What? Me Worry!?!

Module 2

Overview of Worrying

Introduction

Most clinicians and researchers agree that worrying is a central feature of generalised anxiety disorder. As we discussed in Module 1, one of the common things that people with generalised anxiety disorder experience is chronic worrying.

The aim of this module is to provide an overview of what worrying is, what triggers worrying, what keeps it going, and most importantly, how to treat it effectively.

Understanding Worrying
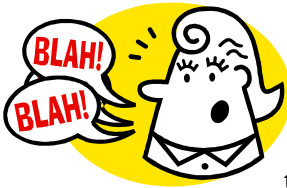
You can think of worrying as a **self-talk activity**, where we 'talk to ourselves' about possible future negative events that might happen and of which we are afraid. We discuss the event with ourselves and we think about how we might deal with it should the event happen. As such, worrying is a type of vigilance for threat, and an 'attempt' at mentally 'solving problems' that haven't yet happened. We say 'attempt' because often a good solution is not found, and people are left thinking they will not be able to cope should their worst fears happen. We say 'solving problems' because people often think that worrying is problem-solving, when in fact effective problem-solving is a very different type of activity (which you will see in Module 9).

"What If…" Worries

People with generalised anxiety are often having an internal conversation about things they fear **might** happen. In this way, worrying often occurs in the form of "What if…" questions. The questions play in your mind like a song and the words may sound like these:

"What if I can't get to my appointment on time?"
"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 something happens to my child?"
"What if my husband/wife/partner has an accident?"
"What if I get anxious during my interview?"
"What if my face turns red?"
"What if I get sick?"

As you will have noticed, the above examples of worrisome thoughts are about external things (e.g., work, family, etc) or internal physical things (e.g., illness).

What are the "What if…" questions you often ask yourself? (What external things or internal physical things do you tend to worry about?).

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What Triggers Worrying?

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 the T.V. news)
- 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)

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.

Write down any external images, information, and situations, or any internal images or "What if…" thoughts, that have triggered worrying for you.

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What Maintains Worrying?

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?"

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 they hold negative beliefs about the activity of worrying. For example, they 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 negative beliefs about worrying makes the process of worrying very distressing for you, and this will even keep your worrying going. Researchers believe that it may be these negative beliefs about worrying that are unique to people with generalised anxiety disorder.

What worries-about-worrying do you have? (What are the disadvantages of worrying?)

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Positive Beliefs About Worrying

While worriers may hold negative beliefs about worrying (i.e., that worrying is uncontrollable and harmful), they also often hold positive beliefs that worrying is beneficial and "good". It is these positive beliefs about the usefulness of worrying that 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

What positive beliefs do you hold about worrying? (What are the advantages of worrying?)

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Unhelpful Strategies

In an attempt to decrease or stop worrying in the short term, people often use certain strategies. However, in the long term, these strategies actually keep worrying going, making such strategies "unhelpful". There are two main types of unhelpful strategies.

The first type of unhelpful strategy is **avoidance**. This may take the form of avoidance of a feared outcome or avoidance of worrying itself. For example, if someone was given the opportunity to take on a new and important project at work, a person with generalised anxiety may worry "What if I can't do the job? What if I fail?" In order to avoid this feared negative outcome, they may pass the opportunity on to another colleague. An example of avoiding the act of worrying may be avoiding the television news because you know that the news tends to trigger episodes of worrying, or constantly contacting a loved one to allay fears that something bad has happened to them. This last example is known as reassurance seeking.

The problem with avoidance is that people limit their opportunity to be exposed to their worrying, and learn that the outcome isn't as bad as they thought, that worrying isn't uncontrollable or dangerous, and that there are other ways of coping besides worrying. Avoidance limits a person's opportunity to have experiences that disconfirm their worries and their beliefs about worrying. This keeps worrying going because their worries go unchallenged.

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How have you avoided feared outcomes or avoided worrying itself?

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The second type of unhelpful strategy is thought control. People with generalised anxiety often attempt unsuccessfully to control their worrisome thoughts in a number of ways. These may include trying to suppress their worries (i.e., telling themselves to "Stop worrying"), trying to reason with their worrisome thoughts (i.e., "The likelihood of these things happening is so small"), distracting themselves (i.e., focusing attention on another task) or thinking positively (i.e., "Everything will be OK"). These attempts at controlling their worries often do not work for various reasons.

For example, it is widely known that trying to suppress a thought has the opposite effect of making that thought occur more. For example, **try not to think of a <u>pink elephant</u> for the next 60 seconds and see how well you do**.
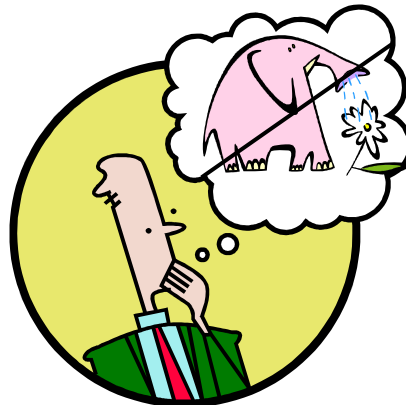
Again, trying to reason with your worries is often useless, because no matter how small the chance is of something happening, your need for certainty will not be able to tolerate this small chance, and the answer to all your reasoning attempts will always be, "But it still could happen!" These ineffective thought control strategies not only keep the worrying going because they are not good at stopping the worrisome thoughts, more importantly they fuel one of your negative beliefs about worrying – that worrying is uncontrollable.

What thought control strategies have you tried for controlling your worries?

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Treatment For Your Worrying

Let's recap and put all the information we now know about worrying together, and then have a look at how you can overcome your worrying. You can use the worksheet on page 8 to summarise all the things you have written on the previous pages in one worksheet.

When your worrying is **triggered** by something external or internal:

1) Very specific worries related to the trigger are set off, and tend to take the form of **"What if" questions**. It is likely that the fact you respond with worrying so quickly, is because you believe that at times worrying can be helpful to you. That is, you hold some **positive beliefs about worrying**.

2) However, if you keep on worrying, your worries may start to focus more on worries-about-worrying and how uncontrollable and harmful your worrying is. This is because you also hold some **negative beliefs about worrying**.

3) You experience **distressing emotions and unpleasant physical sensations** when you worry, which make you feel worse and make you believe even more that your worrying is harmful to you.

4) You engage in **unhelpful strategies** like trying to **control your worrisome thoughts**. These often don't work and will make you feel worse, making you believe even more that your worrying is uncontrollable.

5) You may engage in other **unhelpful strategies** like trying to **avoid worrying**. This may make you feel better in the short term, but in the long run it will limit your opportunity to find better ways of coping with life than worrying.

From what you now know about the process of worrying, it makes sense that to overcome worrying and generalised anxiety, you need to do three things: 1) address your beliefs about worrying; 2) deal with the specific worries you have; and 3) learn to use helpful rather than unhelpful strategies. The modules within this information package are divided into these 3 sections.

Beliefs About Worrying:

Module 3	Negative Beliefs About Worrying: "Worrying Is Uncontrollable"
Module 4	Negative Beliefs About Worrying: "Worrying Is Dangerous"
Module 5	Positive Beliefs About Worrying

Dealing With Specific Worries:

Module 6	Challenging Worries
Module 7	Letting Go Of Worries
Module 8	Accepting Uncertainty

Helpful Strategies:

Module 9	Problem-Solving
Module 10	Relaxation
Module 11	Self Management

You will notice that the next three modules (3, 4, and 5) target your negative beliefs about worrying and then your positive beliefs about worrying. Your beliefs about worrying need to be dealt with first, before dealing with your specific worries. The reason for this is that the beliefs people hold about worrying are often what distinguishes someone with normal levels of worrying, from someone with more problematic generalised anxiety. Therefore, changing these beliefs is very important in overcoming your generalised anxiety. Also, looking at your specific worries is not the best place to start, because while working on one worry may help to decrease that particular worry, it is likely you will just start worrying about something else.

It is in modules 6, 7, and 8 that your specific worries will be addressed. Two main techniques for dealing with your worries will be taught. The first is how to challenge your worries and the second is how to disengage from, or let go of, your worries. How to become more tolerant and accepting of uncertainty will also be addressed here, as your worries will often relate to this issue.
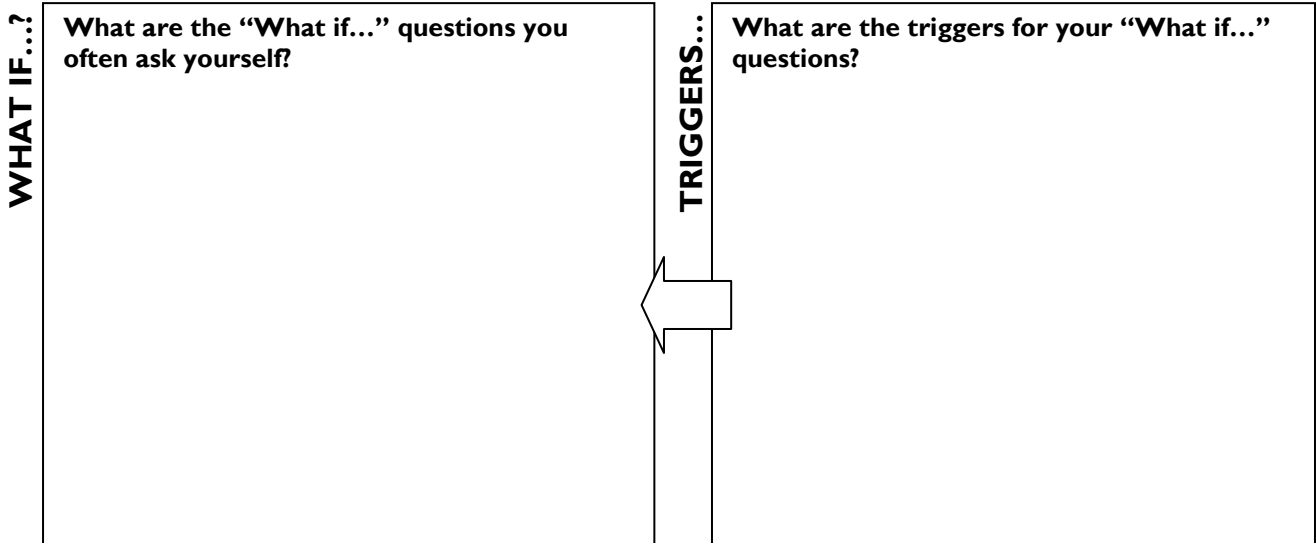
Modules 9 and 10 will teach you skills to help you with the way you respond to your worries. For example, using problem-solving skills is a more helpful way of responding to your worries than using some of the unhelpful strategies you may be used to. Also, using relaxation can be helpful in dealing with unpleasant physical sensations, like tension, that are often linked to your worrying. Finally, Module 11 will put all the helpful strategies you learn throughout this information package together in a self-management plan, which will help you maintain and improve on the gains you make.

Additional points to consider…

It is common for people using self-help materials, like this information package, to jump between sections and complete things in whatever order they like. However, the series of modules in this information package have been specifically designed to be completed in the order they appear. **It is recommended that you finish the modules in the order they appear in this information package, finishing each module before moving on to the next one in the series**. Doing this will maximise the benefits you may receive from completing the "What? Me Worry!?!" information package.

Finally, it is important for you to know that the techniques you will learn throughout the modules in this information package come from a type of treatment commonly called **'cognitive-behavioural therapy'**. This type of psychological treatment has been evaluated scientifically and shown to be effective in treating a number of psychological problems, including problematic generalised anxiety. Cognitive-behavioural therapy is aimed at changing your thinking patterns and beliefs (the cognitive part), as well as your style of behaving and the things you do (the behavioural part). This will bring about a change in how you feel and decrease your worrying and generalised anxiety.

Understanding Worrying – A Summary

WHAT IF…?

What are the "What if…" questions you often ask yourself?

TRIGGERS…

What are the triggers for your "What if…" questions?

WHAT MAINTAINS WORRYING?

Beliefs About Worrying

Negative Beliefs: What worries-about-worrying do you have?

Positive Beliefs: What are the advantages of worrying?

Unhelpful Strategies

Avoidance: How have you avoided feared outcomes or avoided worrying itself?

What thought control strategies have you tried for controlling your worries?

Module Summary

- Worrying is a primary feature of generalised anxiety

- Worrying is negative thinking dwelling on possible negative occurrences that might happen in the future. Worrying often takes the form of **"What if…"** questions

- The triggers of worrying can be external (images, thoughts, situations) or internal (images, thoughts)

- Worrying keeps going because of:

  - **Negative beliefs about worrying** – "Worrying is uncontrollable and dangerous"

  - **Positive beliefs about worry** – motivates, avoids, prevents, prepares, etc.

  - **Unhelpful strategies** – avoidance and thought control.

- The modules you will be completing to overcome your generalised anxiety will cover:

  - Negative Beliefs About Worrying ("Worrying Is Uncontrollable" & "Worrying Is Dangerous")

  - Positive Beliefs About Worrying

  - Challenging Worries

  - Letting Go Of Worries

  - Accepting Uncertainty

  - Problem-Solving

  - Relaxation

  - Self Management

- The techniques you will learn come from a type of treatment called cognitive-behavioural therapy, which is commonly used to successfully treat a variety of psychological problems.
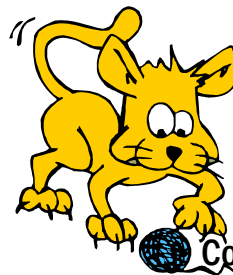
Coming up next …

In the next module, you will learn how to change one of your negative beliefs about worrying – that "Worrying is uncontrollable".

About The Modules

CONTRIBUTORS

Dr Lisa Saulsman (MPsych[1]; PhD[2])
Centre for Clinical Interventions
Paula Nathan (MPsych[1])
Director, Centre for Clinical Interventions
Adjunct Senior Lecturer, School of Psychiatry and Clinical
*   Neuroscience, The University of Western Australia*

Dr Louella Lim (DPsych[3])
Centre for Clinical Interventions
Dr Helen Correia (MApp Psych[1]; PhD[2])
Centre for Clinical Interventions

[1]*Masters of Psychology (Clinical Psychology)*   [2]*Doctor of Philosophy (Clinical Psychology)*   [3]*Doctor of Psychology (Clinical)*

Some of the materials in the modules of this information package were taken from:

Nathan, P., Smith, L., Rees, C., Correia, H., Juniper, U., Kingsep, P., & Lim, L. (2004). *Mood Management Course: A Cognitive Behavioural Group Treatment Programme for Anxiety Disorders and Depression (2nd ed.).* Perth, Western Australia: Centre for Clinical Interventions.

BACKGROUND

The concepts and strategies in the modules have been developed from evidence based psychological practice, primarily Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy (CBT). CBT for generalised anxiety is a type of psychotherapy that is based on the theory that generalised anxiety and worry is a result of problematic cognitions (thoughts) and behaviours. There is strong scientific evidence to support that cognitions and behaviours can play an important role in generalised anxiety, and that targeting cognitions and behaviours in therapy can help many people to overcome generalised anxiety. Examples of this evidence are reported in:

Barlow, D.H., Raffa, S.D., Cohen, E.M. (2002) Psychosocial treatments for panic disorders, phobias, and generalized anxiety disorder. In P.E. Nathan & J.M. Gorman (Eds.), *A Guide to Treatments that Work* (2nd ed., pp. 301-335). New York: Oxford University Press.

Gould, R.A., Safren, S.A., O'Neill Washington, D., & Otto, M.W. (2004). A meta-analytic review of cognitive-behavioural treatments. In R.G. Heimberg, C.L. Turk & D.S. Mennin (Eds.), *Generalized Anxiety Disorder: Advances in Research and Practice* (pp. 248-264). New York: Guilford Press.

REFERENCES

These are some of the professional references used to create the modules in this information package.

Barlow, D.H. (2002). *Anxiety and Its Disorders: The Nature and Treatment of Anxiety and Panic (2nd ed.).* London: Guilford Press.

Heimberg, R.G., Turk, C.L., & Mennin, D.S. (2004). *Generalized Anxiety Disorder: Advances in Research and Practice.* New York: Guilford Press.

Wells, A. (1997). *Cognitive Therapy of Anxiety Disorders: A Practice Manual and Conceptual Guide.* Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

Wells, A. (2008). *Metacognitive Therapy for Anxiety and Depression.* New York: Guilford Press.

"WHAT? ME WORRY!?!"

This module forms part of:

Saulsman, L., Nathan, P., Lim, L., & Correia, H. (2005). *What? Me Worry!?! Mastering Your Worries.* Perth, Western Australia: Centre for Clinical Interventions.

We would like to thank Mandy Nathan for the suggestion of a "worry puss" for the theme character of this Information Package