

COPING WITH ANXIETY

This booklet was produced by the Clinical Psychology Service of Northampton Community Healthcare (NHS) Trust. It forms part of a series of booklets that are designed to provide people with information that will reassure, advise and encourage them.

COPING WITH ANXIETY

This booklet has been written to help you learn about your anxiety and how to cope with it. It contains information about what anxiety is and how it affects our feelings, thoughts and behaviour. Advice and exercise are given for you to learn to help you cope with your anxiety.

The following directions may help you to get the most use out of the booklet:

1. Read the contents page.
2. Browse through the whole booklet, reading the heading and getting a “feel” for the layout.
3. We advise you to read through each section carefully. You don’t have to read through each section in order – by all means pick out the sections you’re particularly interested in first.
4. The **BEST PLAN** is to start with the **EASIEST** activities you can carry out **AT HOME** – such as the relaxation or thought-stopping exercises in Section 2.
5. It is best if you read the whole booklet to get an idea of the overall content.
6. When you feel reasonably confident that you are becoming more skilled with an exercise, then move on to another e.g. changing your behaviour. But remember that you will usually have to carry on practising an earlier stage [e.g. relaxation] whilst you’re carrying out a later stage.

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WHAT IS ANXIETY ?

Anxiety is a very common problem. About one person in ten will at some time go to a doctor seeking help because they suffer from the symptoms of anxiety. In many cases people do not use the term “anxiety” to describe what they are complaining about. They might instead complain that they are feeling nervous, jittery, tense, on edge, jumpy, wound up, etc., but all of these refer to the problem of anxiety. Anxiety is a normal healthy reaction. It happens at times of danger, or in worrying situations. When we are anxious our body’s systems speed up. This speeding up can be an advantage. It means that we are ready for action and enables us to respond quickly if we need to. Moderate amounts of anxiety actually improve our performance at difficult times. A footballer who did not get keyed up for a match or a student who did not feel some urgency before an exam could not expect to perform at their best. Anxiety becomes a problem when it occurs at times when there is no real danger or when it goes on long after stress is over. The result is a very unpleasant feeling. We might feel our heart pounding, our stomach churning and our legs go weak. Though we cannot banish anxiety completely from our lives, everyone can learn to control it.

HOW ANXIETY AFFECTS YOUR BODY:

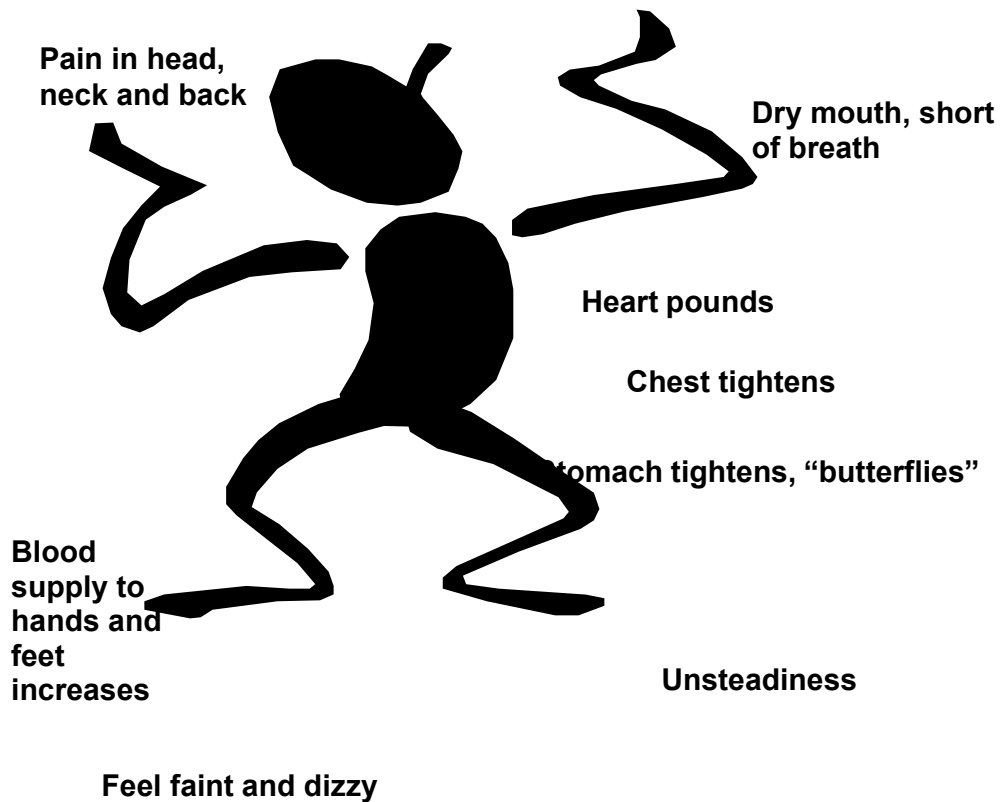
We are often aware of many physical changes that occur in our bodies when we are anxious. Some of the most common ones are:

- heart pounding [palpitations]
- breathlessness
- chest pain
- tiring easily
- dizziness
- faintness
- “butterflies” in the stomach
- headache
- pins and needles, tingling in hands and feet
- weakness
- trembling
- sweating
- dry mouth
- panic attacks
- loss of appetite
- wobbly or “heavy” legs

“My palms were sweating and I was tense. I could feel my heart pounding as I went through in my mind what was about to happen”

Body changes happen automatically when we are anxious. Sudden or severe anxiety is called panic. People with severe anxiety may feel tightness, pain or other symptoms which are very strong. Sometimes they feel so ill that they think that they might have a heart attack, or a brain tumour or another serious illness. They are quite wrong because anxiety itself does not cause any physical harm. One person with panic attacks has this description:

“Something clicks inside. I experience tingling sensations all over my body. My stomach turns over and I become very involved with physical feelings. Noise and surroundings fade away. All I experience is intense fear. I instinctively want to run. I feel unreal and my surroundings seem unreal”



Of course, not everyone experiences anxiety to this extent nor all the time.

HOW ANXIETY AFFECTS YOUR THOUGHTS:

Along with the physical changes that occur during anxiety, anxious people tend to think that something terrible is about to happen. Common fears are of "going mad" or having a heart attack. Often people think that "something" terrible is going to happen which makes us even more frightened. Anxiety problems may also cause a feeling of depression. One reason is that we feel helpless about dealing with the anxiety and that we can't cope with it. Many of the thoughts that occur when we are anxious can make the anxiety worse. One person reported that:

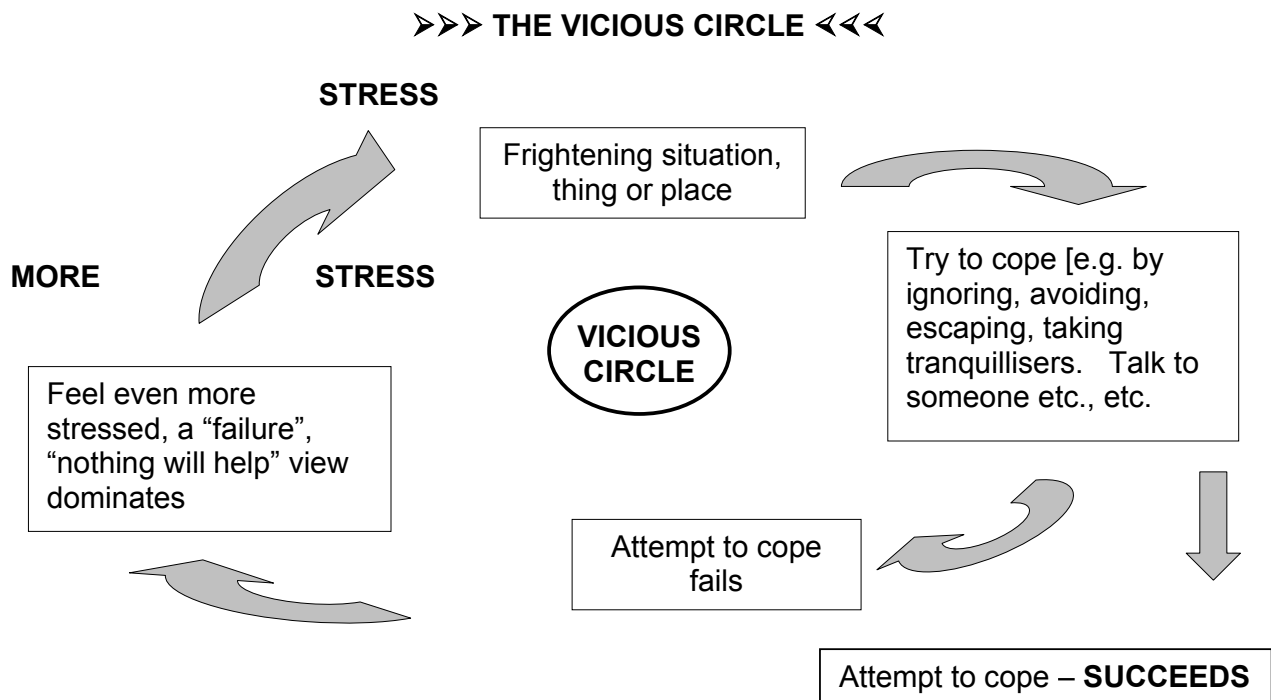
"The more I thought that I was going to have a heart attack the more afraid and anxious I got and this seemed to make me feel even worse"

Another that:

"It feels as though there is something in my throat. My mouth is dry and I can't swallow properly and then I begin to get panicky. I haven't said anything to anyone but I worry that it is cancer of the throat"

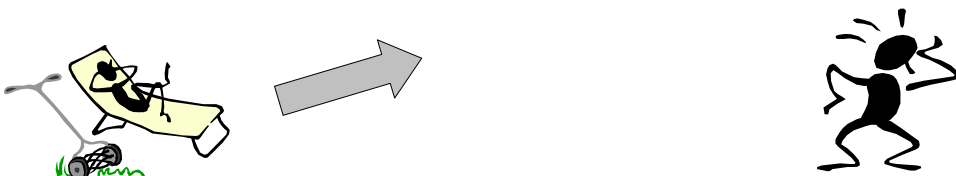
THE VICIOUS CIRCLE THAT MAINTAINS ANXIETY

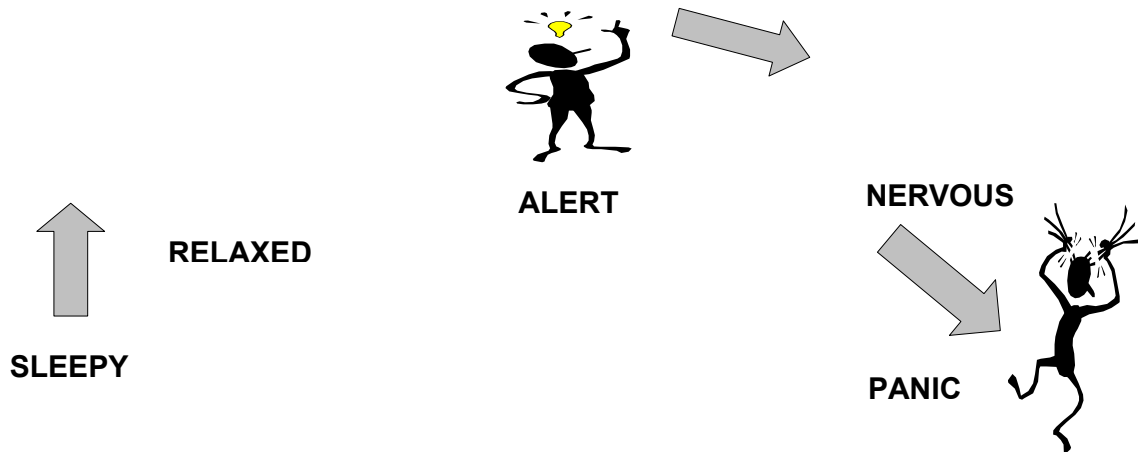
Our thoughts and feelings and behaviour tend to affect each other. This leads to a “vicious circle” in which each of them makes the other worse. We can then get them “trapped” into staying anxious. But if you break this circle you can reduce your anxiety.



HOW ANXIETY CHANGES DURING THE DAY:

You can grasp the idea of anxiety best by thinking about how you are during a typical day. There will be some things that are easy to do. They are routine and you hardly need to think about them. For example, doing some cleaning. You may even be able to think about other things while doing it. You will tend to be relaxed and even a little bit sleepy. If you then have to go shopping your level of tension will rise. As a rule you will feel much more alert once you get outside. If you go to a shop you will be more aware of the things around you. Your concentration will be clear and you wouldn't be sleepy because you have to choose what to buy. If you then went to the dentist your tension might rise even further. You might start to get some symptoms of anxiety. For instance, your legs might feel a bit wobbly and weak, or your heart pound. But once it was over you'd calm down and the symptoms would go.





Thus, anxiety is a common part of everyday life. We need a certain amount of nervous tension to do things well. But too much tension reduces our ability to cope with life.

WHAT IS A PANIC ATTACK ?

When we get very tense and anxious we can have a panic attack. This includes many symptoms of fear and is usually very unpleasant. The panic can come on automatically. The person often does not know why it starts or how to stop it. There is usually a vicious circle of thoughts, feelings and behaviour. Most people experience a panic attack in their lives. The important question to ask is “Why do some people get over it and yet others go on to develop a real problem ?” The answer is probably that people who do cope make sense of what has happened to them and don’t worry about it or shrug it off as a “one off” inexplicable event and then get on with their life. Other people worry about “What caused it ?” “Will it happen again ?” They start avoiding the situation it occurred in and so on. These people are much more likely to go on to develop a problem.

WHAT CAUSES ANXIETY ?

There is no easy answer to this question. Some people have problems with anxiety because they tend to react strongly to all sorts of things. Some people have always been anxious and others become anxious after a big upset like an accident or death.

“It started when my daughter died. I couldn’t face going out and stayed indoors for weeks and everyone helped me. After the help stopped I still didn’t go out and the longer I left it the harder it got”.

Some things like going to the dentist, going into crowded shops, interviews, exams or meeting new people make most of us anxious. In these situations anxiety can be expected and it wears off after a while. For some people anxiety builds up slowly as one problem after another adds up. The final straw may be what looks like a small thing. Other people feel puzzled that they become anxious after having coped with a lot of problems. Just when they expect to begin to feel happier they start to feel anxious.

“My father had a bad accident. I looked after him and my mother for 3 months. During that time my daughter left her husband and my youngest was diagnosed as having diabetes. I coped really well with all that but now that they are all sorted out I have started to panic at the smallest thing”.

Anxiety can develop in many different ways.

WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT ANXIETY ?

1. Understand your problem and its causes. So far this booklet has dealt with information about anxiety. Many people feel better from knowing the facts and getting rid of misunderstandings. Many people feel relief when they realise they are not mad or odd and not likely to come to harm through anxiety. You might realise that you are paying too much notice to what other people think of you. You might be trying to cram too much into each day. You might be setting standards for your children which are too high. Just knowing about anxiety and how many people have a problem at some pointing their lives should help.
 2. Deal with the causes if possible if you can spot things which are making you feel anxious – try to do something about them. If you feel anxious because of strain in your marriage, don't let it just carry on. Try to talk about it together in a calm way. If your child's behaviour makes you feel tense think how you could handle things differently. Do something about the things that are making you anxious – if you don't it's unlikely that someone else will.
 3. In the next section of this booklet we aim to set out ways of handling the changes anxiety can cause in your body, your thoughts, and your behaviour. Read the sections carefully and try to apply the advice to your own situations.
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SECTION 1:

CHANGING YOUR BODY SENSATIONS – Learning to Relax:

When you feel anxious your body often feels tense. This section aims to introduce you to a relaxation method for coping with this tension. You may wonder why you need to learn to relax. It is because relaxation isn't a state which most people achieve easily. Your day to day life may be hectic and you may not even know what it feels like to be really relaxed. The way you get rid of tension is by deliberately trying to relax when you notice the tension. The relaxation method described here will give you a way of doing this. Before you try out the method you may like to consider why you should find relaxation useful.

There are a number of reasons including:

1. When you are in a situation which makes you anxious you may become tense. Being tense can, in turn, make it harder to cope with the situation [it is certainly more difficult to think clearly if you're tense].
2. Trying to relax in a situation which makes you tense gives you something to do and so helps to distract you from your fears.
3. When you have learned to relax you may find that you don't become anxious so easily as before. This will help you build your confidence because you will actually experience less anxiety. At first it may take you quite a long time to achieve a really relaxed state but with practice you should need less time. Learning to relax is like learning skills such as driving

or typing. The more you practice the easier it becomes and eventually you do not need to think about it very much.

The method here is called **Progressive Relaxation**. To start it will help if you can find a quiet place where you can sit or lie down comfortably and know you won't be interrupted. The following exercise has to be learned carefully for it to be at all useful. This exercise teaches you to control your muscles by tensing and relaxing each muscle group. It is worth the effort of learning properly, though it will take time.

MUSCLE RELAXATION EXERCISES:

For each muscle group breathe in and then tense the muscles for a few seconds; then breathe out and relax; then focus on the relaxed muscle for a few moment. Always try to breathe slowly, calmly and in a relaxed manner. [Many people breathe too fast when they are tense].

1. Sit or lie as comfortably as possible, loosen any restricting clothing and arrange your posture so that your hands are at your side and that your legs are slightly apart. Try and feel really relaxed.
2. Now breathe in and out slowly, calmly and deeply a few times, filling your lungs with air and saying the word "relax" or "calm" as you breathe out.
3. Tense and relax your muscles in this order.
4. Now focus for a few minutes on the deep, warm, heavy and relaxed feeling all over your body

Muscle Group	Tensing Procedure
Hand and lower and upper arm	- Tense by bending your elbow making a tight fist – then relax
Repeat with other hand and arm	
Forehead	- Wrinkle up forehead and brow by lifting eyebrows – then relax
Nose and upper cheeks	- Squint eyes, wrinkle nose – then relax
Jaws and lower cheeks	- Clench jaws, bite teeth, pull corners of mouth back – then relax
Neck	- relax
Shoulders and upper back	- Pull your head forwards – [not too far] – then relax
Stomach	- Push your chest out and your shoulders back – then relax
Right thigh, then left	- Relax
Right calf and foot, then left	Pull tummy in – then relax Lift your leg and feel the thigh tighten – then relax Pull your toes back towards your shins – then relax

RELAXATION PRACTICE:

It is necessary to practice the full exercise daily until you know it very well since it is only by being very well practised that you will be able to call on your skill. Beware – it is very easy to get out of practice and then the skill will not be ready when you need it. Remember the aim is to have a relaxation skill to use every day at any time, as you begin to feel worked up and

tense. You will only become good at the relaxation exercises if you practice. No-one else can do it for you.

QUICK RELAXATION:

Once you have mastered the exercise you can then progress to a quicker version, by learning to let go of the tension without first doing the tension exercises. Feel the overall relaxation in your body for a few moments and notice the pleasant warm feelings.

MAKING THE BEST OF RELAXATION:

To make the best use of relaxation you need to:

- Practice daily. Relaxation is a skill and needs practice.
- Do the exercises in places where there are noises or other people [e.g. when you are out shopping or on a bus].
- Use the things you have learned to help you relax in situations you find difficult.
- Use parts of the relaxation exercises wherever you are. Slow down, speak slowly, relax your shoulders and arms and most important breathe slowly and deeply
- Develop a more relaxed lifestyle. Do things more calmly. One side-effect of learning this relaxation method is that you will improve your sleep. Some people with insomnia find relaxation helps them sleep.

Breathing Exercises:

Some people find that their breathing goes fast and shallow as they become more tense. This will make you feel light-headed, dizzy and less able to cope. If you notice this it will pay to practice these breathing exercises.

- Take complete breaths in which every part of the lungs is filled with air.
- Breathe in slowly and deeply, pause for a moment holding the air in the lungs and then let the breath out slowly.
- As you breathe out say “relax” or “calm”.
- After a moments pause repeat this.
- Do this several times and be sure to do it as slowly as possible.
- This should last just about a couple of minutes, taking about 7 seconds each time you breathe out.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU PANIC ?

Panic [sudden or severe anxiety] happens to many people from time to time. It is important to know how to handle panic.

- Remind yourself that panic won't cause physical harm, and that it always fades away if you stay as calm as possible.
- Stay where you are. Never rush out of a room or a shop when you feel panic.
- Slow down, if possible sit or stand still.
- Slow your breathing. Breathe out slowly and deeply. Concentrate on the breathing movements.
- Distract yourself. Try to get your mind off feelings of panic. If you panic remember that you can deal with it.

SECTION 2

CHANGING YOUR UNWANTED THOUGHTS:

Often your fearful thoughts may appear to arise on their own, crowding your mind with unwanted ideas. The aim of this section is to teach you how to get rid of your negative thoughts and replace them with positive ones. Although the method outlined here is amazingly simple, it really does work for many people. Once again you will need to practice this thought-changing technique regularly to gain control over your own thoughts. Here are the basic steps you will need to take:

Step 1: Identifying Negative Thoughts

Think about your thinking ! First you must identify the thoughts and images which make you anxious. These thoughts are unhelpful and may also be untrue and they SELDOM LEAD TO USEFUL ACTION. Here are some examples of how they can be challenged and changed to accurate, helpful thoughts.

Inaccurate – Unhelpful Thoughts:	Accurate – Helpful Thoughts:
I am going to be sick	If I breathe slowly and calmly I will not be sick
I must have a brain tumour	This is only a headache and I know that many people get headaches. I know it's very unlikely to be a tumour as I've had a full medical examination in the last year
I am going crazy/I am stupid	I feel like this because I am in a situation that I usually avoid. I know that other people don't feel like this but I need to be strong and continue to learn to handle my anxiety, not thinking about how stupid I feel; but how good it is that I am on the road to recovery
I am going to scream	If I keep thinking about staying calm and relaxed, I don't need to scream
Everyone will stare at me	Not everyone can be staring at me. People may be looking at me but I don't need to let that affect how I feel and behave. After all, I have as much right to be here as they do
Nobody likes me	I am going to learn to get over my anxiety. I really do want to get better. I don't want to stay like this for the rest of my life.
I could never go out on my own	I used to go out on my own. I am going to keep trying to and not give up even if it's just a little step at a time
I could never learn to drive a car	Maybe it is too much at the moment to learn to drive a car. I can use a bus or taxi to travel around on and as I start to learn how to cope with my anxiety I could book

a lesson with an understanding instructor and see how I am

The lift will get stuck

This lift goes up and down so many times each day without getting stuck and I know that it is regularly serviced. Even if it does get stuck there is an emergency button I can press to get help so it wouldn't be the end of the world

You may also imagine frightening scenes. For example, you might picture yourself fainting or being attacked by a dog. These images are just as inaccurate and unhelpful for you as bad thoughts. To help you monitor your thoughts you could try keeping a diary for a few days or a week and write down some of the negative, unhelpful thoughts you have. In particular you need to be aware of the thoughts which make you anxious.

You can also try to rate how anxious you feel at the time by using the 0 – 5 point scale below:

Date	Time	Where I was	What I was doing	What I was thinking	Anxiety Rating
					0 = None
					1 = Slight
					2 = Moderate
					3 = Severe
					4 = Very Severe
					5 = Most Severe

Now you have made a list of your thoughts and images you are ready to challenge them.

STEP 2 : Challenging your Negative Thoughts:

Go back through your list and try asking yourself the two questions below about each thought:

1. Is the thought accurate ?

Ask yourself "What evidence have I that this thought is correct ?" Often there are logical flaws in the way people think. For example, often people exaggerate. You might be thinking "No-one likes me" or "Everyone is looking at me". Just because the statements might be true for one or two people doesn't mean that you can OVERGENERALISE to everyone. Sometimes we try to make things sound worse than they really are. For example, you might start to think "Wouldn't it be awful/unbearable if"

This is called "catastrophic" thinking and many people who have anxiety do a lot of it !

2. Is the thought Helpful ?

Even if your thoughts are quite accurate are they helpful ? If not, then there is no point in letting them into your mind. Unhelpful thoughts are mostly self-defeating. For example, whenever you think "I can't do something" the chances are you will simply give up trying. Then you may never find out if you really can succeed. Once again, try to replace all unhelpful thoughts with helpful ones. Instead of thinking "I can't" think "I can". Each time you challenge

a negative thought write down a positive thought to replace it. Now you should have a list of constructive thoughts. These should be accurate and helpful and above all should help you to reach your targets. [You may find that calling them “AH” thoughts helps you remember – test each thought for its Accuracy and Helpfulness]. You will need this list when you start to practice thought-stopping in real life situations. The aim is first of all to learn a technique for controlling your thoughts. Finally you should be able to apply the method to real life situations.

Step 3 : Practising the Thought-Stopping Techniques on your Own:

Your goal is to make the technique work in real life situations.

First you must perfect your technique by regular practice and then you can move on to real life application.

1. First sit in a quiet comfortable place. You can close your eyes if it helps.
2. While you are relaxed make yourself think some of the thoughts/images you have listed that usually flood into your mind against your will and make you anxious. Concentrate hard.
3. Let these thoughts and images build up until you start to feel anxious.
4. Now shout aloud “stop”.
5. Follow this command with a short time of relaxation [See section 1]. Use relaxation techniques that you have practised and which work for you. You may like to voice a command to yourself like “relax” or “be calm”.
6. Wait until you are relaxed again.
7. Repeat the above exercise but this time say the “stop” command and the “relax” command words softly.
8. Wait until you are relaxed again.
9. Repeat the exercise again only this time just say “stop” or “relax” to yourself in your mind.

The idea is that you start to associate a flood of unwanted thoughts with a command to end them and with relaxation rather than anxiety.

If you practice regularly you should find that you will start to relax as soon as you say “stop” in your mind.

The technique is very simple and providing you practice daily you should soon build up some control over your unwanted thoughts.

You also of course should practice thinking the more accurate and helpful thoughts from the list you produced.

Try to set aside about 15 minutes twice a day for a week or two at times when you aren't experiencing a problem.

Step 4 : Applying Thought-Stopping:

Up till now you have practised by MAKING yourself think unwanted thoughts and then stopping them. From now on you will be doing the same thing, only this time you will be controlling the thoughts which flood into your mind in real life situations.

Use your thought-stopping techniques WHENEVER an unwanted thought gets in your way. In real life situations it may also be useful to replace each negative thought or image with a positive one.

Now you can use the list of positive thoughts that you made for yourself in Step 2. Each time you stop a bad thought try to relax and think one of the good thoughts in its place. The aim is to be CONSTRUCTIVE not SELF-DESTRUCTIVE in your thinking.

COPING WITH SET BACKS:

Sometimes in the first few weeks of using thought-stopping the target problems may appear to get worse. This is to be expected because forced practice at first makes you concentrate on the negative thoughts. However, continued practice should overcome this and then you should be more likely to make steady progress.

“Just when I have started to make progress and things were going well I had a set back and I was back to square one. I needed help from my husband to start again but I soon made up the ground I had lost and I’m still going forward. I still have one or two set backs but I keep working at it”

SECTION 3:

CHANGING YOUR BEHAVIOUR:

Making progress sometimes means doing things you find hard to do. Problems often go on because it is easier to allow them to continue rather than to change. This is why it is helpful to make a clear plan for changing things. Your plan should probably include the following steps:

- Pinpoint the actions you want to change. For instance, do you avoid meeting people, speaking up for yourself, or carrying drinks in front of other people because your hands shake? If so, these are activities you must actually plan to increase.
- Pinpoint the situations that make you anxious. Notice the places which make you most anxious or which you often avoid. To get over your anxiety you must stop avoiding.
- Begin with something easy. Face up to the things that make you anxious in a gradual way by starting with something easy.
- Practice regularly and often. Plan things which can be faced at least once a day. The more often you face them the most quickly you will progress.
- Let friends and relatives help. Explain what you are doing. Friends and relatives who show interest can be encouraging and can help prevent backsliding. In the early stages of your plan they may go with you as you face difficult activities.
- Check how you are doing. Use the diary of your activities to help you notice the progress you have made.
- Move and breathe slowly. Use the relaxation exercises you have learned.

- Make gradual progress. When you feel more comfortable with your first step choose another which is slightly more difficult. Progress in small steps by tackling activities or places which are gradually more difficult.
- Keep going. You will probably be tempted to miss something you have planned when you feel anxious or ill. You may find yourself making excuses. It is vital to face difficulties however you feel.

WHAT TO DO IF THINGS ARE NOT GOING WELL:

Three things which may help are:

- Take smaller steps
- Get more help from other people in planning and doing the things you find difficult
- Spend more time on relaxation and doing enjoyable things. Treat yourself. Make a point of treating yourself when you have made some progress.

Remember that when you face difficult situations you may find that you still feel anxious for a while. Overcoming avoidance and changing the way you feel takes time. If you carry on with your plan your feelings of anxiety will lessen. Make a plan to do things you are avoiding.

- Work out what you find hard to do
- Start with something easy
- Keep going – and going – and going

SUMMARY OF MAIN POINTS:

1. Anxiety problems are very common. About one person in ten sees a doctor about them
2. Anxiety can be very unpleasant and even distressing affecting how we feel, think and behave
3. Anxiety symptoms are not physically harmful, although if someone lets the problem continue for years that person may be more likely to develop some physical problems eventually
4. If you are prepared to help yourself your anxiety problems can probably be reduced or even overcome
5. Understanding your problem helps
6. Deal with the causes of your anxiety if you can
7. You can learn ways of calming yourself and thinking clearly
8. It is helpful to make a plan to stop avoiding things you find difficult
9. No matter how much help other people give you, the fact remains that most of it is up to you

This booklet was revised on 9th December 2003