

Anxiety Management, Week #3

Calming Your Mind

Everyone worries at times, and it is very natural to have occasional self-doubts. However, when those worries or doubts become firmly embedded in your thoughts, they make your anxieties soar. When worries repeat themselves over and over, they form what experts call automatic negative thoughts: ANTs (Beck), and you begin to act as if the fears are *truly* happening. A pathway is eventually formed in your brain which becomes the default, set to negativity.

Learning to manage thought patterns is a huge part of managing anxiety. The mind and body are intricately connected. Negative thoughts or worries cause you to tense up physically. Physical tension causes your mind to activate the fears in the emotional center of your brain and shut down the logical part of your brain responsible for self-calming. Both lead to anxious or self-defeating behaviors, which begins a downward spiral. It is essential to find a way to catch, control, challenge, and change these automatic negative thoughts.

While calming the anxious mind is a necessary component of managing anxiety, creating different thoughts is not easy or quick. Just as you would practice an instrument or a sport to improve, you must practice these skills over and over. Think of it as developing cognitive muscle. You are creating new pathways in your brain.

When you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change. ~ Wayne Dyer

Review: How do you assess your level of anxiety? Catch. It. Early.



What are your early warning signs of anxiety? _____

On average, what was your level of anxiety this week? _____

What helped lower your anxiety this past week? _____

What did you do differently this past week? And what were the results? _____

What strategies did you use to interrupt physical anxiety this past week? _____

What did you notice about times when you were *not* anxious? _____

What challenges to reducing anxiety did you encounter this week? _____

The four main steps in changing negative talk and calming worries are:

● **Catch it** ● **Control it** ● **Challenge it** ● **Change it.**

1. **Catch it.** It is essential to notice when your thoughts began to focus on worries or fears. We don't often even realize when anxious thoughts take over. Perhaps you have a continual negative inner commentary you are unaware of. This is why they are called "*automatic* negative thoughts." Start paying close attention to your thoughts. Imagine you are doing an experiment on yourself and the first step is to simply *observe* thoughts during times of anxiety. Jot some of them down each day. Speculate on the power of these thoughts. How do they impact your confidence? Your relationships? Your anxiety? Your academic performance? Notice. Notice. Notice.
2. **Control it.** Tell yourself to **STOP**. Say it loudly and firmly and often (silently or, when alone, aloud). Picture a stop sign, or a wall, or a railroad crossing gate coming down, or an image of your choice. You want to short-circuit that negative thought and keep your brain from looping in the same old anxious manner. In order to do this, you must also relax your body. Focus on your breath. Breathe from your belly and notice and then relax any tense muscles.
3. **Challenge it.** Examine the evidence. Is your statement *true*? Does it reflect the reality of the situation or is the statement based on your fears? Is your thought *helpful*? Does it motivate you to get started on a project you are avoiding or to have a necessary conversation you are dreading? Is your thought *kind*? Or are you talking to yourself in a way you would never, in a million years, speak to a friend? Fears must be separated from reality. When thoughts are challenged, they start to lose their power.
At times, it can be helpful to carry out your fear to that worst case scenario you are imagining. And then remind yourself that if your fear *does* come to pass, you *will* survive. You *will* figure out what to do. You *will* handle it.* Also ask yourself if you are trying to control a situation that is beyond your control. "You can't control the river." Nor can you control other people.
4. **Change it.** What would be a more accurate thought? What would be more helpful? What would be more kind? What would be a calmer thought which will lead to calmer emotions and actions? Remember your thoughts lead your emotions and your actions. The goal is not to use naïve idealistic thinking, but rather realistic thinking. Anxiety most often arises when we engage in unrealistic thinking.

*Note: While this strategy can be helpful on occasion, it is not recommended as a regular practice.

The greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another. ~
William James

Include other senses. As we know from modern learning theories, we learn best when we combine learning modalities. Try:

- Tossing a ball back and forth to yourself or squeeze a stress ball when you use calming self-talk.
- Try singing it. For example, "I can do it" can replace "hallelujah" from the Hallelujah Chorus.
- Take a "power stance" with feet hip width apart, shoulder's back, and hands on hips. Breathe from your belly and state your new cognition.
- Take a break from worrying and do a quick task you can easily succeed at. For example, tidy your work space or wash the dishes. Come back and state your new thought.
- Choose an inspirational song with the message you wish to tell yourself. Take a break and listen to it.
- Take a brief fast walk while you state your reframe.
- Make yourself a cup of decaffeinated tea. Hold the cup. Notice the warmth and aroma and repeat your new cognition.
- Try writing. Write down your fear. Cross it out and replace with more realistic language.
- Take a bath or shower and imagine the stress washing away while you store up your new way of thinking.

Now to start practicing...

1. Identify an anxious thought. _____
2. What impact does this thought have on your life? _____

3. How can you stop or control it? _____
4. What can you say to yourself to challenge it? _____
5. What can you change it to? _____

Setting Goals:

For the next week, I will continue to _____

For the next week, I will start to _____

I will assure I practice this by _____

Another strategy I plan to try later is _____

Keep picturing yourself in the future with less anxiety. What are you doing differently? How are you thinking differently? _____

At the end of each day, identify what lowered your anxiety during the day.

At the end of each day, remember the times you were *not* anxious that day.

As a single footstep will not make a path on the earth, so a single thought will not make a pathway in the mind. To make a deep physical path, we must walk again and again. To make a deep mental path, we must think over and over the kinds of thoughts we want to dominate our lives. ~ Henry David Thoreau

Please join us for another class!

Week #1: Understanding Anxiety: A Self-Assessment

Week #2: Calming Your Body

Week #3: Calming Your Mind

Week #4: Creating a Lifestyle for Managing Stress

Central ideas from Wehrenberg, M. (2008). *The 10 Best-Ever Anxiety Management Techniques*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Eunie Alsaker, LICSW, CT, Winona State University Counseling & Wellness Services, ealsaker@winona.edu

The Wolf You Feed

An elder Native American was teaching his grandchildren about life. He said to them, "A fight is going on inside me...it is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One wolf represents fear, anxiety, anger, envy, regret, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, and lies.

The other stands for joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, kindness, empathy, generosity, compassion, and truth."

"This same fight is going on inside you, and inside every other person, too," he added.

The Grandchildren thought about it for a minute and then one child asked his grandfather, "Which wolf will win?"



The old Cherokee simply replied, "The one you feed."

We indeed feed one of these two wolves with the thoughts we choose. Notice your thoughts and evaluate them. Do your thoughts lead to feelings of confidence, compassion, and calm? Or are you running yourself down by focusing on your fears? **Thoughts are powerful.** They influence your behavior and your attitude. They influence how to approach a task. They influence what you believe you are capable of. They influence how you treat people and how you allow yourself to be treated. They certainly influence how you treat yourself. Choose, or feed, wisely!

Story taken from: <http://discuss.epluribusmedia.net/content/wolf-you-feed>