goal? Is this thinking out of proportion and unrealistic? Have you some of the time, or even most of the time, been able to get by without substantial problems? What goals have you achieved?
- Where did your thought or belief come from? Does it make sense to you? Does it help you achieve your goals in life? Does it make you feel good or bad about yourself? Is it time to question this thought or belief?

## Examples of more helpful thoughts

The following are some common examples of more helpful thoughts. When you have come up with alternative thoughts that are right for you, try writing them on a card and keeping them with you. Use the card to remind you regularly of your new thoughts and to apply them in anxiety-provoking situations.

"Most times I have been in this kind of situation I have done reasonably well, so I'll probably do well this time too."

"Even if things don't go as I would prefer I can probably cope. I could get some help to look at my other options."

"Even if I do get panicky or anxious, I can take a break, concentrate on my breathing, and remind myself that this feeling doesn't last for very long."

"People have their own lives to lead; they probably don't have time or don't care to notice my imperfections. Even if they do, so what?"

**Handout 6.3**

## **Tips to manage worrying**

Worrying is a natural part of our thinking process. However, some people spend all their time worrying about everything, major and minor, and this can cause significant problems in their daily life, in their relationships, and in how they experience different situations. Excessive worrying can lead to avoiding or not being able to fully enjoy various events and situations, not being able to make even the simplest decision, and feeling physically tense and uneasy most of the time. Stress from prolonged worrying can lead to more serious physical and emotional problems. Therefore excessive worrying can actually lead to something to worry about!

The following tips can help you to break this cycle (it can be helpful to work through these strategies with a trained therapist):

- Learn a variety of relaxation and breathing strategies. This can help you reduce your overall levels of stress and help you face anxiety-provoking situations. It can also help distract you from your worries. Use a CD or tape to guide you through the exercises.
- It is important to learn how to distinguish between worries that require your attention and worries that are unnecessary. The following questions can help you clarify this:

“Can I do something about this problem?”

“Is this something I always worry about, but nothing ever happens?”

“Is this something that has a solution?”

“Will my worrying make this situation better or worse or have no effect at all?”

- If there is something you can do about the problem, take action. People often delay or avoid taking action or making decisions because they are worried about making a mistake. Unfortunately we can't predict the future, so in every decision we make there is a chance that it may or may not go well. The important thing to remember is that whatever happens you will be able to deal with it. The only way to decrease worry about making mistakes is to learn that you can cope with making mistakes. Set a time limit for making a decision, write down your reasons for making the decision, and then follow through. Keeping a decision-making diary (similar to the worry diary described below) can help during this process.
- If there is nothing you can do and worrying does not make the situation better, tell yourself that your worries are not helpful and let them go. It can help to challenge your thoughts about the worry and ask yourself, “Where's the evidence for that?” or “What would be so bad about that?” or “Is this problem so important that I should spend all my time thinking about it?” Relaxation, breathing, distraction, and just observing your thoughts come and go can also help reduce your worrying.

- Study your worries by keeping a worry diary. Write down what you fear might happen (be as specific as possible) and then later write down if what you were worried about actually happened, whether it was as bad as you expected, and what you did to cope with the situation. This will help you understand your worries better, distinguish between worries that are useful and those that are useless, and help you realise that you can cope no matter what happens.
- Set aside some time during the day to worry—you can call this “worry time”. Select a time every day that is convenient for you and pick a suitable amount of time to worry (half an hour, one hour). Use this time to think about your worries and about possible solutions. It can be helpful to write things down. It will take time to train yourself not to dwell on worries at other times of the day or night. *Practice* is key here. What you can do if you worry outside of the organised time is to write the worry down and put it in a “worry box” (you can use an empty tissue box for this). Then, when it’s your worry time, you can take your worries out of the box and deal with them appropriately. Keep the worry box beside your bed with a pen and a pad of paper for worries that come to you at night. This may seem like an odd suggestion, but if worrying is a major problem for you, it’s worth a try.
- Create “worry-free zones” or places where you have decided that you are not to worry. You can start with one zone, like a room in your house, and expand these zones over time as you gain more control over your worries. If you find yourself worrying in a worry-free zone, just notice it and let it go, or try to delay it until you are not in the zone.
- You may have found that worrying has prevented you from enjoying or doing things that you used to value. Start scheduling in pleasant activities to enrich your life.
- It can help to imagine a situation that is worrying you and then imagine yourself being able to cope well in the situation. Pay attention to how you feel when you successfully cope in a situation.

**Handout 6.4**

## **More strategies to manage persistent unhelpful thoughts**

Ideally you will be able to identify and dispute unhelpful, unrealistic, and anxiety-provoking thoughts and change them to more helpful and realistic thoughts. This “cognitive therapy” strategy is a good option because as your thinking habits become healthier, a major source of distress will be removed from your life. However, there are several more very helpful techniques to manage thoughts that lead to distress. These strategies may be useful at particularly difficult times in life when you are feeling overwhelmed with stress.

### **Distraction**

If you have noticed that you are preoccupied with persistent, worrying thoughts, distraction can be a powerful tool to bring relief. Ideally your distracting activity will be something that is relatively familiar, pleasant, and that absorbs your attention. Either more mentally active or more physically active distracting activities may suit you best. It is useful if you choose your distraction techniques before you have the symptoms because it is difficult to try to think of what to do when the symptoms have already started. Make a list of distracting activities and put it somewhere visible so that next time you are feeling stuck with distress you can use this list.

Suggestions include: read a good book, play with a pet or child, watch something you like on TV, do some household chores or work that you enjoy, go for a walk, take a bath, listen to music that usually puts you in a positive or relaxed mood, make a phone call to a good friend, do some kind of craft work or gardening, count backwards from 100, say the alphabet backwards, look at the pictures in a magazine, focus on describing something in the room, sing to music, or talk to someone.

Distraction may not always be as simple as it sounds. Even though you may carry out a distracting activity your stress-provoking thoughts are likely to return and interrupt you. This is to be expected especially if worrying has been a long-standing pattern of thinking. When it does happen, just notice it without judging yourself and then turn your attention back to your task. For example, if you are out walking and you begin to worry again, just notice that you have started to worry again and then remind yourself to enjoy the view, or if you are cooking remind yourself of the next step in the recipe.

It is important to note that although distraction is very effective, the old adage “you can never get enough of a good thing” does not apply. Always avoiding situations and distracting yourself from your feelings is not healthy and can lead to increased anxiety and fear. So, use distraction in moderation.

## Letting go

Our mind works so that once we think of one stress or anxiety-inducing problem, we are likely to think of other similar problems in life that have occurred in the past or could happen in the future. Letting go rather than dwelling on stressful thoughts is a skill. With practice we can become better at this. The process of letting go involves first noticing the thought, then describing it in an objective and non-judgemental way, and finally allowing the thought to pass. It can be helpful to imagine the thought passing like clouds floating by in the sky, a balloon flying through the air, or waves lapping on a beach.

For example, when giving a talk at an important public event, negative thoughts may come to mind. Dwelling on these thoughts would increase anxiety, so instead:

Just notice: "There's that thought again that I might stutter and forget my speech."

Describe: "This thought is unhelpful and makes me feel anxious" or "My hands are sweaty."

Let go: "The thought will just come and go—it's just passing through my mind."

## Being mindful

Mindfulness is an ancient practice found in Eastern philosophies, including Buddhism. Mindfulness involves bringing attention or awareness to the present moment in a non-judgemental manner. Being mindful is about just noticing and observing, without trying to change anything or to stop or prolong the experience in any way. It can be applied to any situation from doing the dishes to tasting chocolate to smelling a rose.

For example, walking mindfully entails absorbing yourself in the experience by attending to the particular sensations and experiences of walking (how your limbs move, the feel of the ground on your feet, your breathing rate increasing as you walk faster, the wind on your face, etc.). Of course, the mind naturally wanders and it is important not to berate yourself for becoming distracted or to try to block out these thoughts. In fact, becoming distracted by thoughts (of what you need to do today, about past events or experiences, or hopes or fears of the future) is a normal part of the process of mindfulness. The practice of mindfulness is to notice that your mind has wandered and then redirect your attention back to the present moment.

Mindfulness practices can assist people to experience and cope with painful emotions, to increase awareness of avoidance behaviours, to become less judgemental about the self, others, and life in general, and to participate in the experience of everyday activities.

### Suggestions for mindfulness activities

- **Notice your breath:** Slowly breathe in and out; notice how the air feels in your nostrils as you breathe in, notice the time it takes between inhaling and exhaling, and how it feels to breathe out through your mouth. Remember that becoming distracted is normal; if this happens, just notice the thought passing through your mind, and redirect your attention to your breath.
- **Tasting chocolate:** Feel the texture of the chocolate on your tongue and how it changes as it melts in your mouth—notice how you naturally will either suck on it or chew it. Taste the chocolate without any judgement, good or bad. After you swallow it, notice the taste left in your mouth. Do not try to prolong the sensation in any way, just notice it.
- **Doing the dishes:** Observe yourself picking up items in the sink, the texture of the object in your hands, how your hands feel under warm water, the feel of soap and water as you clean the dish or cup. Notice the changes in water temperature and pressure as you do the dishes. Observe how you place the object in the dishwasher or tray.

### Accepting

#### *Accepting thoughts*

When experiencing distress, “accepting” is usually the last thing we want to do. Instead we might be thinking that it is very unfair to be experiencing distress and that we would do anything to get away from it. This kind of thinking can actually cause more pain and distress. Trying to push away the reality of something that we can’t change generates frustration, makes the emotion stronger, and is counter-productive. Accepting doesn’t mean saying that it’s okay or fair to be in a distressing situation, it just means acknowledging the situation in a realistic manner.

<b>Frustration-inducing thoughts</b>	<b>Accepting and coping thoughts</b>
“This shouldn’t be happening.”	“This situation is unpleasant and unfair.”
“I can’t stand it.”	“I don’t like this but I can cope and get through this.”

#### *Accepting emotions*

Accepting the experience of distressing emotions is also an important skill to have in order to have a healthy and functional emotional system. Expecting that you should always be able to cope in life without experiencing significant distress is unhelpful and unrealistic. Another unhelpful assumption is the belief that if most people don’t publicly show distress, they don’t experience it. These expectations and assumptions can lead individuals to think they are bad or faulty just for experiencing distressing emotions, making them feel isolated and alone, which generates

further distress. We can relieve some of our suffering if we acknowledge and accept that distressing experiences and emotions are part of life. Accepting yourself and your responses rather than judging yourself will enable you to acknowledge your emotions as well as manage them more successfully.

#### *Accepting others' responses*

Sometimes other people will convey ideas that the emotions you experience are excessive or wrong, and can give advice such as, "Just pull yourself together," or "Forget about your emotions and get on with it." These kinds of messages usually make people feel even worse, often leading to anger towards others or guilt and shame for not being able to cope. Clearly this is unhelpful. However, we cannot control what others say or think; we only have power over our own responses. Therefore, it can be helpful to expect and accept that others may make unhelpful or judgemental comments and plan how you will deal with the situation. For example, let the person know what they could do to help you, walk away and tell yourself that it is okay to feel anxious sometimes, and try to steer clear of people who make unhelpful comments.

#### **Affirmations**

These are positive statements that you say to yourself to replace negative thoughts or worries. Examples of affirmations are:

- "I accept the natural ups and downs of life."
- "It's never too late to change. I am improving one step at a time."
- "I love and accept myself the way I am."

In order for affirmations to help, you have to practise. Choose one or two affirmations and repeat them to yourself over and over when you are feeling relaxed. When you practise your affirmation, start by saying it out loud and with confidence, even if you don't believe what you are saying. Practising will help you use this strategy automatically when you're feeling anxious or notice your negative thoughts.

**Handout 6.5**

**Affirmations**

The following are quotes, some serious and some amusing, that may serve as self-statements in times of stress.

**Worry**

- *If you can't sleep, then get up and do something instead of lying there and worrying. It's the worry that gets you, not the loss of sleep.* Dale Carnegie
- *Worry is interest paid on trouble before it falls due.* Dean W. R. Inge
- *Why is it, that no matter how busy we are, we always find time to worry?* P. K. Shaw
- *For every feared thing there is an opposing hope that encourages us.* Umberto Eco
- *The torment of precautions often exceeds the dangers to be avoided.* Napoleon I
- *One doesn't discover new lands without consenting to lose sight of the shore for a very long time.* André Gide
- *How irritating is someone with less intelligence but more nerve than we have.* W. G. Plunkett.
- *Half the things that people do not succeed in, are through fear of making the attempt.* James Northcote

**Acceptance**

- *What's done is done, it cannot be changed. Love not for the past, but for what lies ahead.* Darren Domin and Tim Page
- *Every path has its puddle.* English proverb
- *Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards.* Søren Kierkegaard
- *Although the world is full of suffering, it is full also of the overcoming of it.* Helen Keller
- *The way I see it, if you want the rainbow, you gotta put up with the rain.* Dolly Parton
- *I can't change the direction of the wind, but I can adjust my sails to always reach my destination.* Jimmy Dean
- *Peace of mind is a mental condition in which you have accepted the worst.* Lin Yutang
- *You can clutch the past so tightly to your chest that it leaves your arms too full to embrace the present.* Jan Glidewell
- *If I try to be like him, who will be like me?* Yiddish proverb
- *Pure and complete sorrow is as impossible as pure and complete joy.* Leo Trotsky

## Motivation

- *Action is the antidote to despair.* Joan Baez
- *We all find time to do what we really want to do.* William Feather
- *Do or do not, there is no try.* Yoda
- *No one knows what he can't do until he tries.* Anonymous
- *Chance favours the prepared mind.* Louis Pasteur
- *I always wondered why somebody doesn't do something about that. Then I realised I was somebody.* Lily Tomlin
- *Thoughts are useless unless followed by action.* P. K. Shaw
- *There are two mistakes one can make along the road to truth—not going all the way and not starting.* Buddha
- *Putting off an easy thing makes it hard. Putting off a hard thing makes it impossible.* W. G. Plunkett.
- *Don't wait for the light to appear at the end of the tunnel; stride down there ... and light the bloody thing yourself!* Sara Henderson
- *The reward for a thing well done is to have done it.* Ralph Waldo Emerson
- *He has half the deed done who has made a beginning.* Horace
- *If we did all the things we are capable of doing, we would literally astound ourselves.* Thomas Edison
- *A journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step.* Chinese proverb
- *The best advice we ever had was given us as toddlers: take one step at a time.* P. K. Shaw
- *Nothing can be created from nothing.* Lecretius
- *A final incentive before giving up a difficult task, try to imagine it successfully accomplished by someone you violently dislike.* K. Zenios

## Support

- *Trouble is part of life, and if you don't share it, you don't give the person who loves you a chance to love you enough.* Dinah Shore
- *A friend is one who knows all about you but likes you just the same.* W. G. Plunkett.
- *Many a family tree needs trimming.* Kin Hubbard
- *Advice is what we ask for when we already know the answer but wish we didn't.* Erica Jong
- *Kind words can be short and easy to speak, but their echoes are truly endless.* Mother Theresa
- *One kind word can warm three winter months.* Japanese proverb
- *Words can sometimes, in moments of grace, attain the quality of deeds.* Elie Weisel

### Problem solving

- *The best way to solve problems is not to create them.* P. K. Shaw
- *Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.* Theodore Roosevelt
- *A mixture of empathy and brainstorming can move mountains.* Hazel Hawke
- *The shortest way to do many things is to do only one thing at once.* Samuel Smiles

### Change

- *Progress is impossible without change; and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything.* George Bernard Shaw
- *Change is not made without inconvenience, even from worse to better.* Richard Hooker
- *Time may heal all wounds, but steady daily routine makes good bandages.* W. G. Plunkett.
- *All things good to know are difficult to learn.* Green proverb
- *He who does anything because it is custom, makes no choice.* John Stuart Mill

### Overcoming obstacles and learning from mistakes

- *Failure is the condiment that gives success its flavour.* Truman Capote
- *Perfection has one grave defect; it is apt to be dull.* W. Somerset Maugham
- *Even a mistake may turn out to be the one thing necessary to a worthwhile achievement.* Henry Ford
- *There is only one thing more painful than learning from experience and that is not learning from experience.* Archibald McLeish
- *Learn from the mistakes of others—you can never live long enough to make them all yourself.* Martin Luther King
- *Insight, plus hindsight, equals foresight.* Russell Murphy
- *When written in Chinese, the word crisis is composed of two characters. One represents danger and the other represents opportunity.* John F. Kennedy
- *Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it.* Helen Keller
- *We will either find a way, or make one!* Hannibal
- *He who never made a mistake never made a discovery.* Samuel Smiles