

Worry - a CBT approach

Is my worry excessive?

Worry is a normal aspect of everyday living. It can help motivate us to act on or problem-solve an issue. It can overcome procrastination by helping us to prioritise. However, worry can become a problem if there is a pattern whereby one worry, when dealt with, is quickly replaced by another, and if this is experienced as regularly causing excessive levels of anxiety or stress. It may feel like a 'whirlwind' of worry.

Excessive worry can create considerable distress, can consume our thinking and lead us to avoid dealing with the thing that is concerning us.

This leaflet briefly describes one model of addressing worry and suggests some simple strategies that can be useful in combating it.

A CBT model of worry

A cognitive behavioural understanding of worry emphasises the vicious cycles that worriers can find themselves trapped in. That is, the ways in which worriers respond to worry thoughts and how this can create and maintain further worry. So, the worry itself is not seen as the issue, but the responses to worry are seen as the real problem.

This model then suggests that the key is not to try to remove the worry itself but to learn to worry more effectively and reduce the time spent in unproductive worry. Although this is challenging, acceptance of a level of uncertainty and discomfort is crucial as is deciding on positive action rather than circular thinking or avoidance behaviours.

Some strategies

The following strategies are not intended to each work alone but when put together can initiate the recovery process.

Distinguish productive from unproductive worry

Consider for a moment whether you would label the following worries as productive or unproductive:

- (a) I've just started my degree course, and am worrying about the end result, which is making it hard to engage with and enjoy work.
- (b) I've been to the bank and there is less money in there than I expected.

Although there is always room for some ambiguity you will most likely have labelled (a) as unproductive and (b) as productive. This can be a useful benchmark for

deciding whether a particular worry would be helped by further thought and problem solving.

It may be helpful to set aside 'worry time' to give yourself space to look at what is on your mind, and to then go through the process of discerning whether a worry is something that needs more thought and problem solving, and if so when and how, or whether it is a future based worry that is out of your control at this point in time. Stay with the negative emotion It is natural to want to avoid feeling bad. However we can become so stuck in pre-empting and avoiding even the smallest of negative feelings that we don't face up to things that we otherwise would.

The chain reaction of physiological changes that happen in our bodies when we get anxious (sometimes called 'fight or flight' response) is useful to us in emergency situations. We think and react more quickly as a result of this response. However sometimes our fight or flight response can become overresponsive, and affect us in situations where it is not helpful or necessary.

If we can allow ourselves to experience and feel what we are feeling, and remind ourselves that although it is unpleasant it is not dangerous, then the feelings will generally become less intense and pass more easily. If we adopt this mind-set and approach to anxiety then we can become more able to enter into situations which we find anxiety provoking.

Exposure to situations which are slightly out of our comfort zone then means that we are creating the opportunity to become used to those situations and discover that we are more able to cope than we predicted. Overcoming avoidance can open up the possibility of experiences that can be life enhancing that we would have missed out on otherwise.

Challenge cognitive distortions

A negative automatic thought is a thought that seems to just pop into your head, and may be very familiar, and generally generates a negative emotional response. We usually experience these when we notice a mood shift but as they seem automatic we may not consciously register them.

Typical examples of negative automatic thoughts in worriers might be:

Black and white thinking 'What if I can't do it?'

Labelling 'What if they see I'm an idiot?'

Catastrophising 'If I fail this one thing, then it's all utterly ruined and I'll never get a decent job.'

Mind-reading 'What if they think that I don't like them?'

If you can learn to catch the negative automatic thought in the moment it comes to you, and recognise the distortion in the thought, then you have already begun to question it and accept only what is valid in it. The next step is then to generate a more balanced thought that looks at the whole picture.

Overcome avoidance

Avoidance is an unhelpful response to worry because it stops us discovering that we could cope. Avoidance takes many forms. It can be more obvious avoidance such as putting off a piece of work or avoiding going to a party, or it can be more subtle such as avoiding eye contact or seeking reassurance (avoiding trusting or relying on our own opinion). All avoidance serves to undermine our confidence. It may be helpful to set a hierarchy of easiest to hardest avoidances to face up to, and gradually attempt to do the easiest until it becomes significantly less anxiety provoking, before moving on to a harder one.

Other helpful behavioural strategies can be: to apply a written problem-solving approach to worries that seem productive, or to use a decision-making tool (list advantages and disadvantages but give each a rating of 0-10 for importance and score the total for each option). Be aware of your worry rules.

Finally, it can be important to start to notice themes in your worries. These might point you to underlying assumptions/ rules you have that provoke you to worry. For example, a rigid assumption: 'I need to worry to show that I care.' 'I must worry in order to be prepared for disappointment.' 'Unless I worry I won't deal with problems, or stay focused on things that I need to do.' If you can spot a rule then you can question it.

You can ask yourself, for example, whether this is the best way to show that you care, whether worry does in practice prepare you for or soften the blow of disappointment, and whether problem-solving isn't easier and more effective when worry is contained.

Where to seek more help

If you get stuck or find it impossible to know where to start with these suggestions, maybe you can talk it through with a friend or family member, or someone else you trust? However, if your worries continue to feel unmanageable you might find it helpful to talk things through with a counsellor.