



What? Me Worry!?!

Module 3

Negative Beliefs About Worrying: “Worrying Is Uncontrollable”

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Introduction

Ask yourself this question: *if you believed you had control over your worrying, how much would your worrying bother you?* Chances are, you wouldn't feel as bad if you thought you were in control of your worrying, as opposed to thinking that your worrying is in control of you. So in this module we will look at changing your beliefs that:

“I have no control over my worrying”
“Once I start worrying I can't stop”
“My worrying is uncontrollable”
“My worrying will never end”
“My worrying controls me”
“I can't do anything to stop my worrying”

Changing Your Belief

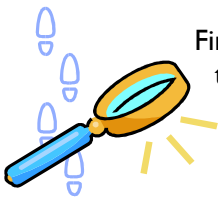
Before we start changing your belief that worrying is uncontrollable, we need to know how much you believe it. How convinced are you that your worrying is beyond your control? Do you believe it fully and whole-heartedly? Do you mostly believe it? Half the time? Occasionally? Or maybe this is not a belief you even hold? Even if you think you do not hold this belief, we encourage you to still work through this module to be sure it is not a belief that is lurking at the back of your mind without you realising. Chances are, you can move on quickly from this module to the next.

How much do you believe that your worrying is uncontrollable?

(Circle the percentage that best describes the strength of your belief)

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

To change your belief that your worrying is uncontrollable, you need to do two things.



Firstly, you need to **challenge** or dispute your belief. That means taking apart the belief that you can't control your worrying, by evaluating if it really is accurate and true, and examining what evidence you base your belief on. In this way you will be like a detective, trying to get to the facts of whether worrying really is uncontrollable.

Secondly, you need to **experiment** with your belief. That means doing things to see if worrying really is uncontrollable. If you are able to do things that show your belief isn't true – that in fact you can control your worrying – it is going to be hard to hold on to your belief. In this way you will be like a scientist with a prediction that worrying is uncontrollable, which needs to be tested.

Challenging Your Belief

Below is a list of questions you can ask yourself to challenge whether your belief that worrying is uncontrollable is really true. By using these questions you will become a detective, examining the evidence for and against your belief. An example is given below of how to use these questions to challenge your belief, and on page 4 you will find a worksheet to help you do this for yourself.

Evidence For

- What makes you think worrying is uncontrollable?
- What's the evidence for your belief?
- Is the evidence for your belief good/solid/reliable?
- Is there another way you could view the evidence for your belief?



Evidence Against

- Is there any evidence that goes against your belief?
- Have there been times when your worrying has been interrupted by something that has distracted you (e.g., phone rings, having to interact with someone)? What does this experience tell you about your worrying being uncontrollable?
- Have there been times when you normally would have worried about something, but couldn't because you had to do something else? What does this experience tell you about your worrying being uncontrollable?
- Have you ever tried to properly postpone your worrying (that is, not suppress it, but instead allow yourself to have a worrisome thought, and decide not to worry about it at that particular moment)? If you have done this, what does this tell you about your worrying being uncontrollable? If you haven't done this, how do you truly know your worrying is uncontrollable?
- Does your worrying stop eventually? How can this be if it is uncontrollable? Shouldn't it just go on forever if it can't be controlled?

EXAMPLE:

Belief: "My worrying is uncontrollable"	
Evidence For	Evidence Against
<p><i>When I tell myself not to think about something, I still keep worrying, so it must be uncontrollable.</i> [I guess what I am really doing is suppressing my thoughts, which just makes them come back worse. It is possible that the strategy I am using is wrong, rather than my worrying actually being uncontrollable.]</p> <p><i>It just feels uncontrollable, therefore it must be.</i> [This isn't very solid evidence that my worrying is beyond my control. Just because I feel it is true, isn't really evidence that it actually is true.]</p>	<p><i>Things do happen during my day that naturally interrupt my worrying.</i> [My worrying can't be uncontrollable if something can interrupt it. If it were uncontrollable it would keep going regardless of things happening around me.]</p> <p><i>There have been times when I haven't worried, because I have been too busy doing something else.</i> [My worrying can't be uncontrollable if being busy can stop it from happening.]</p> <p><i>I have only ever tried to suppress my worrying, but never tried to postpone it.</i> [I don't truly know if it is uncontrollable if I haven't used the right strategy to try and control it.]</p> <p><i>My worrying does eventually stop, either when I have run out of steam, or feel I have worried all I can and I am prepared.</i> [My worrying can't be uncontrollable if it doesn't actually go on forever.]</p>

Challenging Your Belief

Belief: <i>My worrying is uncontrollable</i>	
Evidence For	Evidence Against

Experimenting With Your Belief

Now it's time to do a bit of experimenting with your belief that worrying is uncontrollable. Like any good scientist, if you have a prediction about something, the best thing to do is to conduct an experiment to see if it is true.



You will have noticed in the previous example for challenging your belief that a distinction was made between suppressing thoughts, and postponing worrying. Remember in Module 2 you did an experiment where you were asked to suppress a thought:

Try not to think of a pink elephant for the next 60 seconds.

Try it again right now!

Chances are you can't, and thoughts of pink elephants keep popping into your head.

Suppressing worrisome thoughts means trying to get all thoughts related to whatever you are worried about out of your mind – trying not to think about **any** of it. However, doing this is just not possible, as the pink elephant activity will have shown you.

Postponing worrying is something different. Postponing worrying means that it is alright for an initial worrisome thought to be in your mind (e.g., “What if I fail my exam?”), but you make a decision not to ‘chase’ the thought any further at that particular time. Not chasing the worrisome thought further means that you don't try to anticipate the worst or run scenarios and solutions related to your initial thought through your head over and over again (e.g., “It will be a disaster, I will be a failure, I will get kicked out of uni, I won't be able to find a job, maybe I should pull out of my course,” etc). Instead, you postpone your worrying until a later time. Can you see the difference between suppressing thoughts and postponing worrying?

It makes sense that if you are able to postpone worrying, then your worrying can't be uncontrollable, and this belief is not true.

Experiment: Postpone Worrying

Everyday over the next week, try to postpone your worrying. Here's what to do:

- Pick a ‘worry period’. This is a set time, place, and length of time to do all your worrying. Plan when, where, and for how long you will do all your worrying. Try and keep your worry period the same everyday (e.g., 6pm, dining room, 20mins) and don't do your worrying in bed or before you go to sleep
- When you notice yourself worrying about something or other during the day, list your worries **briefly** (in a couple of words only)
- Make the decision not to worry about it then and there, but save the worry for your set worry period. Bring your attention back to the present and what it was you were doing, reassuring yourself that you will deal with your worries later
- When you get to your worry period, only worry about the things you've listed if you feel you **must** (you don't have to worry about them if they no longer bother you, or if they no longer seem relevant to you). If you do need to worry, only worry for the set amount of time specified.

Before you start the experiment, complete the worksheet on page 7 in as much detail as you can and then continue filling it out as you go along.

Instructions for completing the worksheet:

First, write down the details of your worry period (start time, end time, and place). Then, write down what you think will happen when you try to postpone your worrying. After that, rate how confident you are of your ability to postpone your worrying (between 0 and 10).

Now just give the experiment a go and see what happens.

For each of the next 7 days, fill in the day and the date, list what your worries were for the day, and underline the things you did worry about during your worry period. Record what actually happened during the day (e.g., did you manage to stop chasing worrisome thoughts and to postpone worrying?). Rate how much of the time during the day you were able to postpone worrying.

Then, compare what you predicted would happen with what actually happened on those 7 days. Typically people predict that they won't be able to postpone their worrying, and that their worrying will be out of control when they try this new strategy. Often people are surprised that they are actually able to postpone their worrying, and experience a sense of control. What did you find?

While postponing worrying is used here as an experiment to tackle your belief about worrying being uncontrollable, it is also just a really good strategy to stop your worries interfering in your day-to-day life. So, try to continue with the postponing worrying activity indefinitely. A later experiment recommended in this information package may require that you stop the postponing worrying experiment for a certain period of time. But unless another experiment gets in the way of you postponing your worrying, treat this technique as your new way of dealing with worrying generally, and use it for as long as worrying is still a problem for you.

Now that you have challenged and experimented with your belief that worrying is uncontrollable:

Rate again how much you believe your worrying is uncontrollable?

(Circle the percentage that best describes the strength of your belief)

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

If there is some weakening (however small) of your belief that your worrying is uncontrollable compared to what it was at the start of this module, congratulate yourself. If there's no change yet, that's okay. Remember, changing your beliefs takes time and persistence. Just going over the evidence for and against your belief once or experimenting with your belief once may not be enough. These are ongoing strategies you can practice until the evidence for your belief is weak, the evidence against your belief is strong, and you are successfully able to postpone worrying. A good gauge of when you have done enough work on this belief may be when your belief is relatively weak—lets say only 20%.

Postpone Worrying Experiment

My Worry Period:

Start Time:	End Time:	Place:
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Prediction (What do you think will happen if you postpone worrying?)

How confident are you of your ability to postpone worrying?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
I cannot postpone worrying at all				I am moderately confident I can postpone worrying					I am extremely confident I can postpone worrying	

Day: Date:	___ day	___ day	___ day	___ day	___ day	___ day	___ day
List of worries during the day							
What happened? (Did you stop chasing the worrisome thoughts? Did you postpone worrying?)							
How much of the time were you able to postpone worrying? (0% to 100%)							

Compare prediction with what happened

Module Summary

- Negative beliefs regarding worrying being uncontrollable make your worrying worse
- To change these beliefs you can:
 - Challenge them – look at the evidence for and against the beliefs
 - Experiment with them – set up a **postpone worrying** experiment to see if worrying really is uncontrollable
- In order to change your belief that worrying is beyond your control, you need to persist with both techniques until:
 - The evidence for your belief is weak
 - The evidence against your belief is strong
 - You are successfully able to postpone worrying
- Once you have achieved these three things ask yourself:
 - **What does all this say about my worrying?**
 - It should show you that your worrying is in fact **controllable**.



Coming up next ...

In the next module you will learn how to change another of your negative beliefs about worrying – that “Worrying is dangerous”.

About The Modules

CONTRIBUTORS

Dr Lisa Saulsman (MPsych¹; PhD²)

Centre for Clinical Interventions

Paula Nathan (MPsych¹)

Director, Centre for Clinical Interventions

Adjunct Senior Lecturer, School of Psychiatry and Clinical

Neuroscience, The University of Western Australia

Dr Louella Lim (DPsych³)

Centre for Clinical Interventions

Dr Helen Correia (MApp Psych¹; PhD²)

Centre for Clinical Interventions

¹Masters of Psychology (Clinical Psychology)

²Doctor of Philosophy (Clinical Psychology)

³Doctor 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.

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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!?!”

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