

What do you think...?

In this workshop, we will be learning new skills everyone can use in situations which cause them to worry or to feel overly stressed, in order to take control and to feel better. It is important for me to add that this is a *skills-building* workshop, and not intended to be therapeutic.

Here are some typical scenarios in which people often say things to themselves which are not accurate, and which cause them to worry:

1. Have you sent a text message to a loved one who normally responds relatively quickly, and they don't reply right away?

Where does your mind go?

2. If you find yourself stuck in traffic and realize you might be very late for an appointment, do you get anxious? What goes through your mind?

3. Have you ever been in a conversation with someone and become upset because of something they said, you worry about it, and then you learn later that what you "heard" was not what they meant at all? What do you say to yourself that causes the discomfort when you first react?

4. Have you worried a lot about what would happen if your spouse or partner were to die? What goes through your mind?

5. Do you often avoid standing up for yourself? What do you tell yourself in those situations that prevents you from speaking up?

6. If you wake up with a few symptoms of an illness, a sore throat, congestion, or fever, or if you suddenly develop a rash - where does your mind take you?

7. If someone close to you does or says something that upsets you, do you address the issue directly about it or do you **avoid the confrontation**? Do you have trouble standing up for yourself? What do you think you say to yourself that stops you?

8. Do you have trouble setting boundaries? Do you have trouble saying no and end up doing something you don't want to, which leads to you feeling regretful/resentful? What do you fear will happen if you say no? Are you a people-pleaser? What goes through your mind that stops you from saying no when you really want to?

9. Do you have trouble making decisions? Do you sometimes make them based less on the reality of the situation and more on what you think might happen or on what someone else thinks? Do you tend to second-guess yourself? What do you say to yourself in those situations?

10. Do you think it's selfish to take care of yourself before taking care of others? What makes you think so?

11. Do you often worry more about others' feelings than your own? Do you make decisions based on that? Do you know why - what you say to yourself in these situations?

12. Do you have trouble sleeping the night before an early appointment, houseguests arriving, or some other important event? What goes through your mind as you try to fall asleep?

13. When you are in the middle of something you really don't want to do, and there's a long way to go before you can stop (i.e., in the middle of a hard workout, on a long car drive or flight), what goes through your mind?

14. Do you worry about your memory? What do you say to yourself when you forget someone's name, misplace something, or simply forget anything you think you should know?

15. Do you worry about having enough money as you grow older?

10 Differences Between Worry and Anxiety

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-squeaky-wheel/201603/10-crucial-differences-between-worry-and-anxiety>

1. We tend to experience worry in our heads and anxiety in our bodies.

Worry tends to be more focused on thoughts in our heads, while anxiety is more visceral in that we feel it throughout our bodies.

2. Worry tends to be specific while anxiety is more diffuse.

We worry about getting to the airport on time (specific threat) but we feel anxious about traveling—a vaguer, more general concern.

3. Worry is verbally focused while anxiety includes verbal thoughts and mental imagery.

This difference is important, as emotional mental images such as those associated with anxiety provoke a much greater cardiovascular response than emotional verbal thoughts (such as those associated with worry). This is another reason why we experience anxiety throughout the body.

4. Worry often triggers problem solving but anxiety does not.

Worry can lead us to think about solutions and strategies for dealing with a given situation. Anxiety is more like a hamster wheel that spins us around but doesn't lead us to productive solutions. Indeed, anxiety's diffuse nature makes it less amenable to problem solving.

5. Worry creates mild emotional distress, anxiety can create severe emotional distress.

Anxiety is simply a much more powerful and hence, disruptive and problematic psychological state than worry.

6. Worry is caused by more realistic concerns than anxiety.

If you're concerned about getting fired because you did really poorly on a project, you're worried. If you're concerned about getting fired because your boss didn't ask about your child's piano recital, you're anxious.

7. Worry tends to be controllable, anxiety much less so.

By problem solving and thinking through strategies to deal with the cause of our worry, we can diminish it greatly. We have much less control over our anxiety, as it is much harder to "talk ourselves out of it."

8. Worry tends to be a temporary state but anxiety can linger.

Once we resolve the issue worrying us, our worry diminishes and disappears. Anxiety can linger for long periods of time and even jump from one focus to another (e.g., one week we feel anxious about work, then about our health, then about our kids...).

9. Worry doesn't impact our professional and personal functioning; anxiety does.

No one takes a sick day to sit and worry about whether their teenager will do well on their exams. But anxiety can make us feel so restless, uncomfortable, and incapable of concentrating that we might literally feel too distressed to work.

10. Worry is considered a normative psychological state while anxiety is not.

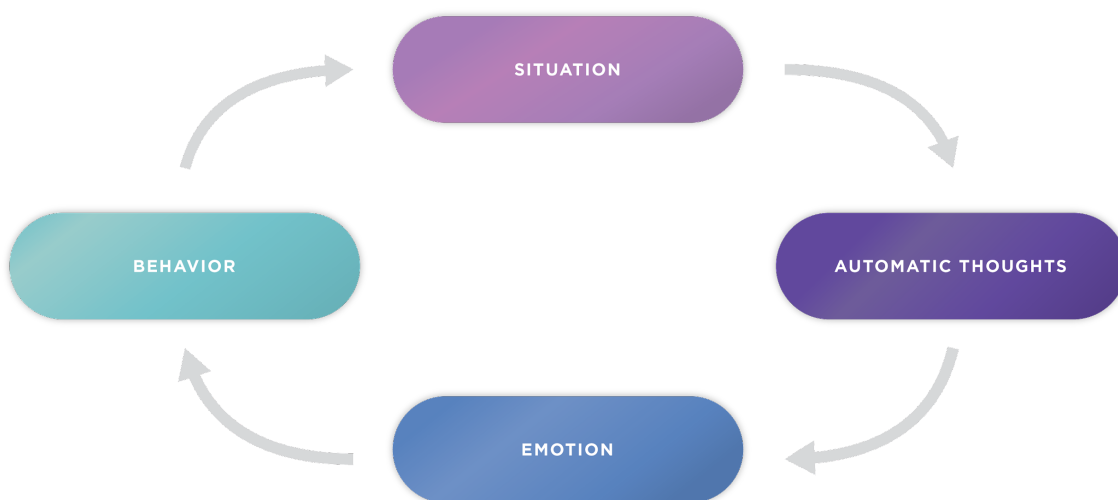
Are You A Worrier? You Can Change That! HANDOUT

In this workshop, we are focusing on worry. Some people spend a great deal of time worrying about something that happened in the past or about something they think may happen in the future. *We only get one shot at this life, and every moment spent needlessly worrying about the future or obsessing about the past is wasted time.*

What is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy?

The tools we are learning today stem from Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, or CBT, which is not only a psychotherapy treatment but also a template for learning a healthier way to perceive the world, and can be used by anyone to improve everyday life! It is based on the idea that **our thoughts generate our emotions**. These thoughts, which are called “Automatic Thoughts”, are often inaccurate. They often pop up out of nowhere, have a “grain of truth” to them – which is where they come from, but they are basically **not based in fact**. The emotions that follow these thoughts are generally ones that are upsetting – anger, frustration, sadness, guilt, hopelessness, etc. We often recognize these emotions when they manifest themselves as physical sensations in our bodies, such as a racing heart, flushed face, a queasy stomach or feeling nauseated, to name a few. Because of this, we tend to think that the feelings come first. However, research has shown that this is not the case, which is good news, since we have control over our thoughts! And once we take a look at those thoughts and realize that they can be challenged for accuracy, the associated emotions are minimized and often eliminated.

Yes, sometimes emotions are borne out of true thoughts or situations. But many times they are not, and cause a number of emotional disturbances, including excessive worry. When we think these **thoughts** and feel these **emotions**, we typically **behave** in a way that keeps us stuck in a negative cycle.



Unless this type of thinking is challenged and changed, these messages often become our internal monologue or “self-talk” throughout our lives and cause a great deal of unnecessary emotional pain. CBT is a process by which we: 1) Identify the Automatic Thoughts (AT), 2) Identify the Distortion, 3) Identify the Emotion evoked by the Distortion, 4) Identify the Behaviors, we choose because of this distortion, which keep us stuck in the cycle, 5) Challenge the Distortion with reality-based facts, which is where we break out of the cycle at the thought level, and 6) Reframe and replace the distorted thought with a **true, realistic, believable** one which elicits a **more reasonable** emotion. By doing this, the subsequent behaviors chosen are different (this is where we break out of the cycle at the behavioral level), and are much more likely to produce a more positive situation, generating more realistic thinking patterns and emotions based on those patterns. And THAT cycle is the one we hope to perpetuate. The good news is that we can ALL learn to change this negative, destructive type of thinking. It is not easy, and it takes practice, but once learned and adapted, can make an enormous difference in our lives.

Why use CBT?

Simply put, we use it because we want (and often need) to change the way we perceive our experiences and ourselves. CBT can be used in innumerable daily experiences and can help us take more control over our lives; enhancing communication and interpersonal relationships, risk-taking, decision-making, and setting and achieving goals, to name a few. In fact, CBT provides the tools to manage the stress of everyday living for *everyone*.

Here is a step-by-step CBT Guide:

STEP 1: Identify Automatic Thoughts (AT)

CBT teaches us to identify when we are saying things to ourselves that are not true. Here are a few examples:

He must think I'm an idiot. She will think I'm unreliable. If I don't perform perfectly, I'm a failure. I should be a better son/daughter. I'm a terrible partner. What if that abnormal blood test means I'm dying of cancer? I can't do anything right. If I tell her that she hurt my feelings, it will ruin our friendship.

Those are the Automatic Thoughts (AT's). They just pop into our minds, they are specific to a certain situation, they come rapidly and without warning, and we **BELIEVE** them to be true even though they are **NOT TRUE**. And it is our belief in these thoughts

that leads to the intense emotions evoked. ***This is the most important part of all - we believe something about ourselves which is not true, and this leads us to feel badly about ourselves. And because we feel this way, it often affects all other aspects of our lives.***

STEP 2: Identify the DISTORTION

While we are learning these techniques, we may find ourselves at STEP 3 at this point because we are usually aware of what we are **feeling**, but not necessarily about what we're **thinking**, even though the thought actually precedes the emotion. Once the process becomes more familiar and once we learn to be more mindful in our daily lives, we begin to notice first what we are saying to ourselves before identifying the emotion, and then proceed with Step 2.

These are ten common ways we distort our thinking, as David Burns, M.D. has identified:

1. All or nothing thinking: you look at things in absolute, black-and-white categories;
2. Over generalization: you view a negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat;
3. Mental filter: you dwell on the negatives; an example of this is a clear glass of water being completely clouded when a drop of ink is introduced. One negative thing overshadows all of the positives in your mind.
4. Discounting the positives: you insist that your accomplishments or positive qualities don't count;
5. Jumping to conclusions:
 - a. Mind-reading – you assume that people are reacting negatively to you when there is no definite evidence;
 - b. Fortune-telling – you arbitrarily predict that things will turn out badly;
6. Magnification or minimization: you blow things way out of proportion or you shrink their importance;
7. Emotional reasoning: you reason from how you feel: "I feel like an idiot, so I really must be one."
8. Should statements: you criticize yourself (or others) with "shoulds", "oughts", and "musts".
9. Labeling: instead of saying "I made a mistake", you tell yourself "I'm a jerk" or "a fool" or "a loser".
10. Personalization and blame – you blame yourself for something that you were not entirely (or even remotely) responsible for, or alternatively, you blame others and deny your role in the problem.

**Adapted from Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy by David Burns, M.D. (William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1980; New American Library, 1981).

People who tend to be worriers do a lot of Jumping to Conclusions, Mind-reading and Magnification, and use “**should**” and “**what if**” in a lot of their language and thinking.

STEP 3: Identify the EMOTION generated by the Automatic Thought

The emotions that follow these thoughts are generally ones that are upsetting--anger, frustration, sadness, guilt, hopelessness, etc. We recognize these emotions when they manifest themselves as physical sensations in our bodies. We feel our heart racing, a queasy stomach, our face flushing, or feel nauseated, to name a few. As mentioned earlier, sometimes these emotions are borne out of true thoughts and situations. But many times they are not, and may cause emotional disturbances such as depression, anxiety, relationship problems, low self-esteem, low confidence, and other problems. The **behaviors** driven by these **thoughts** and **emotions** keep us stuck in a negative cycle.

STEP 4: Identify the BEHAVIORS that result from the distorted Automatic Thought

Here's a typical situation which will help explain this step.

You get in your car to go to an important appointment. You have left what you thought was ample time to get there with time to spare. Suddenly, traffic stops and there are brake lights in front of you as far as you can see.

We usually know how we feel before we know what caused those feelings. If you are like many people in this situation, you would begin to feel anxious. Your heart rate might increase, you might notice a tightness in your stomach or chest, What goes through your mind?

“Oh, no, I'm going to be late. They will think I'm so irresponsible and unreliable. I should have left earlier. I should have looked at the traffic app. This is awful.” And so on...

Those thoughts generate more worry and anxiety. And they may end up being true, but they are all things that **may or may not happen in the future**. They are certainly not happening the moment you think them, and you have no control over those things, whether they happen or not. *Each of those moments in which you are worrying about those possibilities are wasted moments in your life.* These thoughts fall under the distortion Jumping to Conclusions (both mind reading and fortune-telling): “I'm going to be late, They will think I'm irresponsible” and Magnification (also referred to as Catastrophizing): “This is awful”, and “I should have...” (Should statements).

The **behavior** you choose next determines whether you remain in that negative cycle, perpetuating the anxiety, or break out and decrease the anxiety. Do you start trying to change lanes to go faster? Does that usually work? Do you start swearing at all of the “idiots” on the road? Do you berate yourself for not predicting this traffic? (“labeling”). Many people choose to start looking at the clock obsessively at this point. Do any of these actions help? Will they change anything? Do they make you feel better? The only things you have control over at this point are: 1) concentrating on driving the car, slowing down your breathing and possibly listening to music or a story; and 2) calling the person you have the appointment with, letting them know about the situation, that it’s out of your control, and that you may be late. There is literally nothing else you can possibly do to change things. However, many people get very upset in these situations, and might even work themselves up into a panic.

If we identify early on which things we truly have control over, and begin to practice mindfulness (slow down breathing, focus on what we are doing at that exact moment), the emotion may change to mere annoyance, but will not get to the level of panic that it might have. And the behaviors that follow will not be ones that keep us stuck in that negative cycle. They will be based on realistic thinking, such as: “I have called to let them know I will be late, I have absolutely no control over this situation, so I will enjoy some music, a book on tape or a podcast to pass the time. And I will stop looking at the clock!” This is how we break out of the cycle. When we focus our thoughts on the music or the book/podcast, we are not thinking the thoughts that led us to feel anxious. It is physically impossible to think 2 thoughts at the same time, and we automatically relax. This is not simple, and it requires practice. But the more we practice and challenge these ingrained thinking patterns, the more the realistic thoughts will become the automatic ones.

Next we learn how to break the cycle:

After completing Steps 1, 2, 3 and 4, we are now aware of our distorted thinking, the emotions evoked, and the behaviors typically chosen. Let’s take another look at the Automatic Thought and Behavior stages in the graphic. We must now learn to break out of this negative cycle. We move on to Step 5, where we challenge the Automatic Thought, and then Step 6, where we replace it with a realistic, believable thought. In time, we will tend to choose healthier behaviors, and therefore break the cycle.

STEP 5: CHALLENGE the distorted Automatic Thought

In this step, we challenge the Automatic Thought by questioning its accuracy, looking for evidence that it is true. In the scenario we presented in Step 4, you would

ask yourself, “Do we know for a fact that “they will think I’m irresponsible and unreliable?” No, this is pure conjecture, in other words Fortune-telling and Mind-reading. We can’t know what is actually going through someone else’s mind unless they tell us (and are honest about it). So, any time we think we know what someone else will think of us and it causes us distress, we can simply challenge this by thinking “I have no idea what they will think of me”. That is the truth and will not lead to a negative emotion. We may also choose to check out our assumptions by directly talking to the other person, saying something like: “I’ve been worrying about canceling our dinner plans, because I was thinking you might be upset and think I wasn’t interested in spending time with you.” We have no idea how they will respond to that, but at least we will have the correct information. People often avoid addressing situations like this out of fear they will upset the other person, or “rock the boat”. The reality is usually the opposite. So often I hear that when someone actually checks out their fear with the other person, the reality is very far from what they had imagined or assumed.

When we berate ourselves by using “should” statements, we are implying we could have predicted that something like this would happen - in other words that we should be clairvoyant and be able to predict the future. This is also associated with perfectionism, which many of us have a tendency to suffer from. The implication is that we didn’t do something perfectly. “I should have left earlier. I should have looked at the traffic app.” If we challenge this by saying to ourselves “Why should I have...(whatever it is we think we should have done)? How would I have known this would happen? I’m not perfect and cannot predict every inevitability.” Doesn’t that feel better than that critical voice which makes us feel guilty?

STEP 6: REFRAME and REPLACE the Automatic Thought

What we learned in Step 5 is that our **perceptions** cause us to feel badly about ourselves. So, now we can look at the actual facts and revise our view to be more realistic. We acknowledge the grain of truth that we might be late for the appointment. That’s the **only** thought based in fact out of all of the ones that caused the discomfort. So, instead of saying “I’m going to be late, they are going to think I’m irresponsible and unreliable, and I should have predicted this”, we use reality-based language and re-frame it to something like: “I am stuck in traffic and may be late for this appointment, so I will call to let them know. It would have been nice if I had known about this in advance, but there’s really nothing else I have control over right now, and to make the best of it I’ll finish listening to the audiobook I’ve been enjoying.”

The good news is that we can ALL learn to change this negative, destructive type of thinking. It is not easy, and it takes practice. For many, these messages have been around for many years. But it is never too late to take control over our emotional health.