

# Understanding and Coping with Anxiety



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## **Part 1. Understanding Anxiety**

Anxiety is a **normal reaction**. Everyone will feel anxious at some stage. Anxiety is designed to **keep us safe** by preparing us to deal with challenges or situations that are dangerous or threatening. It does this by:

- **Keeping us alert** so that we are able to spot and avoid danger
- **Preparing our bodies** so that we can quickly take some action to keep safe
- **Helping us learn** how we can keep out of future danger and stay safe

When we perceive a threat our body prepares us to deal with it. This is often called the **fight or flight** response. This prepares us to **avoid or run away** (flight) or to **confront** and face the threat (fight).

**For example:**

- You will need to jump out of the way of the car to avoid being hit (flight)
- You will need to quickly leave the building when the fire alarm sounds (flight)
- You may need to fight off an attacker (fight)

Fortunately, for most of us, there are relatively few real threats to our physical safety. We don't have to avoid runaway cars or fight off attackers every day. However, many of us feel anxious because we **imagine threat**. We **worry** about what might happen and imagine that:

- Things **will go wrong** – e.g. we will get lost if we go somewhere new
- We will be **unable to cope** – e.g. we won't know what to say to someone or they will laugh at us
- We will be **unsuccessful** – e.g. we will get our work wrong or fail our exams

Because we are always imagining threat we may live in a constant state of anxiety.

### **Fight or Flight**

There are 3 core parts of the **fight or flight** anxiety response:

**1. How we think.** This helps us to identify situations or events where there might be possible threat or danger. Often this is what we think will happen and how we will be unsuccessful or things will go wrong.

**2. How we feel.** This is the response that prepares our bodies to take some action to deal with the threat. We may notice our heart racing, that we feel hot, short of breath or go red. We may feel tense or on edge.

**3. What we do:** We learn how to keep ourselves safe and out of future danger. Often this involves avoiding the situations or things that we worry about and which make us anxious.

## 1. How We Think

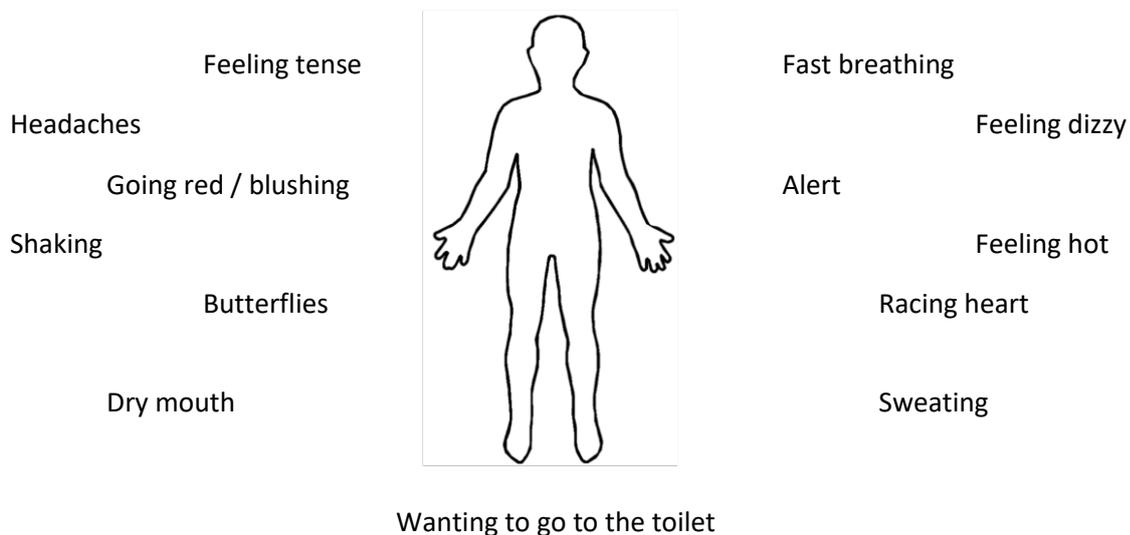
When we feel anxious we are more likely to expect the worst. We are more likely to think that:

- We will be unable to cope
- We will get things wrong
- That bad things will happen
- That people will laugh at us or be unkind
- We are more likely to look for signs of danger

These ways of thinking can make us believe we are living in a dangerous world which we are unable to cope with.

## 2. How we feel

There are many possible symptoms of anxiety, including:



Other possible symptoms of anxiety include:

- Difficulty concentrating
- Not wanting to go out
- Problems sleeping
- Not eating
- Feeling unwell and sick
- Being irritable
- Temper outbursts
- Thinking about your fears all the time

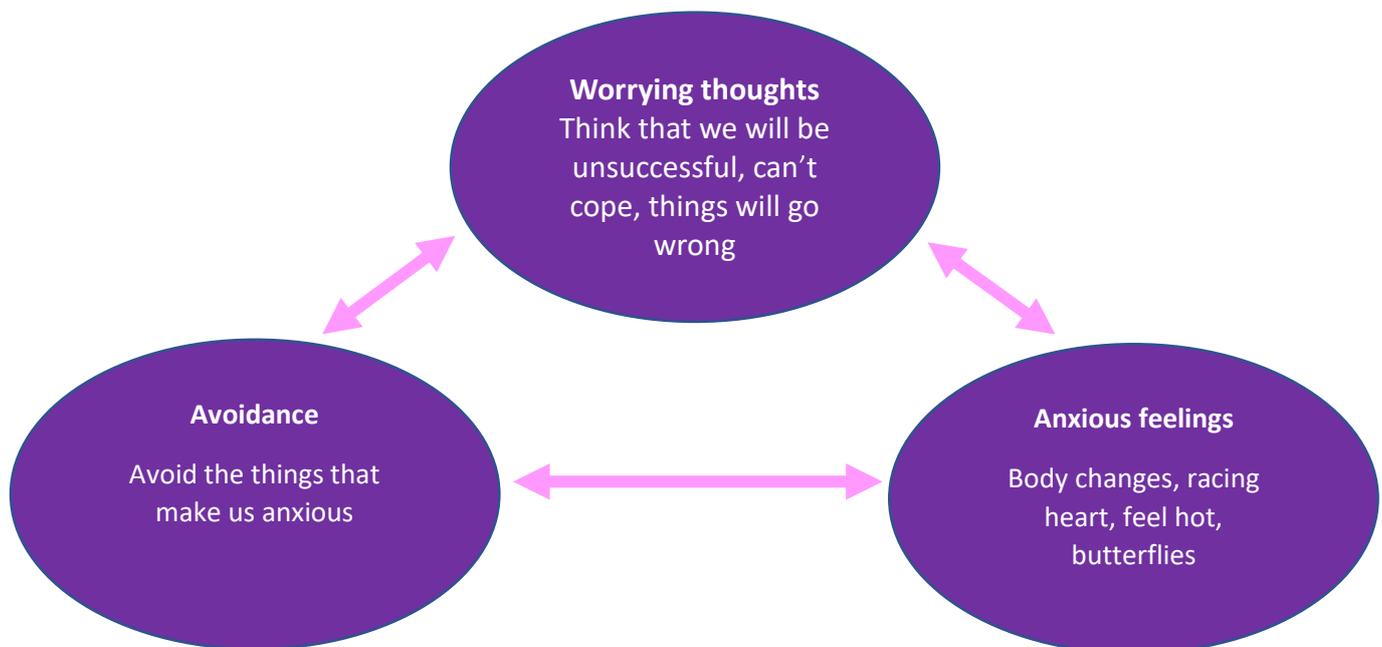
### 3. What We Do

We learn from what has happened and use this information to deal with future or similar events. For example,

- If you were laughed at in class for wrongly answering a question you might not answer future questions as you may think that you will get it wrong. Or,
- If you had a panic attack when you were shopping, you might stop going to the shops. You may think that you won't be able to cope and so decide to stay at home. Or,
- If you were meeting someone you care about and they were very late, you might think that they have had an accident. You may want to be constantly in touch with them and never leave them so that you make sure they ok.

We learn to **avoid or stop** doing things that make us anxious.

#### The Anxiety Trap



Anxiety not only feels uncomfortable but it can have a significant effect on your everyday life. It can:

- **Limit what you do and where you go.** You may not want to leave the house or meet up with friends. You may not want to go to school and this will have an impact on your academic performance.
- **Put a strain on your relationships.** You may find you argue more with friends and family, they may try and make you do things you don't want to do and get cross with you if you don't. Friends may stop asking you to join them.
- **Limit your social and relaxation time.** You may not feel able to go to the cinema, out for a meal or go on holiday, you may not be able to take part in clubs that you used to enjoy

## Types of anxiety

There are several different types of anxiety but all are likely to make you think that there will be a bad outcome.

- You may worry about anything and everything and expect that everything will go wrong. You may worry all the time. This is called **generalised anxiety**.
- You may worry about what other people think about you, and you may think they will find you boring or that you have nothing to say. This is called **social anxiety**.
- You may experience intense episodes of fear that seem to come out of the blue, and make you feel out of control. You may worry you are having a heart attack or even dying. These are called **panic attacks**.
- You may have specific fears of things like animals (dogs or spiders). These are called **phobias**.

## Causes of anxiety

There is no single reason why people become anxious. Often it is a combination of factors including:

- **Genetics** – Research has shown that we may inherit a predisposition or tendency to be anxious.
- **Life events** – Anxiety can be triggered by stressful events. These could be anything such as friendship and bullying issues, physical injury or illness, bereavement, moving house or school, family problems. Global issues, such as climate change are also a source of anxiety for many.
- **Family factors** – Anxious children and young people are more likely to have anxious parents/carers and, therefore, they may learn unhelpful ways of coping with stress/anxiety from their parents/carers.
- **Character** – You may just be the kind of person who struggles more with shyness and worries about new and unfamiliar situations.

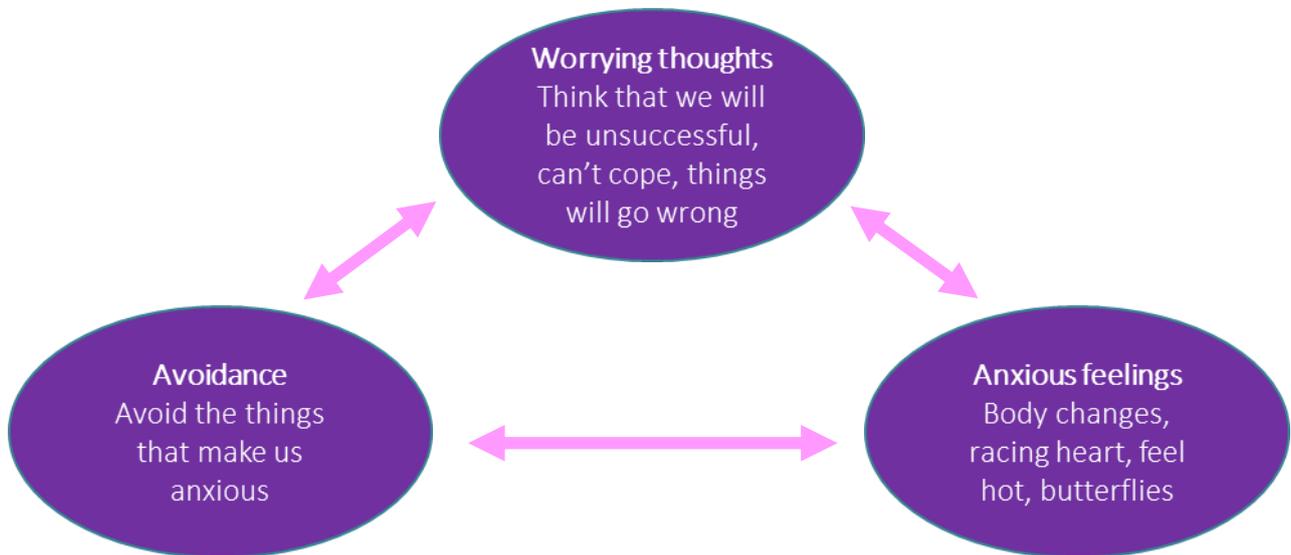
## Part 2. Learning to Beat Your Anxiety

One of the recommended treatments for anxiety is **Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT)**. CBT targets the three key parts of the anxiety response.

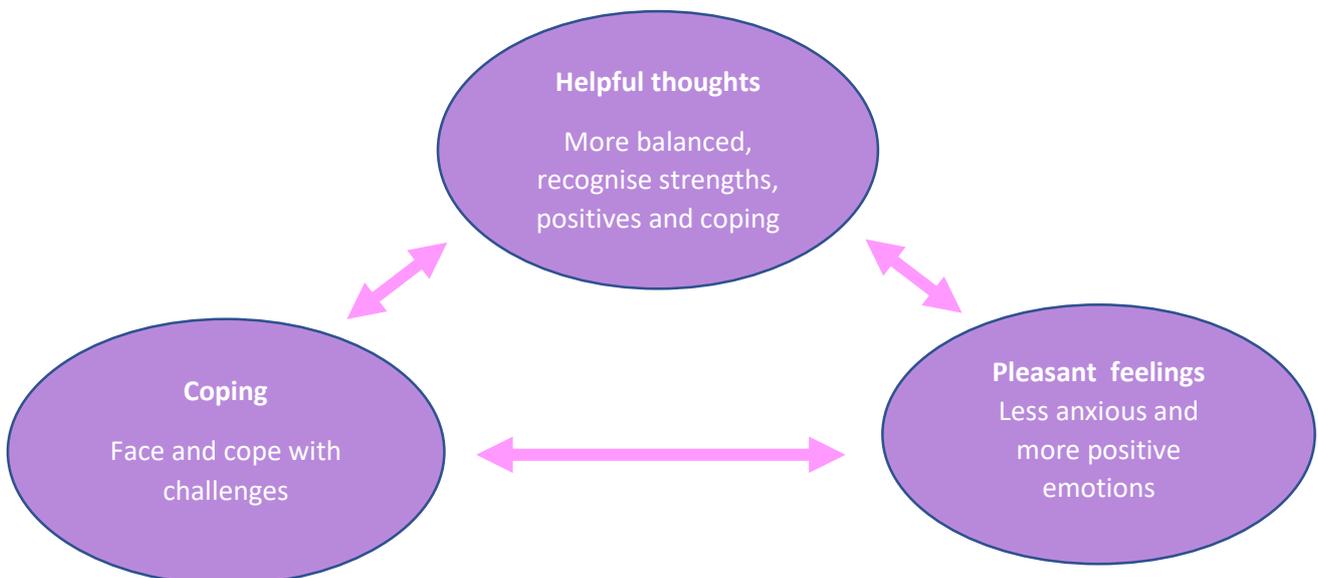
- How we **think**. It helps us to question the way we think about events and situations and how we see threat and danger.
- How we **feel**. It helps us to understand, manage and tolerate our anxiety symptoms
- What we **do**. It helps us to change what we do by confronting and facing our fears

It helps to break out of the anxiety trap, to deal with worries in a more balanced and helpful way.

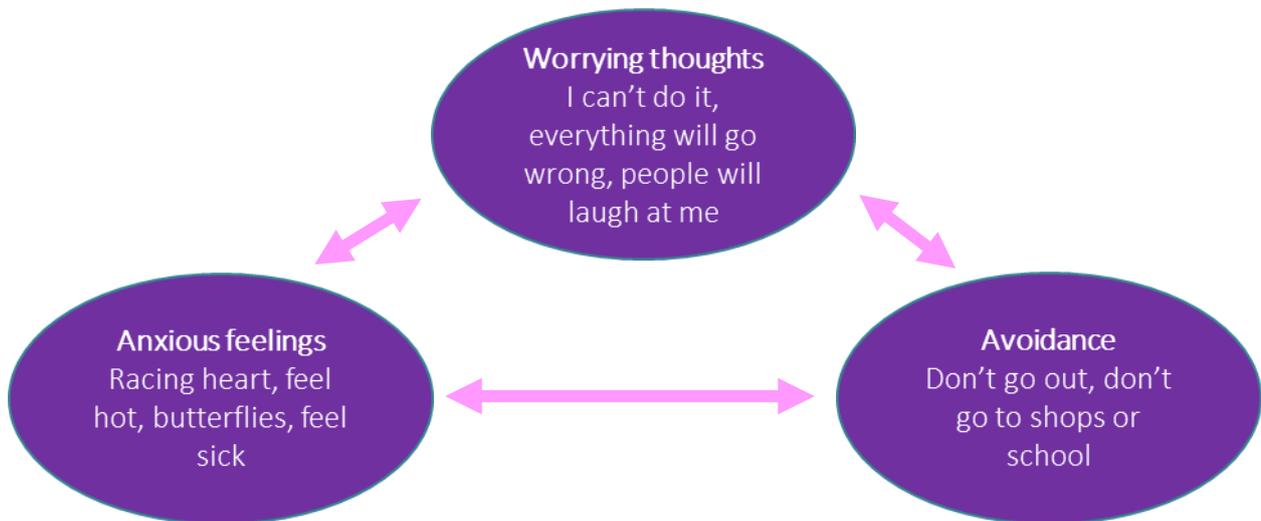
The aim is to **move from the anxiety trap:**



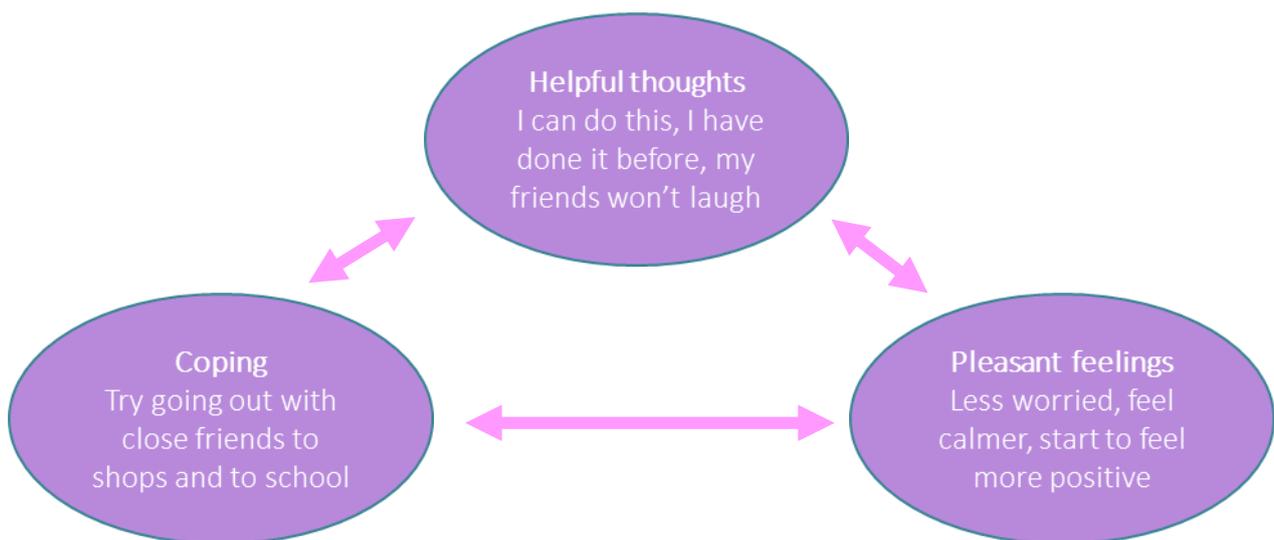
**To more balanced thinking:**



For example, CBT can help you move from:



To more balanced thinking:



### The goal

The goal is to learn to **cope with anxiety** not to get rid of it, no one is anxiety free. This is normal, and as we have already seen, anxiety can be helpful. You will continue to feel some anxiety, but you will be able to cope and manage it, **and** it won't stop you from living your life and doing what you want to.



It can be helpful to set yourself a goal, this will remind you of the bigger picture when you are feeling anxious about trying new things. There is a Goal Setting worksheet that will help you identify your goal.

## The Worksheets

Alongside this booklet are some worksheets that can help you learn to manage and beat your anxiety. These will take you through the following **5 steps to coping with anxiety**:

1. **Understanding anxiety**
2. **Learning to stay calm**
3. **Identifying and challenging anxious thoughts**
4. **Facing your fears**
5. **Learn to solve problems**

## Support

You can do this on your own but sometimes it can be really helpful to have someone to talk this through with. For example – you may feel you can talk to a parent/carer or trusted adult and they can help you without interfering. Or you may have a partner or close friend who understands how hard you are finding things and would be willing to listen

**Their job is to listen and help you think, NOT to solve it for you.**

## Step 1. Understanding Your Anxiety

The first step is to help you understand more about your anxiety. *You have to know your enemy!* We do this by asking the following questions

- How often do you feel anxious?
- Where and when do you feel anxious?
- What makes you feel anxious?
- What thoughts race through your mind when you feel anxious?
- What do you do when you are anxious?

A helpful way of doing this is to keep a diary. A diary is included in the accompanying resources.

Day and Time	What were you doing?	What were your hot thoughts?	How did you feel?
Monday 7 30	Getting ready for school	I'm sure I've forgotten something	Hot, racing heart, sweating

After completing the diary for a week or two, make some quiet time to review it. You could do this with your support person. You are looking for any patterns that will help you manage your anxiety.

- Are there particular days or times when you feel anxious?
- Are there common situations which make you anxious?
- Are there any common thoughts when you become anxious?
- What are your strongest and most common anxiety body signals?

The second thing we need to do is to help you identify your anxiety signals. Remember all these bodily sensations are normal, it is your body responding to what it thinks is danger. *It is not a sign something is physically wrong with you*

If you are able to spot when you are becoming anxious, by noticing your body signals, you can do something to help yourself feel better before it becomes overwhelming



Have a look at the worksheet, My Body Cues and see if you can identify which signals you experience

## Step 2. Learning to Stay Calm

Once you understand your anxiety and can spot when you are feeling anxious, the second step is to do something about it.

There are many ways we can help ourselves to feel better and to relax. There is no one way that will always work. You may already know things that you can do to feel calm, and it is worth trying lots of things and building up a toolbox of different ways to stay calm. That way, if something doesn't work on one day, you can try another.

With relaxation we know that practice makes perfect, try and build it into your routine to make sure you keep practicing, for example do it just before you go to bed.

You could also ask your support person what makes them relax and feel calm, and see if it works for you.



The Control your Anxiety handout provides a number of different ideas. Find out which work for you.

## Step 3. Identifying and challenging anxious thoughts

The third step is to help you find out more about the way you think and your worries. We all have negative, critical and worrying thoughts at times. This is normal. The difference when you are experiencing anxiety you **think like this all the time**. It becomes hard to recognize your successes or when you do cope.

You become trapped in these negative and unhelpful ways of thinking. When you are anxious, you are more likely to think that:

- You will be **unsuccessful** – “there’s no point trying I know I can’t do that”
- You will be **unable to cope** - “I won’t know what to say if my teacher asks me a question, I will go bright red”
- That **bad things will happen** – “what if I get lost” or “everyone will laugh at me”
- You will **get things wrong** - “I never get this work right”
- Other people are **negatively judging you** – “people think I look stupid”

Thoughts like these are **unhelpful**:

- They make you feel unpleasant and **increase their anxiety**
- They are demotivating and **don’t encourage** you to give things a try
- They **stop** you from living your life

To help you get out of this negative trap you need to develop more balanced ways of thinking. You may have noticed that your thoughts tumble around in your head like they are in a washing machine. You can lose hours listening to them and end up feeling very anxious. This is called ruminating. When you are ruminating you look for and listen to all the evidence that you are unsuccessful and can’t cope.

What you need to do is actively search for those **times you have been successful and coped**.

Instead of simply listening to the unhelpful thoughts that tumble around your head you need to **check them out** and see if you are seeing the whole picture.

### **A positivity journal**

To counter your tendency to focus on the unhelpful thoughts (not coping or being unsuccessful) you can keep a log of all the positive and good things you have done or been part of. Each day, identify two or three positive things that have happened. These could be examples of

- Coping with a difficult situation or task
- Facing a situation that made you feel anxious
- Having a go at something new
- Being successful (this does not have to be something major, but can be something along the lines of ‘helped someone who was lost by giving them directions’)

Because you are so used to looking for evidence of being unsuccessful, it may be really difficult at first. This is where you could call on your support person. They can help you think about your whole day and notice when things have gone well. You can ask more than one person too!

As your positive log grows it will help you realise that although things can be hard, you can be successful, you can cope and you can face your fears.



A Positivity Log is included in the accompanying resources.

## Check out the way you think

Because we hear our negative and unhelpful thoughts so often we simply believe them and don't stop to check them out. We need to train ourselves to check out what we are thinking and to discover whether there may be a more balanced and helpful way of thinking.

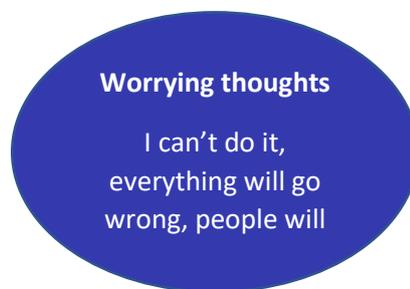


This can be done by using the Catch it, Check it, Challenge it, Change it technique. There is a worksheet in the accompanying resources to help.

1. The first step is to **Catch** the unhelpful thought that is making you feel anxious.
2. The next step is to **Check** it. Are your fears justified or are you exaggerating things? Are you blowing things up to be more than they really are? What evidence is there that your thought is right?
3. The third step is to **Challenge** it and to look for any evidence that supports and challenges this way of thinking. Is there something positive and helpful that you might have overlooked?
4. The final step is to **Change** it. On the basis of the evidence, is there a more balanced and helpful way of thinking about this?

## So how does this work?

Do you remember the thinking trap from earlier? These were the worrying thoughts Alex was having:



## Let's Catch, Check, Challenge, and Change Alex's unhelpful thoughts:

CATCH IT	CHECK IT	CHALLENGE IT	CHANGE IT
I can't do it, everything will go wrong.	Ok, last time I went out with friends it was fine in the end. We did miss the bus but it wasn't all my fault, Charlie was late getting to the meeting place. We still got into the cinema on time.	The others said I was quick thinking as I suggested catching a different bus.	I can do this, not everything will go wrong and I can think quickly if I need to.
People will laugh at me	Not everyone laughed at my idea of catching a different bus	Most people thought my idea was a good one and it worked	Most people are kind and my friends

By doing this you can learn to accept that you will feel anxious but it helps to put things in perspective.

- Things didn't go to plan for Alex but it only happened once.
- Someone else was to blame but Alex thought of a solution, the friends worked together
- Alex does have useful ideas and friends value them, even if some laugh to begin with
- This way of thinking is more balanced and helpful and reduces Alex's anxiety.

### **What would my best friend or support person say?**

Another way we can check our thinking is to ask ourselves what someone we respect or value would say if they heard our negative thoughts. Many of our thoughts stay in our heads and we don't say them out aloud or question them.



Use the What would my Best Friend/support person Say worksheet in the resource pack.

Write down the anxious thoughts. Now ask yourself to imagine what your best friend or support person would say if they heard you thinking this way. You can also ask yourself what you would say to your best friend or support person if they were thinking this.

You can also ask yourself these questions to check how accurate your negative thoughts are and to challenge them so that you can come up with a more balanced, helpful way of thinking.

- Is this thought helpful?
- Has this happened before? How many times?
- How likely is it to happen?
- What else could happen?
- Am I only focusing on the negative?
- What would I say to someone else if they were thinking this?

## **Part 3. Learning to Beat Anxiety**

### **Step 4. Face Your Fears**

The fourth step is to encourage yourself to face your fears. Instead of avoiding the things that make you anxious, there are things you can do differently to help you get your life back. By using the following techniques, you can put yourself back in charge, rather than being bullied and told what to do by anxiety.

It may be tricky at times but it can be useful to remember your goal – why you want to beat your anxiety, what it is stopping you from doing? This will motivate you to try. Once you learn to face your fears you will begin to see that:

- You can cope with anxiety
- Anxiety is not as bad as you imagine
- The anxious feelings will fade over time and you will be able to do things you used to dread.

### **Small Steps**

To make this as easy as possible it is helpful to break your fear into a series of small steps. We call this an exposure ladder. Each step gets you closer to facing your fear and realising you can do it.

If you think about a ladder, the easiest one to climb is where the steps are small and evenly placed. The key to success is to have as many steps as you like, but they shouldn't be too large or the ladder will be harder to climb.



Use the Small Steps worksheet in the resource pack and write in the first box what it is you want to do. For example, it could be to go into town for coffee with friends.

Then break this down into what small steps will help get to this goal, what needs to happen to get to your goal?

In the final box arrange the steps in order of difficulty. Put the easiest at the bottom and the hardest at the top. Your support person will be able to help with this if it gets difficult.

### **An example:**

Hania wanted to go into town with her friends. She broke the challenge into these smaller steps.

My goal (what I want to do): Meet friends for coffee in town

Step 5: meet them and reward self with large coffee and cake!

Step 4: agree where we will meet

Step 3: check how much money will need for fare

Step 2: check bus routes

Step 1: phone and invite friends



The final step is to actually do it. You have a plan of what to do from your Small Steps worksheet. You can now use the Face your Fears worksheet in the resource pack to plan how to do this.

Step 1 - Identify goal and plan your steps

Step 2 - You now know that anxious thinking is unhelpful so try and catch your unhelpful thoughts about each step.

- Once you have identified your anxious thoughts – check and challenge them.
- What evidence is there for and against them?
- What would your support person say?

Step 3 - Identify a more balanced and helpful way of thinking. You can use these thoughts to coach yourself through the step, they are your positive coping thoughts.

Step 4 - If you notice anxious feelings build up and start to feel unbearable, remember to use some of your relaxation and calming strategies.

Step 5 - As you start to relax and feel calmer, imagine yourself successfully achieving that goal, imagine how you would feel when you have completed all the steps.

Step 6 - Find a day and time to do it. Remember you may want to keep putting it off but use your support person to help and focus on achieving your goal.

Step 7 - It is really important to recognise your success and give yourself credit. Give yourself a treat and listen to your support person giving you praise.

## **Step 5. Problem Solving**

Another way to help control your anxiety is to problem solve. This is a simple way of working out what you can do to overcome a problem so that you don't worry about it anymore. This asks a series of questions to help you identify the problem and then think about the different ways you could deal with it.

STEP 1: What is the problem?

STEP 2: What are the possible solutions?

STEP 3: What are the consequences of each solution?

STEP 4: On balance what is the best solution

STEP 5: Try it

STEP 6: Did it work?



There is a problem-solving sheet in the resources.

**Example:**

**STEP 1: What is the problem?**

*I am worried about my English homework, I don't understand it and it's due in tomorrow.*

**STEP 2: What are the possible solutions?**

*I could message Alissa, she may understand*

*I could ask mum*

*I could give up*

*I could go and find the English teacher when I get into school and explain what has happened.*

**STEP 3: What are the consequences of each solution?**

*Alissa is my best friend and she is top of the English class, but I have messaged her already tonight .*

*Mum is tired and has her own work to do, it may stress her out even more*

*I really don't think I understand what I have to do, but at least if I try I can hand something in*

*The English teacher may be hard to find and it could get too late.*

**STEP 4: On balance what is the best solution**

*Phone Alissa, she is my best friend and even if she doesn't know, we can think of what to do next together.*

**STEP 5: Try it**

**STEP 6: Did it work?**

*Yes!! Alissa is brilliant and helped me understand it, but we also thought we would try and find teacher in morning to check it out.*

## Your toolbox

We hope that this booklet has given you a toolbox of ideas you can use to take back control and manage your anxiety.

Know your body  
cues

Problem solving

Take small steps

Keep a diary

Catch, check,  
challenge, change  
your anxious  
thinking

Face your fears

Problem solving

Find a support  
person talk with

## Summary

Beating anxiety will be hard work but it will be worth it.

Remember to use your goals and support person to keep you motivated.

Good luck.