

# what is generalised anxiety?

Feeling tense, stressed, and worried at certain times when under pressure is a normal human response. In fact 2 out of every 5 people report that they worry at least once every day. However, for some people their worry, feelings of anxiety and tension persists to the point that they significantly interfere with their daily life. If this sounds like you, then you may find the information in this sheet very helpful in understanding what generalised anxiety is and its relevance to you.

## What is Worry?

Before you can understand generalised anxiety, you need to have an understanding of worry. Worry is generally regarded as a form of verbal mental problem solving about potentially negative future events. It can be triggered by a variety of external events, or from thoughts that just pop into your head. Worry is characterised by a lot of “what if” statements such as:



- “What if I fail my exam?”
- “What if I can’t do the job?”
- “What if I can’t provide for my family?”
- “What if I get anxious during my interview?”

Normal worry is relatively short-lived and leads to positive problem-solving behaviour. Worry becomes unhelpful when it is about a number of things, is very frequent, and is difficult to control or dismiss. People may think this type of worry is useful, that it helps with problem solving and planning, or prevents future negative outcomes. However, this is not the case, as prolonged or frequent worry generates more anxiety and more worry, which may actually prevent positive thinking and action.

## What are the key symptoms?

Generalised anxiety involves:

- **Anxiety or worry about several things** has occurred for at least the past 6-months
- The worry is experienced as excessive and uncontrollable, is present most days, and interferes with the ability to focus on tasks.

At least 3 of the following symptoms also need to be present for the past 6-months or longer:

- **Feeling restless**, keyed up, on edge & unable to relax
- **Physical tension**.
- **Sleep disturbance**. Having trouble falling asleep, maintaining sleep, or experiencing unsettled sleep.
- **Problems concentrating** and focusing on a task.
- **Feeling irritable**.
- **Feeling tired** or exhausted easily.

## What are the causes?

The causes of generalised anxiety are not clearly understood. However, a number of vulnerabilities are considered to increase the chance of developing generalised anxiety:



- An inherited general biological disposition to experience negative emotions.
- Prolonged stress, and past experiences of uncontrollable or traumatic events.
- Direct or indirect messages from the people around you that the world is threatening or that worry is useful.
- A coping style that involves avoiding challenges or situations where there is the chance of experiencing negative emotions.

## Diagnosis and Treatment

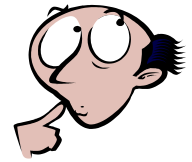
Generalised anxiety is not always easy to diagnose as some of its symptoms overlap with depression and other anxiety problems. It is thus important to see a mental health practitioner for a definite diagnosis.

The recommended psychological treatment for generalised anxiety is cognitive-behaviour therapy. This usually includes: relaxation to reduce chronic tension; techniques for dealing with unhelpful beliefs about worry; learning to challenge and let go of worries; learning more helpful coping and problem solving strategies; and learning to be less focused on uncertainty, and more present focused.



Mindfulness training and meditation may also be helpful for some individuals to reduce worry and increase present moment focus. However more research is required to determine if it is as effective as cognitive-behaviour therapy.

# what is mindfulness?



Have you ever noticed that when you are doing quite familiar and repetitive tasks, like driving your car, or vacuuming, that you mind is often miles away thinking about something else? You may be fantasising about going on a vacation, worrying about some upcoming event, or thinking about any number of other things.

In either case you are not focusing on your current experience, and you are not really in touch with the 'here and now.' This way of operating is often referred to as **automatic pilot** mode.

**Mindfulness** is the opposite of automatic pilot mode. It is about experiencing the world that is firmly in the 'here and now.' This mode is referred to as the **being** mode. It offers a way of freeing oneself from automatic and unhelpful ways of thinking and responding.

## Benefits of Mindfulness

By learning to be in mindful mode more often, it is possible to develop a new habit that helps to weaken old, unhelpful and automatic thinking habits. For people with emotional problems, these old habits can involve being overly pre-occupied with thinking about the future, the past, themselves, or their emotions in a negative way. Mindfulness training in this case does not aim to immediately control, remove, or fix this unpleasant experience. Rather, it aims to develop a skill to place you in a better position to break free of or not 'buy into' these unhelpful habits that are causing distress and preventing positive action.

## Core Features of Mindfulness

### Observing

The first major element of mindfulness involves observing your experience in a manner that is more direct and sensual (**sensing mode**), rather than being analytical (**thinking mode**). A natural tendency of the mind is to try and think about something rather than directly experience it. Mindfulness thus aims to shift one's focus of attention away from thinking to simply observing thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations (e.g., touch, sight, sound, smell, taste) with a kind and gentle curiosity.

### Describing

This aspect of mindfulness relates to noticing the very fine details of what you are observing. For example, if you are observing something like a tangerine, the aim is to describe what it looks like, what is its shape, colour, and texture. You might place a descriptive name to it, like "orange", "smooth", or "round". The same process also can be applied to emotions (e.g. "heavy", "tense").

### Participating Fully

An aim of mindfulness is to allow yourself to consider the whole of your experience, without excluding anything. Try to notice all aspects of whatever task or activity you are doing, and do it with your full care and attention.

### Being Non-Judgemental

It is important to adopt an accepting stance towards your experience. A significant reason for prolonged emotional distress relates to attempts to avoid or control your experience. When being more mindful, no attempt is made to evaluate experiences or to say that they are good, bad, right, or wrong, and no attempt is made to immediately control or avoid the experience. Accepting all of one's experience is one of the most challenging aspects of mindfulness, and takes time and practice to develop. Bringing a kind and gentle curiosity to one's experience is one way of adopting a non-judgmental stance.



### Focusing on One Thing at a Time

When observing your own experience, a certain level of effort is required to focus your attention on only one thing at a time, from moment to moment. It is natural for distracting thoughts to emerge while observing, and there is a tendency to follow and 'chase' these thoughts with more thinking. The art of 'being present' is to develop the skill of noticing when you have drifted away from the observing and sensing mode, into thinking mode. When this happens it is not a mistake, but just acknowledge it has happened, and then gently return to observing your experience.

## How to Become Mindful

Mindfulness is a skill that takes time to develop. It is not easy, and like any skill it requires a certain level of effort, time, patience, and ongoing practice.

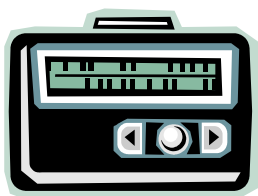
Mindfulness can be taught in a number of ways. Meditation is one of the key techniques used in mindfulness training, but not the only technique. Contact your mental health professional for further information on mindfulness training and whether it may be suited to your needs.



# mindfulness and letting go

Trying to control or avoid worries or other negative thinking by answering back, chasing, or suppressing these negative thoughts can sometimes *strengthen* this negative experience rather than diminish it. Mindfulness is one way of skilfully disengaging from or letting go of negative thinking.

This approach involves practicing how to notice when you are automatically drifting into negative thinking and then skilfully redirecting your attention back to the present, to the here and now



It may be helpful to think of this approach in terms of a radio. That is, imagine that the negative thoughts that drift into your mind as coming from a loud

radio that is tuned to a station where the thoughts are very negative and seem to be shouting at you.

The skill in mindfulness is not so much about trying to turn the radio off, but changing the way you listen to the radio. In this way the volume of the radio station can be reduced, and therefore seem less disruptive and distressing.

However, the important thing to remember is this is not a quick fix, it is not easy, and requires regular practice. The thoughts may still shout at you, but you are changing the way you listen. Begin with the formal practice described in this information sheet. Just like any skill, such as learning a musical instrument, you need to practice, practice, practice! By practicing daily you may eventually become better at letting go, and be able to do things in a more informal way.



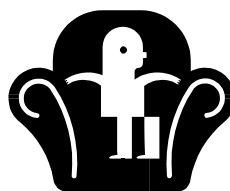
## Steps for Letting Go

To begin, it may be best to start by practicing with minor concerns before moving onto major worries or negative thoughts.



1) To begin the practice, sit down in a chair and adopt a relaxed and alert posture, then ask yourself, **what am I experiencing right now?** What thoughts are around, what feelings are around, and what body sensations?

Allow yourself to just acknowledge, observe and describe these experiences to yourself, without trying to change them or answer the thoughts back. Spend 30 seconds to 1 minute just doing this.



2) Now bringing **your focus of awareness to your breath**, focusing on the sensations of your breath as it moves back and forth in your belly. Binding your awareness to the back and forth movements of the sensations in your belly from moment to moment, and letting all thoughts go. Maybe say to yourself 'relax' or 'let go' on each outward breath. Spend about 30 seconds to 1 minute doing this.

3) Now **expanding your awareness to sensing your whole body breathing**, being aware of sensations throughout your body. If there are any strong feelings around, maybe saying to yourself "whatever it is, it is OK, just let me feel it." Allowing yourself to breathe with these feelings, and if your mind wanders to bothersome thoughts just acknowledge and let go of these - focussing back on sensing your breath. Continue doing this for about 1 minute.

**TIP:** You can try increasing the time of steps 2 & 3 as you start to get more familiar with this skill.

# how worry works

## Worry and Problematic Worry

Worry is generally regarded as a form of verbal mental problem solving about potentially negative future events. Normal worry is generally short-lived and leads to positive problem-solving behaviour. Worry becomes unhelpful when it is about a number of things, is very frequent, and is difficult to control or dismiss. Prolonged or frequent worry generates more anxiety and more worry, which may actually prevent positive thinking and action.

## What Triggers Worry?

Worrying can be triggered by various things. Some triggers may be more obvious and linked to external things, for example:



- Seeing a certain image (e.g. in the newspaper or on TV)
- Hearing certain information (e.g., on the radio or in a conversation)
- Being put in a certain situation (e.g., having to make decisions, perform a task, lead others, or face uncertainty)

Some triggers may be less obvious. These may be thoughts or images that seem to just pop into your head out of the blue. An initial “What if...” question that comes to mind for no apparent reason, can even be a trigger for worrying. For example, the thought “What if I left the iron on?” might pop into my head. If I think “I probably didn’t” and decide not to worry about it, chances are I will forget about it, and the thought will slip my mind. However, if instead I start to ‘chase’ the thought further (e.g., “The ironing board might catch fire and that will spread to the whole house.” “The house might burn down and then I will lose everything!”), then the original “What if...” question has now triggered a worry episode.

## What Maintains Worry?

People who describe themselves as chronic worriers are often disturbed that they seem to spend much of their waking hours worrying excessively about a number of different life circumstances. They do not understand why this activity continues. They often ask, “Why do I do it?” and “What keeps my worrying going?”

There are two types of thoughts or beliefs about worry which work to maintain the worry, in a vicious cycle. These are negative beliefs about worrying, and positive beliefs about worrying. Unhelpful strategies such as avoidance and thought control also maintain worry.

## Negative Beliefs About Worrying

In addition to the specific things people worry about, people with generalised anxiety disorder may also **worry about the fact that they are worrying**. In this case, such worriers are often concerned that worrying is “bad” and may believe that:

- Worrying is **uncontrollable**, and will take over and result in a loss of control (e.g., “I won’t be able to control my worrying, and it will never stop”).
- Worrying is **dangerous**, and will cause either physical or mental harm (e.g., “If I keep worrying like this I will go crazy/ have a breakdown/become ill”).



Holding these (false) negative beliefs about worrying makes the process of worrying very distressing for you, and this will even keep your worrying going.

## Positive Beliefs About Worrying

Worriers often hold (false) positive beliefs that worrying is beneficial and “good,” which can keep worriers worrying. Some positive beliefs may be:

- Worrying **motivates** me to do things
- Worrying helps me find **solutions** to problems
- Worrying **prepares** me for the worst
- Worrying helps me **avoid** bad things
- Worrying **prevents** bad things

## Avoidance and Thought Control

Avoidance may take the form of avoiding a feared outcome (e.g., passing up a promotion to avoid the feared outcome of not doing a good job) or avoiding worrying itself (e.g., not watching the TV news in case a worry is triggered, or asking for reassurance from loved ones that nothing bad will happen to you). Avoidance limits a person’s opportunity to have experiences that disconfirm their worries and their beliefs about worrying. IN a sense, not confronting your worries keeps the worrying going.



People who worry often attempt unsuccessfully to control their worrisome thoughts in a number of ways. These may include trying to suppress their worries, trying to reason with their worrisome thoughts, distracting themselves or thinking positively. These attempts at thought-control rarely work, as trying to suppress a thought usually has the opposite effect of making that thought occur more, which in turn fuels the belief that worries are uncontrollable.

*In other information sheets, we can explore some better strategies to manage worry.*



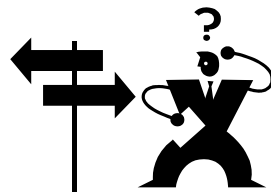
# accepting uncertainty



The inability to tolerate uncertainty is an **attitude** many people have towards life. When one has this attitude, uncertainty, unpredictability, and doubt are seen as awful and unbearable experiences that must be avoided at all costs.

If you hate uncertainty, then you may perceive worrying to be useful to you. You may think that worrying is a way of preparing yourself for the worst – getting you ready for anything that might happen. Worrying might be seen as a way of attempting to predict life so that there are no nasty surprises. As such, worrying reduces your experience of uncertainty and unpredictability. And because worrying reduces your feelings of uncertainty, you will continue worrying and worrying and worrying. In other words, worrying helps you believe that you have more control and certainty in life.

In reality, has your worrying made anything more certain or more predictable? Does worrying really change the outcome of what will happen? Unfortunately, life is still as uncertain and unpredictable as it ever was, it is only your perception that you somehow have more control that has changed. But is this really true? In fact, all you have done is think of all the worst case scenarios, worked yourself up, made yourself feel really bad in the process and often paralysed yourself from taking any action. So, ask yourself, is worrying about uncertainty really worth it? Maybe it is time to consider a different way?



There are two main strategies for learning how to accept uncertainty and thus reduce worry.

## 1. Challenging Intolerance of Uncertainty

Ask yourself the following questions and write down your responses. See if you can come to an understanding of the disadvantages and problems of being intolerant of uncertainty.

- Is it possible to be certain about everything in life?
- What are the advantages of requiring certainty, versus the disadvantages? Or, how is needing certainty in life helpful and unhelpful?

- Do you tend to predict bad things will happen just because they are uncertain? Is this a reasonable thing to do? What is the likelihood of positive or neutral outcomes?
- How likely is it that things you predict will happen? Is it possible to live with the small chance that something negative may happen, given its likelihood is very low?
- Can you live with some of the uncertainties of life? How do you do this? And can you do this in other situations you find difficult?
- Ask a friend how they cope with uncertainty, see if you can learn a few tips from them?

## 2. Acceptance and Mindfulness

When you are intolerant of uncertainty, your mind tends to be focused on the future. An antidote to this style of thinking is to practice becoming more present focused and accepting of your current experience. That is, more mindful. The steps to being more accepting and mindful are explained in the infosheets *What is Mindfulness?* and *Mindfulness & Letting Go*. Three basic steps to follow are:

- **Being aware** of what you are currently thinking and what you are feeling in your body. Use the feeling of your breath to remain present. What are you noticing when you are needing certainty? Acknowledge these thoughts and feelings, maybe saying “ah, so that's how it is”.
- **Letting go** of the need for a quick fix, by saying something to help you let go of the need for certainty. Maybe “it's only a need for certainty thought, just let it go”.
- **Being Non-judgmental**, by bringing a gentle curiosity to the thoughts that drift by without judging them or trying to change them. Then return your focus to the here and now of your experience. Focus your attention fully on sounds around you or sensations in the body, or your breath, or the task at hand.



This document is for information purposes only. Please refer to the full disclaimer and copyright statement available at <http://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au> regarding the information from this website before making use of such information.

See website [www.cci.health.wa.gov.au](http://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au) for more handouts and resources.

# behavioural experiments negative predictions

## Negative Predictions

Many people who suffer from anxiety, depression or low self-esteem tend to make negative predictions about how certain situations will turn out. You may tend to:

- Overestimate the likelihood that bad things will happen or that something will go wrong
- Exaggerate how bad things will be
- Underestimate your ability to deal with things if they don't go well
- Ignore other factors in the situation which suggest that things will not be as bad as you are predicting

When you jump to such negative conclusions about the future, you will tend to engage in unhelpful behaviours. You may tend to:

- Avoid** the situation totally
- Try the situation out but **escape** when things seem too difficult
- Be overly cautious and engage in **safety behaviours** (see worksheet Biology+Psychology of Panic)

The problem with these strategies is that they prevent you from actually testing out your predictions. This makes it very hard for you to ever have a different experience from what you expected, so you continue to expect the worst.



For example, let us imagine you have been invited to a BBQ and your negative prediction is: *"I will have a terrible time, no-one will speak to me, I will feel like a total fool."*

Your usual response may be to either avoid the BBQ altogether, or to attend but to leave as soon as you feel uncomfortable, or to stand in the corner and speak only to one person you already know. This may help you reduce your discomfort in the short term, but it also contributes to the continuation of your negative predictions, and this means continuation of anxieties.

## Testing Our Predictions

What could have been an alternative way to handle the BBQ situation described above?

A different approach could be to go to the BBQ, try your best to have a nice time and speak to others, and use the resulting experience as evidence to test your original negative prediction. **Think of yourself as a scientist, putting your thoughts under the microscope to examine the evidence for and against your thoughts**, instead of assuming that all of your negative predictions are true. Behavioural experiments are a good way for testing these predictions. Next we will go through the steps, using the BBQ situation as an example.



all

## Planning your Behavioural Experiment

1. Be clear about the purpose of the experiment - the point is to test out your negative predictions and help you to develop more realistic and/or balanced predictions.

2. What is the thought or belief that you are trying to test? Rate how strongly you believe this prediction (0-100)

*I will have a terrible time at the BBQ. Even if I try to talk to people, no-one will talk to me. (90)*

3. What is an alternative prediction or belief? Rate how strongly you believe this alternative (0-100)

*I will find at least one person to talk to and will have an ok time. (10)*

4. Design the actual experiment - what will you do to test your prediction, when will you do it, how long will it take, and with whom? Try to be as specific as possible. There are no boundaries to how creative you can be, and it is ok to ask for help.

*I will go to the BBQ at 8pm, alone, and will stay for at least one hour. I will try to make conversation with at least three people, one that I did not know already. I will only drink one glass of wine.*

5. Make sure you set your experiment at an appropriate level. It is best to start simply and increase the challenge step-by-step.

Identify likely problems and how to deal with them.

*There might not be anyone I know at the BBQ. But I will at least know the host and I can ask to be introduced to some other people.*



## Evaluating your Behavioural Experiment

1. Carry out the experiment as planned. Remember to take notice of your thoughts, feelings, and behaviours.

2. Write down what happened, what did you observe?

Consider the evidence *for* and *against* your original prediction. What did this say about your negative prediction

*I felt quite nervous at first and wanted to leave. I used breathing to calm myself. The host was friendly and seemed happy to talk to me, and I also spoke to Kelly, who I hadn't seen in some time. Kelly introduced me to her partner Jim and we had a good chat about travel. At one point I worried I had said something stupid, but Jim didn't seem to notice so my worry passed.*

3. What have you learned?

*I am capable of making conversation and enjoying myself in a casual social situation.*

4. Rate how strongly you now believe in your original prediction and the alternative (0-100)

*I will have a terrible time at the BBQ. Even if I try to talk to people, no-one will talk to me. (10)*

*I will find at least one person to talk to and will have an ok time. (80)*

# calming technique

Everyone knows that breathing is an essential part of life, but did you know that breathing plays an essential role in anxiety? This information sheet will briefly discuss the role of breathing in anxiety and guide you through a simple calming technique that uses breathing patterns to help you relax.

Breathing is a powerful determinant of physical state. When our breathing rate becomes elevated, a number of physiological changes begin to occur. Perhaps you've noticed this yourself when you've had a fright; you might suddenly gasp, feel a little breathless and a little light-headed, as well as feeling some tingling sensations around your body. Believe it or not, the way we breathe is a major factor in producing these and other sensations that are noticeable when we are anxious.

## Anxious breathing

You might already know that we breathe in oxygen – which is used by the body – and we breathe out carbon dioxide. In order for the body to run efficiently, there needs to be a **balance** between oxygen and carbon dioxide, and this balance is maintained through how fast and how deeply we breathe. Of course, the body needs different amounts of oxygen depending on our level of activity. When we exercise, there is an *increase* in both oxygen and carbon dioxide; in relaxation there is a *decrease* in both oxygen and carbon dioxide. In both cases the balance is maintained.

When we are anxious though, this balance is disrupted. Essentially, we take in more oxygen than the body needs – in other words we overbreathe, or *hyperventilate*. When this imbalance is detected, the body responds with a number of chemical changes that produce symptoms such as dizziness, light-headedness, confusion, breathlessness, blurred vision, increase in heart rate to pump more blood around, numbness and tingling in the extremities, cold clammy hands and muscle stiffness.

The normal rate of breathing is 10-12 breaths per minute – what's your breathing rate?

## The Calming Technique

While overbreathing and hyperventilation are not specifically dangerous (it's even used in medical testing!), continued overbreathing can leave you feeling exhausted or "on edge" so that you're more likely to respond to stressful situations with intense anxiety and panic.



Gaining control over your breathing involves both slowing your rate of breathing and changing your breathing style. Use the calming technique by following these steps and you'll be on your way to developing a better breathing habit.

- 1 Ensure that you are sitting on a comfortable chair or laying on a bed
- 2 Take a breath in for 4 seconds (through the nose if possible)
- 3 Hold the breath for 2 seconds
- 4 Release the breath taking 6 seconds (through the nose if possible), then pause slightly before breathing in again.
- 5 Practise, practise, practise!

## Breathing tips

- When you first begin changing your breathing, it may be difficult to slow your breathing down to this rate. You may wish to try using a 3-in, 1-hold, 4-out breathing rate to start off with.
- When you are doing your breathing exercises, make sure that you are using a stomach breathing style rather than a chest breathing style. You can check this by placing one hand on your stomach and one hand on your chest. The hand on your stomach should rise when you breathe in.
- Try to practise at least once or twice a day at a time when you can relax, relatively free from distraction. This will help to develop a more relaxed breathing habit. The key to progress really is practise, so try to set aside some time each day.

***By using the calming technique, you can slow your breathing down and reduce your general level anxiety. With enough practice, it can even help to reduce your anxiety when you are in an anxious situation.***

# progressive muscle relaxation

One of the body's reactions to fear and anxiety is muscle tension. This can result in feeling "tense", or can lead to muscle aches and pains, as well as leaving some people feeling exhausted. Think about how you respond to anxiety. Do you "tense up" when you're feeling anxious? Muscle relaxation can be particularly helpful in cases where anxiety is especially associated to muscle tension. This information sheet will guide you through a common form of relaxation designed to reduce muscle tension.

## Muscle tension

Muscle tension is commonly associated with stress, anxiety and fear as part of a process that helps our bodies prepare for potentially dangerous situations. Even though some of those situations may not actually be dangerous, our bodies respond in the same way. Sometimes we don't even notice how our muscles become tense, but perhaps you clench your teeth slightly so your jaw feels tight, or maybe your shoulders become. Muscle tension can also be associated with backaches and tension headaches.

## Progressive Muscle Relaxation

One method of reducing muscle tension that people have found helpful is through a technique called Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR). In progressive muscle relaxation exercises, you tense up particular muscles and then relax them, and then you practise this technique consistently.

### preparing for relaxation

When you are beginning to practice progressive muscle relaxation exercises keep in mind the following points.

- **Physical injuries.** If you have any injuries, or a history of physical problems that may cause muscle pain, always consult your doctor before you start.
- **Select your surroundings.** Minimise the distraction to your five senses. Such as turning off the TV and radio, and using soft lighting.
- **Make yourself comfortable.** Use a chair that comfortably seats your body, including your head. Wear loose clothing, and take off your shoes.
- **Internal mechanics.** Avoid practicing after big, heavy meals, and do not practice after consuming any intoxicants, such as alcohol.

### general procedure

- 1 Once you've set aside the time and place for relaxation, slow down your breathing and give yourself permission to relax.
- 2 When you are ready to begin, tense the muscle group described. Make sure you can feel the tension, but not so much that you feel a great deal of pain. Keep the muscle tensed for approximately 5 seconds.
- 3 Relax the muscles and keep it relaxed for approximately 10 seconds. It may be helpful to say something like "Relax" as you relax the muscle.
- 4 When you have finished the relaxation procedure, remain seated for a few moments allowing yourself to become alert.

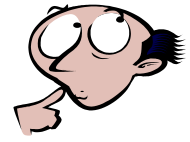
## Relaxation sequence

1. **Right hand and forearm.** Make a fist with your right hand.
2. **Right upper arm.** Bring your right forearm up to your shoulder to "make a muscle".
3. **Left hand and forearm.**
4. **Left upper arm.**
5. **Forehead.** Raise your eyebrows as high as they will go, as though you were surprised by something.
6. **Eyes and cheeks.** Squeeze your eyes tight shut.
7. **Mouth and jaw.** Open your mouth as wide as you can, as you might when you're yawning.
8. **Neck. !!!** Be careful as you tense these muscles. Face forward and then pull your head back slowly, as though you are looking up to the ceiling.
9. **Shoulders.** Tense the muscles in your shoulders as you bring your shoulders up towards your ears.
10. **Shoulder blades/Back.** Push your shoulder blades back, trying to almost touch them together, so that your chest is pushed forward.
11. **Chest and stomach.** Breathe in deeply, filling up your lungs and chest with air.
12. **Hips and buttocks.** Squeeze your buttock muscles
13. **Right upper leg.** Tighten your right thigh.
14. **Right lower leg. !!!** Do this slowly and carefully to avoid cramps. Pull your toes towards you to stretch the calf muscle.
15. **Right foot.** Curl your toes downwards.
16. **Left upper leg.** Repeat as for right upper leg.
17. **Left lower leg.** Repeat as for right lower leg.
18. **Left foot.** Repeat as for right foot.

**Practice means progress.** Only through practice can you become more aware of your muscles, how they respond with tension, and how you can relax them. Training your body to respond differently to stress is like any training – practising consistently is the key.



# postpone your worry

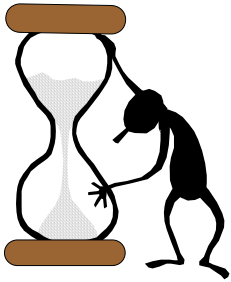


Worry can occur at any time or place, often without you being aware of its exact triggers. As such, worry can be very interfering when going about your daily life. A strategy to deal with this problem is to postpone your worry to a particular worry period. By learning to postpone your worry, it will be less intrusive in your life and you will be managing your worry effectively, giving you a greater sense of control. The steps to postpone your worry are outlined below. Be prepared to practice this approach over and over again. It does take some time and patience.

## 1. Create a worry period:

- To begin, choose a particular time, place, and length of time for worrying. This time, place and duration should be the same each day (e.g. 6pm, study, 20 min)

- Make this place unique and comfortable, free from distractions. It should not be somewhere you go to regularly, like a lounge room chair. Rather somewhere you assign for the worry period only.



- The time should be convenient so you can regularly follow through with the task, and not close to bed time.

## 2. Postpone your worry:

- As soon as you become aware of a worry, postpone it to the worry period.
- Note your worry briefly on paper (in a couple of words only). Carrying a small notebook with you may be useful.
- **Remind yourself** that you will have time to think about it later, no need to worry about it now; you will be in a better position to deal with the worry in the worry period; and there are more important or pleasant things to attend to right now, rather than worry.
- Turn your focus to the present moment and the activities of the day to help let go of the worry until the worry period has arrived. **Tip:** see the **What is mindfulness?** or use the **Letting go of Worry with Mindfulness** sheets for help in doing this.
- Finally, decide what is the most important and best thing you can practically do for yourself right now. Take immediate action to do something that is either practical, positive, pleasant, active or nurturing.



## 3. Come back to your worries at the designated worry period:

When your worry period comes around, settle yourself down at the place you had planned and take some time to reflect on the worries you had written down from the day. Some points to remember are:

- Only worry about the things you have noted if you feel you **must**.
- If all or some of the worries you wrote down are no longer bothering you or no longer seem relevant, then no further action is required.
- If you do need to worry about some of them, spend no longer than the set amount of time you specified for your worry period. It may also be helpful to write your thoughts on paper rather than worrying in your head. You can do this in whatever way feels right to you.



**Note:** Later on you will learn more specifically what to do with your worries, but for now just focus on the process of postponing your worries throughout the day and only worrying at a set time of the day.

Worry postponement may seem like a strange thing to do, and it may seem like an effort to carry a notepad around to jot down your worries and commit to sitting down and reflecting on the days worries at a set time everyday.

It is important to do this at the start because it is a difficult and new skill you are developing. But with time and practice in this formal way, you will be able to do it effectively more informally. Also, typically people predict that they won't be able to postpone their worrying, but often people are surprised that they are actually able to postpone many of their worries, and experience a greater sense of control.

# Situational exposure

One of the ways that people avoid feeling anxiety in certain situations is to avoid those situations wherever possible. However, by not exposing yourself to those situations you don't get the chance to disconfirm your fears, which in turn can make those fears even stronger. If being in those situations is important to you, you will need to face your fears in a real situation and begin to turn social activity into a positive experience. This information sheet is designed to show you how you can begin to do that.

## Graded Exposure

Some people might encourage you to tackle your biggest fear first – to “jump in the deep end” and get it over and done with. However, many people prefer to take it “step-by-step”, what some people call “**graded exposure**”. By using graded exposure you start with situations that are easier for you to handle, then work your way up to more challenging tasks. This allows you to build your confidence slowly, to use other skills you have learned, to get used to the situations, and to challenge your fears about each situational exposure exercise. By doing this in a structured and repeated way, you have a good chance of reducing your anxiety about those situations.

## Situations That You Avoid

The first thing to do is to think about the situations that you fear and try to avoid. For example, some people might fear and avoid going to social places, or being assertive with others. Make a list of these situations.

Once you have made the list, indicate how much distress you feel in those situations by giving them each a rating on a scale of 0 to 100.

**0** – You are perfectly relaxed

**25-49** – *Mild*: You can still cope with the situation

**50-64** – *Moderate*: You are distracted by the anxiety, but are still aware of what's happening

**65-84** – *High*: Difficult to concentrate, thinking about how to escape

**85-100** – *Extreme*: The anxiety is overwhelming and you just want to escape from the situation

## Planning Your Goals

Now you can start to turn the situations you avoid into goals that you'd like to achieve. For example, a situation that you avoid might be “Going to pubs”, which has a distress rating of 75. A goal for this might be “To go out to a pub on a weekend night with friends and stay there for at least 2 hours”. When you are developing a goal, it helps to make them SMART:

**Specific**: It needs to be as clear (eg compare “To eat in public” with “To eat lunch in a local restaurant on my own.”)

**Measurable**: It needs to be easily assessed (eg compare “Being friendly” with “Staying for 2 hrs” - what does ‘friendly’ mean?)

**Achievable**: It needs to be possible and probable to achieve

**Relevant**: It needs to be important to you

**Timebound**: It needs to have an end date for completion

## Building Steps Towards Your Goal

Now that you have a personal, realistic, achievable, measurable, and specific goal that you'd like to achieve, you can plan your “graded exposure” program. This involves breaking the goal down so that you can work step-by-step towards your major goal. Of course, goals with high distress (eg a rating of 80+) will need more steps than a medium distress goal (eg a rating of 40+). You can break your goal into smaller steps by changing WHO is there, WHAT you do, WHEN you do it, WHERE you do it, and HOW long you do it for. Follow the SMART criteria for developing each step. Here's an example.



<b>GOAL:</b> To go out to a pub on a weekend night with friends and stay there for at least 2 hours	DISTRESS 0-100
	80

STEP		DISTRESS 0-100
1	Go to the local pub on a <u>weekday afternoon</u> (with a friend who knows about the problem), buy a soft drink and stay for 10min	35
2	Go to the local pub on a <u>weekday afternoon</u> (with a friend who knows about the problem), buy a soft drink and stay for 30min	45
3	Go to the local pub on a <u>weeknight</u> (with a friend who knows about the problem), staying from 7pm to 8pm	55
4	Go to the local pub on a <u>weekend night</u> (with a friend who knows about the problem), and stay for 30 minutes	65
5	Go to the local pub on a <u>weekday night</u> (with a friend who knows about the problem), staying from 8pm to 10pm	70
6	Go to the local pub on a <u>weekend night</u> (some of the friends don't know about the problem), staying from 8pm to 10pm	80

# Situational exposure

## Climbing Steps Towards Your Goal

Once you have developed the steps that you can take towards your main goal, you can make an appointment with yourself to start on your first step. Here are a few tips for how you can progress through your situational exposure steps.

### before the first step

- 1) **Coping with anxiety.** Before you start on a situational exposure exercise, it is useful to have developed ways of coping with the distress you might feel in the situation. Using well practised breathing techniques can help to reduce the physical response to anxiety. Reducing your general level of anxiety through muscle relaxation techniques can also help to prepare you for entering the situation.
- 2) **Challenging negative thoughts.** Another way to prepare yourself is to challenge negative thoughts that you might have about yourself or the situation. If you spend time working through these thoughts you can come up with some helpful ways of thinking about the situation.

These strategies are discussed in other information sheets in this series.

### completing a step

- 1) **Expect some anxiety.** When you enter the situation – at any step - remember that you'll probably experience some anxiety or discomfort. That's why it's important to start small, and work your way up.
- 2) **Use your skills.** Just as used your coping skills to prepare for the situation, use them while you are in the situation. Use your breathing to reduce your physical anxiety response and challenge negative thoughts that you might have.
- 3) **Stay in the situation.** While it might be tempting to leave if you feel uncomfortable, try to stay in the situation until the anxiety goes down. In this way you can see that, as frightening as the feelings are, they are not dangerous, and they do subside.
- 4) **Stay involved.** 'Staying away' can happen in many different ways, such as sitting away from others, or avoiding eye contact. Stay involved in the situation by noticing what is happening and really experiencing the situation. Really taking part in these situations is the only way to make sure you get used to the anxiety.
- 5) **Stay sober.** Staying involved means being fully aware of what is happening. This means not taking alcohol or drugs to try to "mentally escape" the situation.



### climbing the steps

- 1) **One step at a time.** Climbing a stepladder is not about taking one giant leap, it's about taking one small step at a time. You begin with the least difficult step and gradually work your way up the step ladder getting used to the anxiety you feel at each step. Your primary aim at each step is to complete that step and that step alone.
- 2) **Over and over again.** Do a step frequently and repeatedly, and try to do them in close succession to make sure you are comfortable with the situation before you move onto the next step. This might take 3 or 4 times.
- 3) **Use your skills.** Work through any unhelpful thoughts about the situation after you have completed each step, or repeated a step. Allow yourself to unwind with a relaxation session.
- 4) **Acknowledge the steps you've made.** When you are comfortable with a particular step, admit to your successes and acknowledge the steps that you've made so far.
- 5) **Stepbacks.** We all have our up and down days, and sometimes you might think you've taken a 'step-back' because the situational exposure exercise didn't go as well as you hoped. If you are having difficulties with a particular step then it might be useful to take a "step back" and work on the previous step again or design an "in between" step between the one you've completed and the difficult one. That's why doing a step over and over is so helpful. Remember – take it one step at a time.

### use a diary to record your progress

A diary can help you to keep track of the steps you've completed, and how you can cope with any difficulties you've had. You could use the following columns

- **Situation:** Describe the step and the situation
- **Expected Distress:** Indicate the distress level you expected (0-100)
- **Actual Distress:** Indicate the level of distress you *actually* experienced
- **Outcome:** Indicate whether you completed the step and the skills you used that were helpful, OR, if you had difficulties, describe how you can prepare for the next time.

**If you're having difficulties with situational exposure tasks, talk to a professional so that they can guide you through the process.**

# coping with stress



## Stress and Stressors

Stress is something that is part of normal life, in that it is experienced by everyone from time-to-time. However, some people suffer from stress which is so frequent or so severe that it can seriously impact on their quality of life. Stress can come from a huge range of sources (*stressors*), such as:

- ◇ Relationships with others
- ◇ Work-related issues
- ◇ Study demands
- ◇ Coping with illness
- ◇ Life changes, such as marriage, retirement, divorce
- ◇ Day-to-day activities and tasks
- ◇ Positive events, such as organising holidays or parties
- ◇ Juggling many roles or tasks at the same time



Some people are aware of what tends to trigger their stress, and this increases their ability to either prevent stress or to handle it more effectively. Many others are less able to deal with stress, and identifying stressors is a key step in this. If you often experience stress, take some time to consider what tends to set it off for you.

## Symptoms of Stress

Some people do not even notice that they are stressed until symptoms begin to occur, including:

- ◇ Irritability or moodiness
- ◇ Interrupted sleep
- ◇ Worrying or feeling of anxiety
- ◇ Back and neck pain
- ◇ Frequent headaches, minor to migraine
- ◇ Upset stomach
- ◇ Increased blood pressure
- ◇ Changes in appetite
- ◇ Rashes or skin breakouts
- ◇ Chest pains
- ◇ Making existing physical problems worse
- ◇ More susceptible to cold/flu and slower recovery

These symptoms reduce quality of life, and people suffering from stress may notice that work performance or relationships suffer more as a result. You may be able to use some the strategies listed here, or you may find it useful to consult a professional for more help.

## Stress Management Tips

- 1) **Identify your stressors**, and see if there are some things within your control to manage better. Some things will be beyond your control, for example if you work a job that is based on working towards deadlines then you can't change this without changing jobs. But perhaps you can control some aspects, such as scheduling to have at least a short lunch break each day, or to go to bed earlier so that you have more energy to cope with the daytime.
- 2) Build **regular exercise** into your life - as well as being part of a healthy, balanced lifestyle and giving you more energy, many people find that working out at the gym or playing sport helps them to unwind.
- 3) Make sure that you **eat and sleep well**.
- 4) **Take time out** for family, friends and recreational activities. Most of us know that this is important but we do not all do it. If you find it hard to make time for this, perhaps you need to take deliberate steps to have time out, such as set aside one evening a week where you meet up with friends or enjoy a hobby, or set aside one day of the weekend for relaxing at home.
- 5) **Problem-solving techniques** can be a useful way of clarifying the problem, brainstorming possible solutions, and then choosing one to put into action after listing the pros and cons of each option. See the handout *Problem Solving* for more details about this.
- 6) **Learn calming techniques** such as controlled breathing and progressive muscle relaxation, to train your mind and body to become more relaxed. These techniques require practice but can be helpful with regular use. See handouts *Calming Technique* and *Progressive Muscle Relaxation*.
- 7) You may wish to speak to a professional about **assertiveness training and communication skills** which can help you to deal with challenging situations more effectively, thereby reducing stress. See the handout *Assertive Communication*.
- 8) Last but definitely not least, consider whether there is **negative thinking** which is contributing to your stress. Negative thinking can make us worry more than is necessary, increasing stress, and generally does not motivate us to take positive actions. See the handouts *Thinking & Feeling*, *Analysing Your Thinking* and *Changing Your Thinking*.

