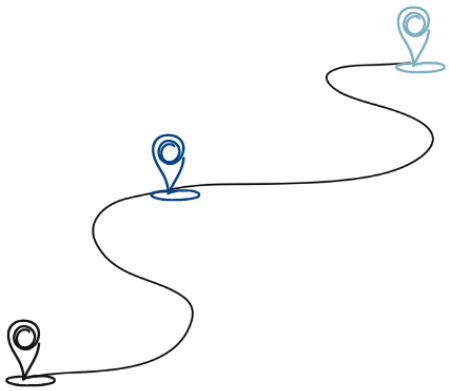
Anxiety Basics

Introducing You to Anxiety



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Chapter Goals

- Learn what anxiety is and how it is maintained
- Learn about a gold-standard treatment for anxiety
- Start to identify your own anxiety patterns

What is Anxiety?



Problems are an inevitable part of life. When we are faced with these problems, it is normal to feel stressed or even anxious. With **anxiety**, it is common to feel nervous and wonder what the outcomes of a problem might be. This is typically a helpful response because it can prepare us for action. This feeling may go away when events change or the problem is solved. An **anxiety disorder**, however, is characterized by *continuous* nervousness and worry, even if circumstances improve. Common focuses of anxiety can be related to their health or social interactions. Sometimes it is more generalized. In addition, these episodes are distressing and/or negatively impact our lives in some way, such as work, relationships, sleep, and health. Millions of people experience at least one of these anxiety episodes in their life.

Why anxiety sticks around and how to manage anxiety is the focus of this workbook. An anxiety disorder is a **psychological disorder**, which means that it is an *automatic* pattern of attending, thinking, feeling, and acting that is maintained in a *cycle* despite creating problems (Barlow, 2021; Bringmann et al., 2023). We want to highlight that an anxiety disorder is automatic. People don't wake up in the morning and say, "You know what, I'm going to be anxious today." The cycle just happens to

them. A large body of research points to a set of factors that keep anxiety going, despite people wanting it to stop (Barlow, 2021).

Here's an example of an anxiety cycle. As you read, take note of anything with which you can relate. It's okay if you don't quite understand what is outlined here or if your situation is a bit different. Your therapist can help.

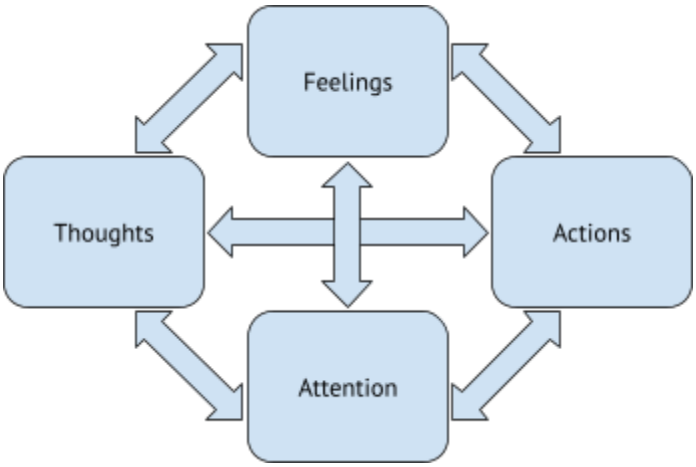
Those experiencing an anxiety disorder tend to worry about life's problems because it feels safer to think about everything that could possibly go wrong. However, when left unchecked, this worry encourages focus on the problem and sometimes even our own short-comings, which can increase nervousness. Although there is some truth to these worries—sometimes bad things do happen and sometimes we aren't able to handle life's problems—these experiences start to cloud our judgments about our future and erode our self-confidence. People may find themselves predicting that bad things will happen with certainty and catastrophe, such as failing an exam, which will lead to failing out of school, which will lead to not getting a job, etc. One way to deal with these feelings is to avoid the thing that brings them up in the first place. This may look like procrastinating on a work project or avoiding difficult conversations with friends. Sometimes avoidance entails doing something that is seemingly productive, but doesn't address the problem. Unfortunately, this "kicks the can down the road" approach means the problem isn't addressed. Sometimes bad things end up happening because of this avoidance, which fuels the anxiety even more.

Despite this continuous and automatic cycle, we can still make changes. Many researchers and clinicians agree that identifying patterns of attending, thinking, feeling, and acting that keep us stuck and practicing new ways of responding can really help us bounce back from an anxiety disorder and move us closer to a life worth living (Hofmann et al., 2012). Making changes can even be observed in our nervous system, which inherently responds to our environments and can be shaped by our experiences (Linden, 2006). However, we need to start by getting a better sense of your own experiences of anxiety.

Although there are common patterns across people, anxiety can look a little different from person to person, especially when considering the culture in which people live. Take a moment to write down your experience with anxiety: (1) when and where you feel most anxious, (2) how anxiety feels to you—such as what you notice in your body, (3) what you tend to pay attention to more or less, (4) how or what you tend to think, and (5) what you tend to do when you are anxious.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) has been adapted to treat different psychological disorders within different cultures (Naeem et al., 2019). It is considered a "gold-standard" treatment because it is the most effective and reliable treatment with enduring long-term benefits (David et al., 2018). The basic idea behind CBT is that different events can trigger different responses—attention, thoughts, feelings, and actions. This happens because at some point in our lives, we learned to respond to certain events in particular ways. We call this our "learned history," which includes our personal experiences as well as cultural expectations. These responses can actually impact one another and form an anxiety disorder.

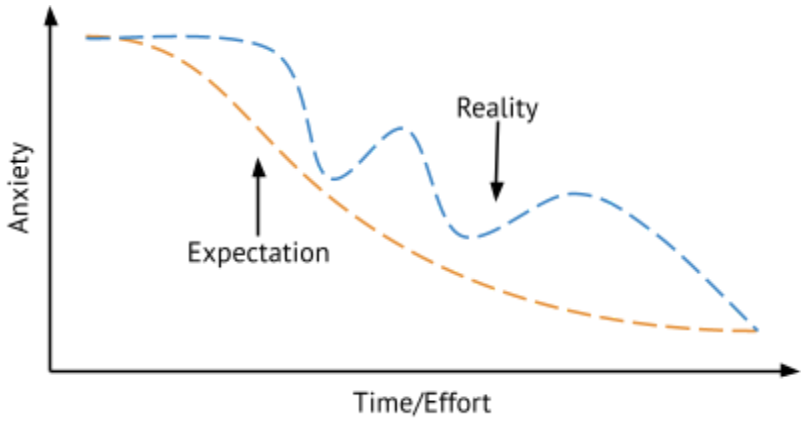


Characteristic responses of anxiety include:

- **Attention** - Towards threat-based information
- **Thoughts** - "Something bad will happen.", "I won't be able to handle it."
- **Feelings** - Tense, nausea, irritated, tired
- **Actions** - Worrying, procrastinating

How these responses are triggered and maintained is what you and your therapists will uncover together. Developing this understanding is what we call a **case formulation** and it directly informs what your treatment will look like.

It is helpful to have clear expectations through treatment. CBT can help you improve your anxiety by helping you notice the thoughts, feelings, actions, and attention that keep you stuck as well as guide you towards new ways of dealing well with life's problems. However, CBT isn't guaranteed and there are a lot of factors that impact how successful someone may be—for example, how many sessions you have, how much effort you put into change, how supportive your environment is, etc. If you do see improvements, they likely won't be linear.



There are a number of what we call "core clinical change processes" that you and your therapists will consider when developing your **treatment plan**—for example, stimulus control, cognitive reappraisal, behavioral activation, mindful awareness, prolonged exposure, etc. A common change process utilized in anxiety treatment is prolonged exposure (Parker et al., 2018), which encourages coming in contact with things that people have learned to fear and avoid, such as public speaking, uncertainty ,etc., over and over until the anxiety decreases or it becomes

toleratable. Each process comes with different change techniques, which you could think of as different skills.

Keep in mind that CBT is an effortful process. It is imperative that once you learn a new technique/skill, you practice it over and over and over again. We want you to retain your new pattern of responding so that it—and not the disordered pattern—becomes automatic. You may find that you take two steps forward and one step back. This is normal. Change is hard and it takes time to develop new patterns. Try not to get too discouraged. Anything worth doing is typically hard. Remember, if you're ever having a hard time understanding anything in this workbook or doing the activities in this workbook, reach out to your therapist.

Illuminating Your Patterns

What we mean by that is, shine a big ol' light on your anxiety cycle. Really look at the events and subsequent responses—attention, thoughts, feelings, and actions—that keep you stuck. This process, which we call **self-monitoring**, can increase the likelihood of changing unproductive habits (Zhao et al., 2021). Put simply, we can't change something that we aren't aware of.

To do this, you will need to make note of five things: events, attention, thoughts, feelings, and actions. **Events** are the triggers for anxiety responses. Situations you are in can automatically trigger specific responses. These situations can be anything, such as working on a project or being in a social gathering. Triggers can also be memories from past events or images of future events that

haven't happened yet. Sometimes we can change these events. More often than not, we are changing how you respond to them.

Attention is where your focus is. It is the built-in flashlight that we have. It is what you notice outside and inside your body. What we attend to can bias our cognitive processing. Do you find yourself overly focused on potential future problems? Are you more likely to notice rejection on other peoples' faces?	**Thoughts** are how you make sense of events. Sometimes how we perceive an event is more important than the event itself. For instance, how likely is it that something catastrophic will happen? Can you overcome hardship if it were to arise? Do you think that what you said offended your friend or colleague? Will they reject you for it?
Feelings are the sensations in your body. They are the body's way of telling us that something is amiss. However, feelings can be learned and removed from any actual problem. Feelings can be tension in your muscles, heaviness in your body, a sense of irritation. They can make it hard to sleep, especially if they are a point of focus.	**Actions** are the things you do to try to address or cope with the events or feelings. Actions related to worry, procrastination, and reassurance seeking are coming with anxiety. These are typically considered avoidant actions because on some level they are done to avoid the anxious feelings that arise.

See the next page for your first "Change Task," which outlines how to monitor your anxiety along with a helpful worksheet.





Change Task

Illuminate Your Anxiety Cycle

It is helpful to get in the habit of tracking the ebb and flow of your anxiety. So, what triggers your anxiety and what is your anxiety made of—your attention, thoughts, feelings, and actions? On the flip side, what makes your anxiety better? If you are unclear on whether something is a trigger or not, just write down what is going on when you are experiencing anxiety. You can start to monitor your anxiety using the worksheet on the next page. It's helpful to get a couple weeks of data before you can start to see a pattern emerge. As you monitor, write down the events and responses as soon as you can. You may find that it is helpful to keep this workbook with you or jot down some notes on a piece of paper and then transfer your notes to this worksheet.

Self-Monitoring Worksheet

Events The triggers of your anxiety	**Attention** What you tend to notice or focus on	**Thoughts** How you make sense of different events	**Feelings** The sensations in your body	**Actions** How you cope with the event or feelings

Chapter Summary

You have learned quite a bit in this chapter. You learned:

1. that anxiety is a natural response to certain situations,
2. that an anxiety disorder is a cycle of anxiety that creates problems,
3. how cognitive-behavioral therapy can help,
4. what are reasonable expectations for progress,
5. the difference between events, attention, thoughts, feelings, and actions, and
6. the importance of knowing your anxiety cycle.

Your **change task** for the week is to write down when and where you are experiencing anxiety and any responses—attention, thoughts, feelings, and actions—while you are experiencing anxiety.

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