

OVERCOMING ANXIETY - 5 UNCERTAINTY AND UNNECESSARY VIGILANCE

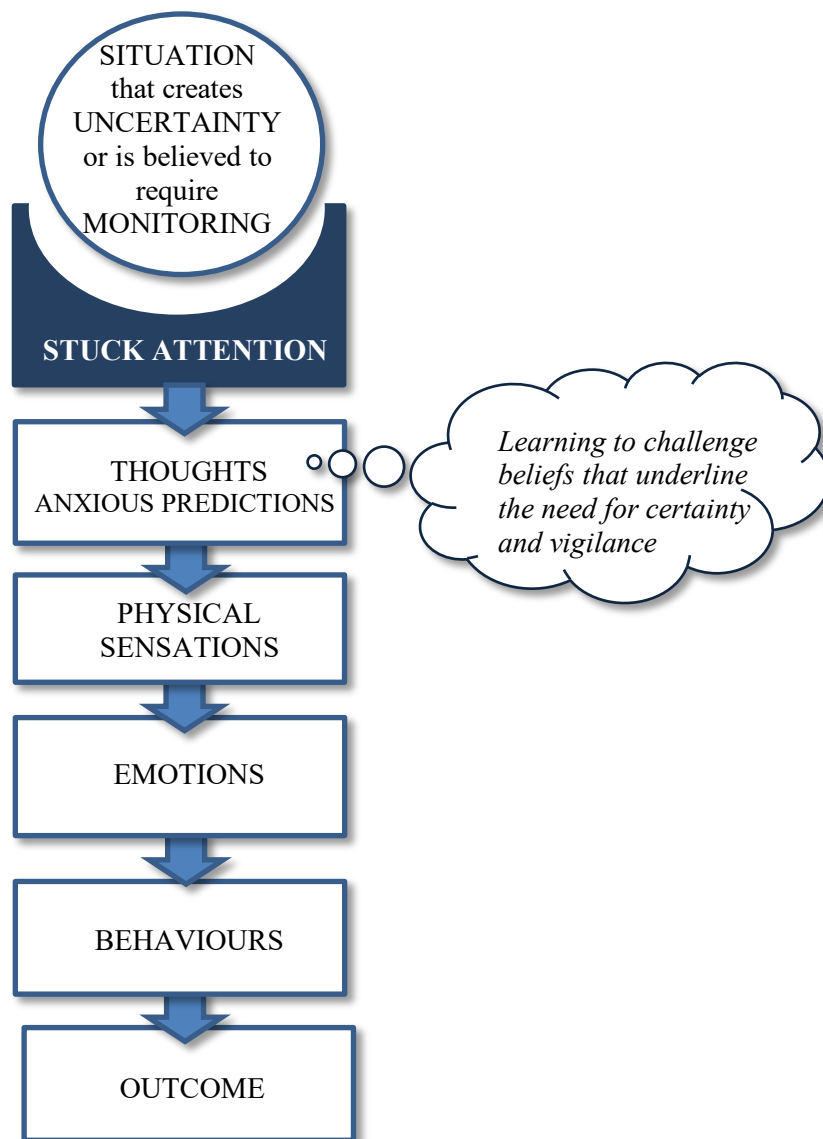


Figure 1:
BUILDING BLOCKS OF ANXIETY

The building blocks of anxiety shown on the Figure 1 should be quite familiar by now. In this section we are going to tackle a specific trigger: situations that create uncertainty or an urge for monitoring. Unfortunately, nothing is 100% certain in life. When you drive or take a bus, you face a possibility of an accident. When you walk, you might fall. When someone you care about is away, there is no guarantee that this person is safe. Tolerance of uncertainty is crucial as otherwise you would not be able to take any chances. You might not be able to start a relationship (“What if my partner meets someone better ten years from now?”), apply for a better job (“What if I take that position and they close shop and few years from now I am worse off than today?”) or make simple choices (“What if I don’t like the chicken and lasagna is actually better?”). Not being able to tolerate uncertainty robs you from small respites that life can offer when you are faced with real difficulties (“What do those tests mean? What if the cancer comes back?”). Intolerance of uncertainty makes it extremely difficult to let go unless “all is known” and people often get stuck monitoring the situation until “all is known” or “it’s finally over”.

Hyper-vigilance connects to intolerance of uncertainty. Just think of a person who just cannot stop monitoring their body functions to ensure that they are ok. Hyper-vigilance is a state of physiological arousal and hyper-attentiveness to whatever the person deems to be

important or dangerous. Many individuals who have history of being assaulted are hyper-vigilant when they are outside. Yet, it can also be directed inwards as in trying to stop unwanted memories or thoughts. Unfortunately, being hyper-vigilant gives power to the experiences that we would rather live without: worry and anxiety.

LEARNING TO TOLERATE UNCERTAINTY

Intolerance of uncertainty is a tendency to search for definitive answers when such answers might not be available. Some individuals tend to get stuck (stuck attention) on their search for an answer to a specific question and unable to do much else (e.g., “Why did my partner leave me?”, “What if I am not going to get better?”). Others seek certainty across variety of situations (e.g. packing excessively for holidays in case you need an extra outfit, not discarding useless possessions in case someone needs them, constant questioning of partner’s intentions, rehearsing situations after the fact to check for any social mishaps).

People who cannot tolerate uncertainty might hold following beliefs:

- I need to be 100% certain before I make any decisions.
- Even a small risk is too much without knowing what it is, so I need to know just in case.
- I can’t cope not knowing.
- I prefer to know the worst now than to live with uncertainty.
- _____
- _____
- _____

Not surprisingly intolerance of uncertainty contributes to the excessive questioning that is the hallmark of compulsive worry. It also leads to other problems, some of which are outlined in the table below¹

| PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH INTOLERANCE OF UNCERTAINTY | EXAMPLES |
|---|--|
| Avoiding certain activities | - Not discussing a sensitive subject with a friend - Not trying activities that you have never tried before |
| Finding artificial obstacles to avoid doing certain things; creating roadblocks | - Refusing a new project at work claiming to want to spend more time on something else - Not undertaking a home renovation claiming to not have enough money |
| Procrastinating | - Postponing revising your mortgage rate because you are not sure of the procedure - Deciding to wait before resolving a conflict with a friend because you are not sure what his/her reaction will be. |
| Wanting to do everything yourself; not delegating tasks to others | - Doing everything yourself at the office because you are not sure about the quality of your colleagues’ work - Always preparing “lunch” for your teenagers to ensure they eat a balanced diet. |
| Partially engaging in a relationship, job or project | - Getting involved with a project, but with the option to quit if you encounter any difficulty |
| Spreading yourself too thin; taking several steps at the same time | - Starting to clean the office, doing laundry and going to pick up groceries - Submitting application for jobs in different fields in order to find something interesting. |

¹ This table and even more information can be found on the handout published by the University of Concordia at http://www-psychology.concordia.ca/fac/dugas/downloads/en/Intolerance_of_uncertainty.pdf

| PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH INTOLERANCE OF UNCERTAINTY | EXAMPLES |
|--|---|
| Searching for more information before finally moving forward | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reading many travel brochures before selecting a vacation destination - Asking the same questions to multiple people before making a decision. - Shopping for a long time before buying a gift for a loved one. |
| Reconsidering decisions already made because you are not sure they were the right decisions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Returning a garment because you are not sure it looks good on you. - Deciding not to sell your house after already having made the decision to sell. |
| Looking for reassurance (asking people questions so that they can reassure you) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Asking your spouse if your behaviours was acceptable in a given situation. - Repeatedly excusing yourself for being late to ensure the other person was not offended. |
| Repeatedly checking actions that are normally done mechanically because you want to be sure you actually did them. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Double-checking that the door to the house or vehicle is locked. - Rereading a text to be sure that you understood it. |
| Overprotecting others or doing things for them | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Making appointments for your spouse. - Preventing your child from sleeping over at a friend's house. |
| Reassuring oneself with an exaggerated personal optimism or by trying to rationally explain everything. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Faced with a difficult task, telling yourself "I am capable, I've done this before, I'll manage", but without actually believing it. |

As you can see from the above examples, the quest for absolute certainty produces chronic doubt.

| INSISTANCE ON CERTAINTY | |
|-------------------------|----------|
| COSTS | BENEFITS |
| | |

Yet, most of all, we need to build our tolerance of uncertainty by making changes in behaviours that maintain it. Use the worksheet on the next page.

BEHAVIOURAL EXPERIMENT: MANAGING UNCERTAINTY

| A: PLANNING | | | |
|--|---|--|---|
| <p>1: Describe the uncertainty related behaviour that you want to put to the test.</p> <p><i>Texting my partner all the time to see if he is OK and if he is not mad at me.</i></p> | <p>2: Why is this behaviour a problem?</p> <p><i>I get frustrated when he does not answer right away; we argue a lot as he tells me that I am too controlling.</i></p> | | |
| <p>3: Describe the situation in which you which you plan to alter your behaviour and what are you planning to do instead of your typical behaviour.</p> <p><i>I will limit my texts to once or twice per day just to say hi. I will not ask for details of what he is doing at the moment.</i></p> | | | |
| <p>4: What do you predict will happen when you alter the behaviour?</p> <p><i>He might get away with doing something he should not and I will end up by getting hurt again. He might think that I no longer care about the relationship as I don't keep in touch as much. He might no longer be interested in me.</i></p> | | | <p>5: On a scale from 0 to 100%, rate how much you believe your predictions.</p> <p style="text-align: right; font-size: 1.2em;"><i>70%</i></p> |
| B: IMPLEMENTING: MANAGE YOUR EXPERIENCE | | | |
| <p>6: Describe your experiences during the exercise (i.e., when you are replacing your usual behaviour with its altered version) and what you did about them.</p> | | | |
| <p>Thoughts during implementation and what you did about them:</p> <p><i>Why hasn't he texted me first? What is he doing?</i></p> <p><i>I used perspective taking worksheet and APPLE</i></p> | <p>Emotions during the implementation and what you did about them:</p> <p><i>Tense, apprehensive</i></p> <p><i>I focused on desired outcome, and reminded myself that it will be the same as with</i></p> | <p>Physical sensations during the implementation and what you did about them:</p> <p><i>Restless, crying</i></p> <p><i>Reminded myself that such reaction is normal when doing something that I feel apprehensive about.</i></p> | <p>Behaviour urges during the implementation and what you did about them:</p> <p><i>Want to text or call; want to see if he posted something on Facebook, want to call a friend to tell me what he is doing.</i></p> <p><i>Reminded myself that it typically backfires.</i></p> |
| C: LESSONS LEARNT | | | |
| <p>7: Answer following questions:</p> <p>a: What happened as a result of your making a change in your behaviour?</p> <p><i>Nothing; we did not argue and met in the evening; I felt very tense and still had an urge to question him a lot about his day when we met.</i></p> <p>b: Did you experience support all your predictions?</p> <p><i>Not really. I felt as uncomfortable as I have predicted but there were no indications that he got upset with me for not texting as often as I used to.</i></p> <p>c: What is your new prediction?</p> <p><i>Not checking on him is not comfortable but it does not lead to him being upset with me.</i></p> <p>d: What are your next steps? What will you do in situations that are similar to this one?</p> <p><i>I will try not to check on him as much.</i></p> | | | <p>9: How much do you believe your new prediction (0-100%)</p> <p style="text-align: right; font-size: 1.2em;"><i>65%</i></p> |

BEHAVIOURAL EXPERIMENT: MANAGING UNCERTAINTY

| A: PLANNING | | | |
|---|---|--|--|
| 1: Describe the uncertainty related behaviour that you want to put to the test. | 2: Why is this behaviour a problem? | | |
| 3: Describe the situation in which you which you plan to alter your behaviour and what are you planning to do instead of your typical behaviour. | | | |
| 4: What do you predict will happen when you alter the behaviour? | | | 5: On a scale from 0 to 100%, rate how much you believe your predictions. |
| B: IMPLEMENTING: MANAGE YOUR EXPERIENCE | | | |
| 6: Describe your experiences during the exercise (i.e., when you are replacing your usual behaviour with its altered version) and what you did about them | | | |
| Thoughts during implementation and what you did about them: | Emotions during the implementation and what you did about them: | Physical sensations during the implementation and what you did about them: | Behaviours urges during the implementation and what you did about them: |
| C: LESSONS LEARNT | | | |
| 7: Answer following questions: a: What happened as a result of your making a change in your behaviour? b: Did you experience support all your predictions? c: What is your new prediction? d: What are your next steps? What will you do in situations that are similar to this one? | | | 8: How much do you believe your new prediction (0-100%) |

LETTING GO OF VIGILANCE

Vigilance refers to keeping watch for potential dangers or difficulties and is characterized by heightened body arousal. Examples would include:

- a person with PTSD who is unable to tolerate large gatherings because of the need to check on whether or not persons in the crowd have ill intentions and becoming overwhelmed with the task,
- a worrier who continues to review day's problems at bedtime and can't fall asleep because it "feels" like that negative consequences will happen the moment he closes his eyes,
- or a person with health anxiety who is unable to stop herself from monitoring her body symptoms and going for yet another doctor's appointment lest she misses an early sign of a life-threatening illness.

State of vigilance is maintained by assumptions such as:

- Something bad will happen if I let my guard down.
- I need to be ready for the worst.
- If I don't maintain my alertness, I will be caught off guard and unable to manage.
- If I lose control, I will become a total mess.

Write down your own reasons for being cautious about dropping your guard or relaxing into situations:

Keep in mind that relaxing does not imply becoming unaware of the situation that you are faced with. Consider driving. A highly vigilant driver might be tense, frequently check the mirrors, drive too slowly or make last minute turns. An alert relaxed driver is fully aware of the vehicles in front of her, checks mirrors when needed and her driving manner feels smooth. Similarly, a relaxed individual might know that there is a leaky faucet in the kitchen, might have already turned off water supply and called plumber but now is able to focus on something else whereas a hyper-vigilant person will be preoccupied with a leaky faucet until it is all fixed and unable to sleep.

| | BEING HYPER-VIGILANT | BEING ALERT |
|-----------------|----------------------|-------------|
| CHARACTERISTICS | | |
| COSTS | | |
| BENEFITS | | |

BEHAVIOURAL EXPERIMENT: LETTING GO OF HYPER-VIGILANCE

A: PLANNING

1: Describe vigilance related behaviour that you want to put to the test.

I am always moving and doing something. I have to know what is around me. Sitting still with my eyes closed is an impossibility.

2: Why is this behaviour a problem?

It is impossible to relax. I snap at those around me. Even everyday noises irritate me. It feels that I am busy but really little of value is accomplished as I cannot concentrate. I have trouble sleeping.

3: Describe the situation in which you which you plan to alter your behaviour and what are you planning to do instead of your typical behaviour.

I will practice sitting and just closing my eyes and listening to music for a few minutes in living room after dinner, just before we do the dishes.

4: What do you predict will happen when you alter the behaviour?

I will be very restless; kids will distract me; it will be impossible to use the kitchen and I will feel guilty or angry because dishes are not done; I will be criticized for being lazy, even by my kids; someone will come into the house and then tell everyone that our family are slobs.

5: On a scale from 0 to 100%, rate how much you believe your predictions.

75%

B: IMPLEMENTING: MANAGE YOUR EXPERIENCE

6: Describe your experiences during the exercise (i.e., when you are replacing your usual behaviour with its altered version) and what you did about them.

Thoughts during implementation and what you did about them:

I should be doing something now; I am wasting my time; I am a bad person - REMIND MYSELF THAT I AM NOT ACCOMPLISHING WHAT I WANT IF I CONTINUE AS IS

Emotions during the implementation and what you did about them:

Tense, angry, frustrated - ALLOW EMOTIONS TO UNFOLD; REMIND SELF THAT I AM ONLY MAKING A SMALL CHANGE

Physical sensations during the implementation and what you did about them:

Internally restless, Palpitations Sounds felt louder - REMIND SELF THAT IT IS MY VIGILANCE THAT AMPLIFIES THESE SENSATIONS

Behaviour urges during the implementation and what you did about them::

Start moving now Get it done now Open my eyes Take off the headphones - STAY PUT AND REMIND MYSELF THAT I WANT TO LEARN HOW TO RELAX

C: LESSONS LEARNT

7: Answer following questions:

a: What happened as a result of your making a change in your behaviour?

Nothing; dishes got done later; nobody criticized me; I felt uncomfortable sitting and listening to music.

b: Did you experience support all your predictions?

No. Still, it felt very uncomfortable.

c: What is your new prediction?

Not doing things right away and allowing myself not to watch over everything did not harm anyone. Relaxing is difficult and leaves me with sense of urgency but I might practice letting go of urgency.

d: What are your next steps? What will you do in situations that are similar to this one?

I will allow myself to relax now and then.

8: How much do you believe your new prediction (0-100%)

65%

BEHAVIOURAL EXPERIMENT: LETTING GO OF HYPER-VIGILANCE

| A: PLANNING | | | |
|--|---|--|--|
| 1: Describe vigilance related behaviour that you want to put to the test. | | 2: Why is this behaviour a problem? | |
| 3: Describe the situation in which you which you plan to alter your behaviour and what are you planning to do instead of your typical behaviour. | | | |
| 4: What do you predict will happen when you alter the behaviour? | | | 5: On a scale from 0 to 100%, rate how much you believe your predictions. |
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| 6: Describe your experiences during the exercise (i.e., when you are replacing your usual behaviour with its altered version) and what you did about them | | | |
| Thoughts during implementation and what you did about them: | Emotions during the implementation and what you did about them: | Physical sensations during the implementation and what you did about them: | Behaviours urges during the implementation and what you did about them: |
| C: LESSONS LEARNT | | | |
| 7: Answer following questions: | | | |
| a: What happened as a result of your making a change in your behaviour? | | | |
| b: Did you experience support all your predictions? | | | |
| : What is your new prediction? | | | |
| d: What are your next steps? What will you do in situations that are similar to this one? | | | |
| | | | 8: How much do you believe your new prediction (0-100%) |

DETACHED MINDFULNESS / GROUNDING SCRIPT

- Take stock of your surroundings. Where are you? What is around you? What can you see, smell, touch or hear? Make a note of your experiences:

- Sit comfortably and close your eyes or focus on something neutral in front of you.
- Take a breath through your nose and out through your mouth. Recall your observations of sights, smells, sounds and objects that you might have touched. Form a mind image of your observations. Let it go.
- Take a breath through your nose and out through your mouth. Start focussing on your body sensations from head to toes. What do you notice in your head? Tension, headache? How about your neck? Your heart? Arms? Stomach? Hands and legs? Are you tired or alert? Do you feel like yawning? Trembling? Feeling relaxed? Make a note of your experiences:

- Close your eyes and take a breath through your nose and out through your mouth. Now take a trip through your mind as if you were walking inside a movie or a video game. What sort of images pop up? What sort of thoughts or ideas are there? Are you preoccupied with something? Are you stuck on any thought or question? Make a note of your experiences:

- Close your eyes and take a breath through your nose and out through your mouth. See if you can notice what your body tells you to do? Do you have an urge to move or just hide? Can you rest? Can you relax? Do you feel like doing something so that it will stop nagging at you? Or, alternatively, do you feel like not doing something that you should do? Do you have any cravings? Notice these urges. Make a note of your experiences:

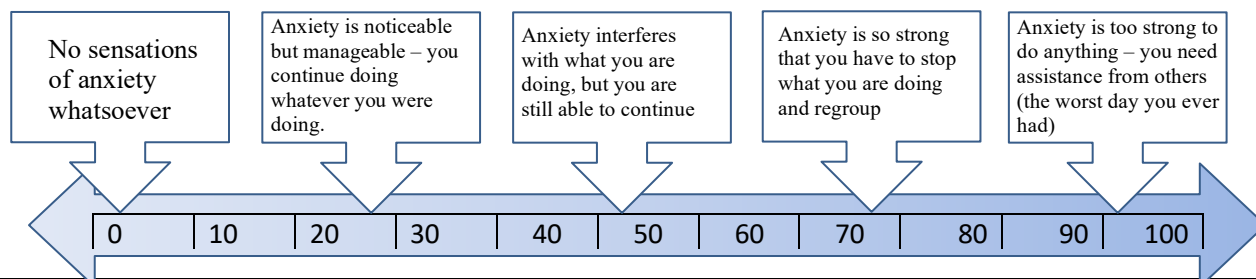
- Close your eyes and take a breath through your nose and out through your mouth. See if you can observe the totality of your experience. What are the body sensations, thoughts and behaviour urges? How does it fall into a single experience of emotion? Which thoughts go with which body reactions and behaviour urges? How does it feel like to observe such experience without trying to shut it down? Make a note of your experiences:

- Take a breath through your nose and out through your mouth. Bring back the image of the room into focus. Start focusing on sounds, texture, temperature, smells around you.
- When you ready, review thoughts, images and urges that you observed in your mind.
- Have a look around. Are the thoughts and images that came into your mind relevant to your current situation? To this very moment, at this minute, this hour, today?
- What is really happening right now? At this very moment, this very hour, today? Write down where you are and what you can expect to happen within the next hour.

- What it different between what is happening in here-and-now and what is happening inside of your mind?

- Take a breath through your nose and out through your mouth and slow down.

KEEPING TRACK AND KEEPING HONEST



| | | | | | | | |
|---|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| DATE: | | | | | | | |
| Rate the intensity of your overall anxiety throughout the day using the scale above and mark it on the graph. | 100 | | | | | | |
| | 90 | | | | | | |
| | 80 | | | | | | |
| | 70 | | | | | | |
| | 60 | | | | | | |
| | 50 | | | | | | |
| | 40 | | | | | | |
| | 30 | | | | | | |
| | 20 | | | | | | |
| | 10 | | | | | | |
| | 0 | | | | | | |
| What challenges / stresses were you faced with today? | | | | | | | |
| What skill have you practiced? | <input type="checkbox"/> Postpone the worry (APPLE) <input type="checkbox"/> Gaining Perspective <input type="checkbox"/> Problem Solving <input type="checkbox"/> Behavioural Experiment <input type="checkbox"/> Grounding | <input type="checkbox"/> Postpone the worry (APPLE) <input type="checkbox"/> Gaining Perspective <input type="checkbox"/> Problem Solving <input type="checkbox"/> Behavioural Experiment <input type="checkbox"/> Grounding | <input type="checkbox"/> Postpone the worry (APPLE) <input type="checkbox"/> Gaining Perspective <input type="checkbox"/> Problem Solving <input type="checkbox"/> Behavioural Experiment <input type="checkbox"/> Grounding | <input type="checkbox"/> Postpone the worry (APPLE) <input type="checkbox"/> Gaining Perspective <input type="checkbox"/> Problem Solving <input type="checkbox"/> Behavioural Experiment <input type="checkbox"/> Grounding | <input type="checkbox"/> Postpone the worry (APPLE) <input type="checkbox"/> Gaining Perspective <input type="checkbox"/> Problem Solving <input type="checkbox"/> Behavioural Experiment <input type="checkbox"/> Grounding | <input type="checkbox"/> Postpone the worry (APPLE) <input type="checkbox"/> Gaining Perspective <input type="checkbox"/> Problem Solving <input type="checkbox"/> Behavioural Experiment <input type="checkbox"/> Grounding | <input type="checkbox"/> Postpone the worry (APPLE) <input type="checkbox"/> Gaining Perspective <input type="checkbox"/> Problem Solving <input type="checkbox"/> Behavioural Experiment <input type="checkbox"/> Grounding |
| What were you able to accomplish during the day? | | | | | | | |
| How much time was spent on worrying? | | | | | | | |
| How much time was spent on doing something proactive (problem solving, taking action steps)? | | | | | | | |