

The Worry Tree

KS 4/5

45 mins

An activity to practice ways of dealing with worrying thoughts.

What you need

- Worry tree and Jo/Joe scenario for each person or one to share in pairs

Introduction

- Explain that worry is a particular problem in **Anxiety Disorders** but also something that many of us experience from time to time. We can spend many hours worrying about anything and everything, and that sort of worrying is often not helpful, in spite of what we might believe.
- Hand out worry trees
- Explain the worry tree is a tool for dealing with worrying thoughts.

Describe the difference between:

- Hypothetical situations
- Real/current problems

Hypothetical situations are the “what if...?” worries about some terrible event that might happen. We blow up a small insignificant thing into something huge, creating a whole story with potentially disastrous consequences.

E.g. “My friend hasn’t texted me recently. He is getting fed up with me. He doesn’t want to spend time with me anymore. Actually he hates me! And if I don’t have him as a no one else will want to hang out with me either ...”.

These kind of worries cause us a lot of anxiety, when there is perhaps little or nothing we can do about the situation, and we are greatly over-estimating the odds of disastrous consequences. We might think we’re helping by worrying and planning what to do in the event of this feared event happening, but it doesn’t happen, so all that time was wasted and distress unnecessary.

Current problems are those worries that relate to a real situation, that we **CAN** do something about. In this case, we can decide what to do, when and how – which will be much more helpful than just continually worrying about it. E.g. ‘I’m finding this maths module really hard. Everyone else seems to get it but I just can’t understand. I’m going to fail my exams....’

- Invite students to look at The Worry tree and run through the steps taken in using it:
 1. Notice the Worry
 2. Ask yourself "What am I worrying about?" e.g. no text – my friend hates me

Ask: "Is this a **hypothetical** situation or a **current** problem?" and/or "Can I do something about this?"

3. If the worry is a hypothetical situation:
 - Let the worry go or **postpone your worry** (refer to notes below)
 - Change your focus of attention - **NOW**

4. If the worry is a current problem:
 - Make an action plan
 - What to do
 - When to do it
 - How to do it
 - Schedule it
 - Let the worry go in the meantime
 - Change your focus of attention - **NOW**

- Read the scenario of Jo/Joe which was created but one of the young people who has had help from CAMHS for anxiety.
- In small groups/pairs see how Jo/Joes experience might be applied to the worry tree. There isn't a lot of detail in the scenario so suggest additional details can be added if helpful.
- Discuss as a class.
 - **Were Jo/Joe's worries real or hypothetical?** The worries seem to be mainly hypothetical but we're making some assumptions as we don't have all the details
 - **What are the challenges in applying this model to Jo/Joes experience?** Jo/Joe is so caught up in the worrying that the specific natures of the worries seem to have got lost. Perhaps it would be helpful to start by teasing out some of the specific things Jo/Joe is worrying about and tackle them individually.
 - **Do you think it would help?** This is difficult to judge this one. Jo/Joes's level of anxiety is great. He/she may need some specialist input from CAMHS before being able to make use of a tool like this.
- In pairs or individually apply some of the things you worry about to the worry tree.

Meet Jo/Joe

Jo/Joe is 16 and has recently been struggling with how she/he is feeling. Jo/Joe has been getting nervous about everything and sometimes doesn't even know why she/he feels anxious. Jo/Joe finds him/herself overthinking anything and everything, often coming to dramatic conclusions which are unlikely to happen.

But to Jo/Joe they feel incredibly real and scary. Jo/Joe has been avoiding situations, meaning she/he is missing out on a lot. Jo/Joe doesn't want to leave the house due to the fear of getting anxious in public; the worst feeling in the world is trying to hold back a panic attack in public. When Jo/Joe gets really anxious she/he feels sick, dizzy, shaky, out of control with a heart that's racing. Jo/Joe feels that nobody understands how real this anxiety is, and gets upset and frustrated when people just say "get on with it", away. Jo/Joe doesn't want to feel like this anymore, she/he just wants to be normal. because it's just not that simple. Jo/Joe hates how she/he feels and just wants it all to go

Postponing Worry: Worry free zones

People who worry and whose minds appear to be constantly on-duty find it helpful to set a regular time for being off-duty or worry free zones. Over time, the worry free zones become longer and more frequent as you progress towards overcoming your worry.

Identify any existing worry free zones, or times when you already seem not to worry so much. It may be at a particular time of day, certain places or when doing certain activities. Build on these times so that they become established worry free zones, when you agree not to worry during these times.



Agree new worry free zones:

- time
- length of time
- place
- activity

You might include activities which require greater concentration, relaxation techniques or mindful activity.

Agree not to worry during these times. When a worrying thought comes to mind, notice the urge to worry, then tell yourself "I don't need to worry about this now, because I can worry about it later".

Over time, these periods of off-duty or worry free zones can be extended in length and/or frequency, and you will become more used to not worrying and it becomes much easier. You will take more control of the worry and discover that you don't have to worry.

Worry zones

This seems to work in reverse of a worry free zone. When we postpone our worry, we set a time dedicated to worrying, later in the day.

In this situation, the aim is to notice the worrying thoughts during the day, then tell yourself "I'll not worry about that now, as I can worry about it later", then return your focus of attention to what you were doing, or do something else. You may want to carry a note book and write down each worry as it happens, or make a note on your phone.



- Agree the worry time: time, length of time, and place.
- During the worry time - only worry about those worries that are still a concern.
- Dismiss other worries, or postpone less urgent worries to the next time.

The aim of setting a worry time is that you are learning not to react to worrying thoughts for the rest of the day, and you are taking control over the usual urge to worry. You will find this easier over time until you feel you can control the worry, or not have to worry at all.

THE WORRY TREE

