

Getting to grips with Anxiety

————— What to do when our thoughts get in the way —————



Acknowledgements

Thanks to all those practitioners and researchers whose work has underpinned the cognitive-behavioural techniques included in these open-source guided-self-help manuals.

Compiled and edited by: Kings College London CYP-IAPT teaching team; Helen Barker, Module lead/Senior Clinical Tutor Susanna Payne, Acting Programmes Co-Lead, Sarah Carman, Module lead/Senior Clinical Tutor, Laura Bowyer, Module lead/Senior Clinical Tutor, Jessica Richardson Programmes Co-Lead

Graphic design / Jelena Crnokrak

Table of Contents



Introduction	4
Thoughts are not facts	5
Common unhelpful thinking traps	6-8
Identifying your own thinking traps	9-10
Putting your thoughts to the test	11-12
Developing helpful/balanced thoughts by remaining curious	13
Putting it into practice	14
Thought record	15

Introduction

- Sometimes our thoughts or predictions about situations can get in the way of what we want to do. If your predictions or fears are getting in the way of taking a step on the fear ladder, this supplement may be of help.

Always remember thoughts are not facts. If we remain curious about our thoughts or predictions and start to question them, test them out and consider alternative perspectives, we can keep facing our fears, and achieve our goals.

The following pages will take you through some advice about how to deal with anxious thinking that stops us getting on with the things we want to do, including

- Starting to notice and remain curious about anxious thoughts
- Responding to our thoughts in a different way
- Starting to notice key patterns or 'traps' in thinking that aren't helpful

Thoughts are not facts

We are thinking all the time, thoughts move in and out of our minds throughout the day. Sometimes we are conscious of them and at other times we hardly notice them.

Everyone has anxious thoughts sometimes, it is normal for such thoughts to pop into our minds quickly and affect our mood and behaviour, sometimes without us noticing. We can be more prone to anxious thoughts if we're having a bad day, are already feeling upset or worried, or if we're facing a situation that usually makes us feel distressed or anxious.

Anxious thoughts are sneaky, they tend to creep up on us and we often believe them without question. They make us feel distressed or worried, and it can be hard to shake them off.

How do they keep anxiety going?

Anxious thoughts are often related to predictions or interpretations of a situation. They are based on reality but may not consider all the facts. As you know, this is because anxiety is an adaptive human emotion that helps us to escape danger, but is **less** useful when it is a false alarm.


When we feel anxious we tend to think of things in unhelpful ways that can increase fear and keep it going. This can be described in a helpful equation:

$$\text{Anxiety} = \frac{\text{Our understanding of how likely the danger is / the size of the threat}}{\text{Our understanding of our ability to cope / the chance of being rescued}}$$

If we think there is a high likelihood of danger and we don't think we will cope or can get help, we are likely to feel more anxious.

It's really important to note that these thoughts are difficult just to change; it's hard to simply change our thinking! It's very normal to have these thoughts – everyone does – they key is how we respond to them. The first step is to begin to notice the anxious thoughts you have, and remain curious about them, not accepting them as facts.

Can you write down any anxious thoughts you often experience when in feared situations. Look out for ones where you over-estimate the level of danger and /or under-estimate your ability to cope with it.



Unhelpful Thinking Styles

Research has shown that there are common unhelpful patterns or thinking styles that we all fall into sometimes. These styles of thinking can be unhelpful to us and impact on our emotions and feelings in a negative way. They also tend to impact on our behaviour, for example, making us more likely to avoid things or withdraw from others. Learning to recognise when we've fallen into an unhelpful thinking trap can help us to question our anxious thoughts and progress with step by step plans to overcome our anxiety and distress.

Here are some common unhelpful thinking styles that we can all fall into.

Blowing things up

These types of thinking traps are when we make negative things bigger than they actually are. This happens in four main ways:

— *All-or-nothing thinking*

Thinking only in “black or white” or extremes (either really good or really bad). When thinking in this way we don't consider all the possible things in-between (or the “grey”).

For example:

- Seeing people as either “good” or “bad”.
- Judging achievements/performance as either a “total success” or “complete failure”.

— *Over-estimating danger*

Imagining or believing that something very unlikely is going to happen.

For example;

- “There's going to be a terrorist attack on the bus on my way to school”.
- “Something bad is going to happen to my mum, she's going to have a car accident”.

— *Catastrophizing*

Imagining the worst-case scenario and that we will be unable to cope with it.

For example:

- Mum and Dad have a fight – “They are obviously going to get a divorce and I'll be a mess”.
- Getting an answer wrong in class and thinking “everyone is looking at me, they all think I'm stupid, I'm never going to be able to come back to this class, and I'll lose all my friends.”

— *Overgeneralizing*

Making sweeping judgements based on only one or two experiences. These thoughts typically contain the words “always” and “never”.

For example:

- A friend gets upset at you – “I always mess up friendships. I have no real friends”.
- A girl in school wins a couple of tournaments – “she always wins, she's so perfect, I never win anything”

Predicting failure

This style of thinking is about what we expect will happen. This can happen in two main ways:

— *The mind-reader*

Believing you know what others are thinking (and assuming it's negative), without any real evidence.

For example:

- “I know they are talking about me right now. They’re saying I look weird”.
- “Everyone is wondering what I’m doing at this party, they don’t like me”.
- “I know she thinks my present is rubbish”.

— *The fortune-teller*

Making predictions about what is going to happen.

- “I couldn’t find a job last summer, so I won’t be able to get one this summer”.
- “I know I am going to fail all my exams”.
- “No one is going to talk to me at the party”.

The downers

These types of traps happen when we only focus on the negative things. There are two common types of downers.

— *Negative Filter*

Focusing only on the negative without seeing any of the positive or what is going well.

For example:

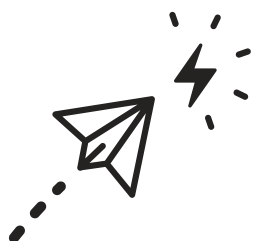
- Thinking about the one person you had an awkward conversation with at the party, rather than the three people with whom you had great conversations.
- Thinking about the question you couldn’t answer on the test, rather than the ones you could.

— *Ignoring the positives*

Even when positive things happen, we then dismiss them or ignore them.

For example:

- You learnt to play an instrument, but you think “this is the easiest instrument to learn” or “everyone can play this so it’s nothing special”.
- Someone in class wants to partner up with you but you then think “it’s only because they can’t find anyone else to pair up with”.



Feeling thoughts

These thinking traps are when we let our emotions change or colour the way we think and see things, rather than considering what actually happened/is happening.

— Emotional takeover

Your emotions influence the way in which you think.

For example:

- I feel bad so it must be bad.
- I feel anxious so I must be in danger.

— Labelling

Sometimes we talk to ourselves in mean ways and use a single negative word to describe ourselves/ others.

- “I’m a failure”
- “He’s an idiot”
- “I’m useless”
- “I’m rubbish”

Mission Impossible

This trap is about setting ourselves very high expectations and standards. Asking yourself to be perfect and not allowing yourself to make mistakes. This can lead to feeling like a failure when you do make mistakes and discourage you from trying anything new, making it hard to get a sense of achievement and preventing you from doing things you might enjoy.

For example:

- “I should get into one of the best universities”
- “I must not disappoint my family”
- “I can’t get anything wrong”

It’s my fault

Putting ourselves down, self-criticism, blaming ourselves for events or situations that are not (totally) our responsibility.

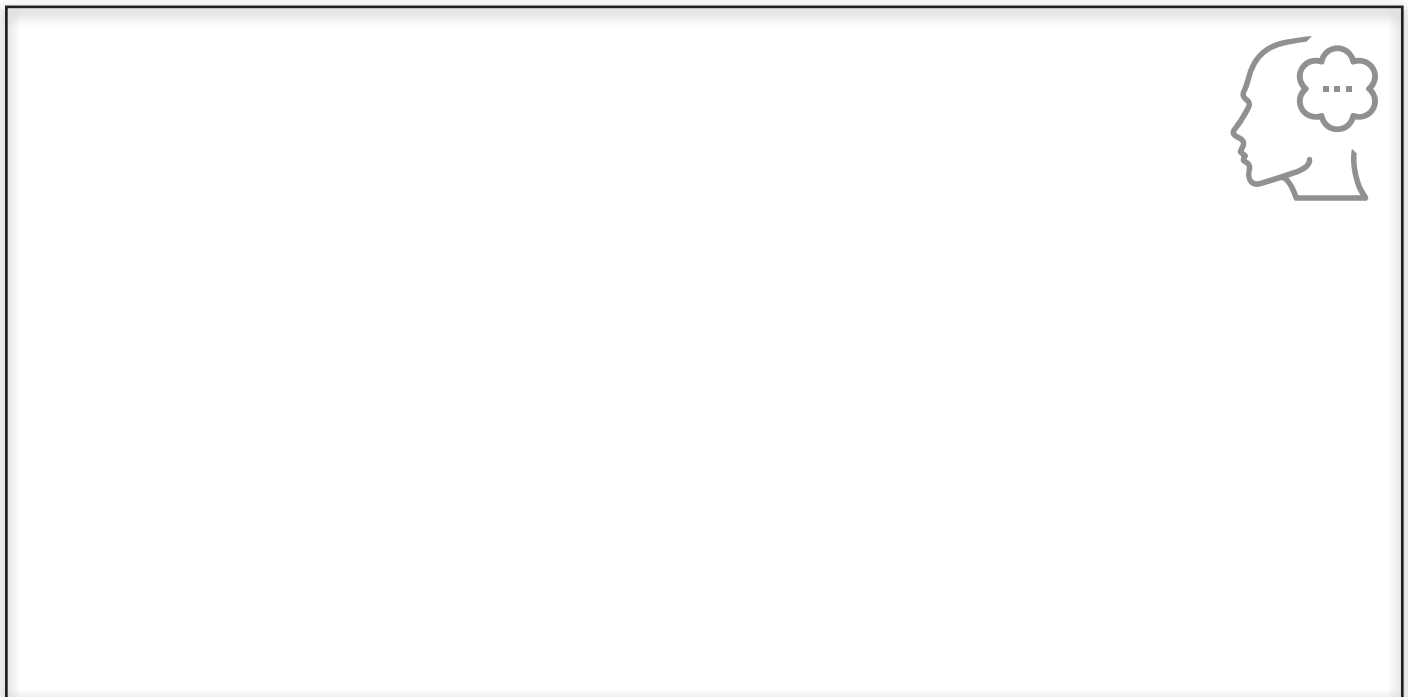
For example:

- If your friend doesn’t see you and walks past without talking to you, you may think “I must have said something to upset them”.
- If your mum is in a bad mood “it’s my fault for being such a disappointment to her”.



Discuss these unhelpful thinking traps with your practitioner. Have you noticed yourself falling into these traps over the past two weeks?

Write down some of the thinking traps that you often get caught in and give examples of the anxious thoughts that might go with them.



A large empty rectangular box for writing, with a small icon of a head and a thought bubble in the top right corner.

Do you notice any particular patterns? Are there particular situations or days when you are more likely to fall into unhelpful thinking traps? How do these ways of thinking make you feel? How do these thoughts impact on what you do? Write down your ideas/observations below.



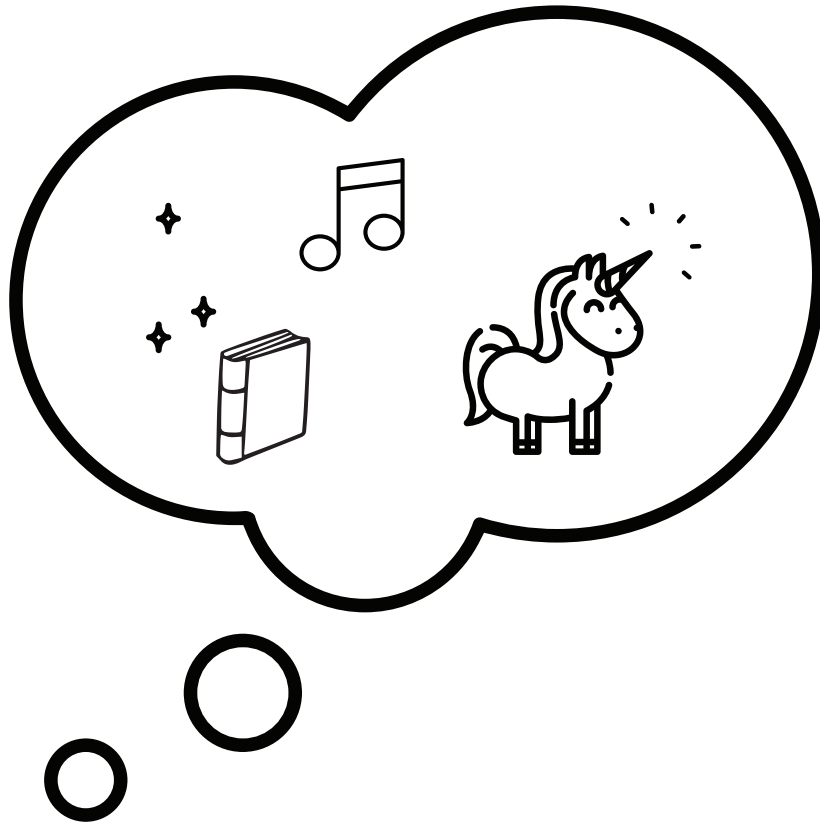
A large empty rectangular box for writing, with a small icon of a hand placing a puzzle piece in the top right corner.

Do you think there are any particular thoughts that are getting in the way of your step by step plan and stopping you from being able to have a go? Look out particularly for thoughts that are about predicting the future/over-estimating the danger and/or under-estimating your ability to cope. Write these thoughts below.



Putting your thoughts to the test

What we've learnt about anxious thoughts and unhelpful thinking styles is that they're common, they happen to everyone and they have a big impact on how we feel and what we do. What we also know is they are very rarely completely true and are often based on our perceptions and opinions rather than facts. It can be really helpful to keep reminding ourselves that:



“thoughts are just thoughts – not facts!”

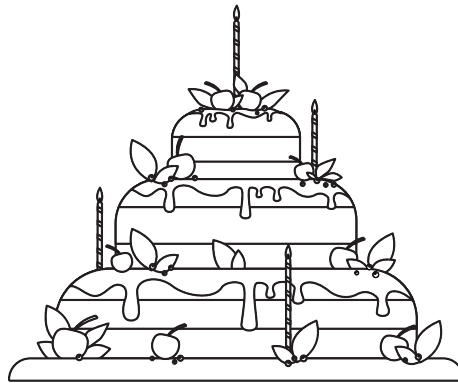
As soon as we start to catch our anxious thoughts and recognise when we're falling into unhelpful thinking traps, we can do something about it and try to minimise the impact they have on our feelings and behaviours. If your anxious thoughts or predictions are stopping you from having a go at facing the fears on your step by step plan, then catching these thoughts and being curious about how realistic they are can be really useful.

It's really important for anxious thoughts not to prevent you from facing your fears. If a thought feels difficult to get past, talk to your practitioner about it. They can suggest changes to the step on the fear ladder that make it less daunting and easier to face. They can rehearse more complicated situations with you before you have to do something alone, or, suggest using members of your back up team.

A couple of things can make thoughts harder to get past.

The first is that sometimes we feel like thinking something, or saying it out loud, makes it more likely to happen. We're all naturally superstitious like this, but really there's nothing to be afraid of...

Let's try now. Close your eyes. Think of a cake. Imagine it in a LOT of detail. What flavour is it? What does it smell like? What does it look like? Try and get a clear picture in your head?



Open your eyes? Do you have a cake?

The second is that everyone has an instinct to immediately push away distressing thoughts as soon as they come into our minds. This makes sense, they make us feel horrible, and we don't want them in our heads. Unfortunately trying to get rid of thoughts will backfire and this is a well-researched effect.

Let's try it now. Bring to mind an image of a white bear.

Now, for the next 30 seconds, you have only one task. That task is to NOT think of a white bear. We'll time it...



How did that go? How many times did you think of a white bear? How many times do you normally think of a white bear?

Imagine what it's like with more important and upsetting thoughts – much worse. Pushing thoughts away simply doesn't work. It stops us feeling curious and examining them in more detail. It stops us from riding out the anxiety we feel naturally (and we know when we do this anxiety will go away by itself), and getting on with the things we want and need to do.

You might find that it is useful to test some of your anxious thoughts out like this with your practitioner, who can help you find ways to do this.

Although it can feel like thinking or saying something makes it more likely to happen, when we test this out, we realise that this isn't true.

Developing balanced responses to thoughts by remaining curious

Another way of dealing with anxious thoughts and unhelpful thinking styles is to look at them more closely and take a moment to be curious about what's really true. You'll notice, from above, that it's very easy to fall into unhelpful thinking traps and believe our thoughts are facts. But they're often not the most accurate version of events. We see the world through a filter that's often misleading. Sometimes we need a moment to check whether our first thoughts and reactions are really accurate or helpful.

Below are some helpful questions that you can use to examine your unhelpful thoughts.

Is my thought typical of a thinking trap that I often get caught up in?

Am I getting trapped by unhelpful thoughts?

Am I over-estimating the likelihood that a bad thing will happen? Am I under-estimating my ability to cope/get help?

Am I getting caught up in thoughts rather than getting on with things?

› Be curious about how realistic your thought/prediction is and alternative perspectives.

Am I focusing on one possibility and ignoring others? Is there another way of looking at the situation?

What would my friend/family say? What would they do?

If I looked back at the situation in a years' time how important would it be?

How helpful is it to think x? Is thinking x helping me to move towards my goal?

What can I do next?

Be curious about your anxious thoughts. Remember they're not always completely true or helpful.

Instead of responding to my thoughts automatically, can I respond to them differently?

What's the way I can best respond to the thought or situation to make myself feel better?

There's a thought record on page 15 for you to keep a note of more helpful ways to respond to difficult thoughts.

Putting it into practice

Discuss a recent situation where you experienced anxiety and it stopped you from completing a step on your step by step plan with your practitioner.

What thoughts went through your mind? Use the questions below to help you identify anxious thoughts.

What was going through your mind when you felt anxious? What did you think was going to happen? What was the worst thing that could happen? What did you do?



Looking back, what would you change about what you thought or did that might improve how you felt about taking this step on your step by step plan? Is there a different way you could respond to similar thoughts in the future that will help you to face your fears and reach your goals?



If it's helpful, make a plan with your practitioner to address any big worries or unhelpful thoughts that are getting in the way of your step by step plan or your goals as they come up or your life in general. Make a note of any upcoming situations where you predict anxious thoughts might get in the way. You may choose to keep your curiosity open to the reality of the thoughts by using the thought record, planning what might be helpful ways to respond to the thoughts, or by creating rehearsal or exposure tasks or activities that prepare you for something difficult.

Don't forget, the best way to overcome your anxiety is to face your fears by testing out whether they come true. The best thing to do is to have a go, using what you have learned from your practitioner and using the supports within your back up team.

Thought Record

Situation What happened before my mood changed?	Thoughts/images What went through my head?	Feelings How did I feel?	Type of thought/image? Is this an example of a common thinking trap?	What can I do next? What's the most helpful way to respond? Helpful questions include: Do my first thoughts need a reality check?; How helpful is it for me to think this way?; If I heard my friend say that about themselves, what would I say?; If I looked back in the future, would I ever give my younger self that advice?; Does thinking this way help me reach my goals?; Do I need to take a break and do something else?