



# Your Best You: Managing Your Anxiety

This workbook was written specifically for students at Queen's University to assist in educating about and improving practical coping skills to manage anxiety.

While Queen's students are our intended audience, we hope this resource will be shared with anyone who may benefit from its use.

*Developed by:*

Mary Acreman, PhD Candidate; Jenn Bossio, PhD Candidate;  
Carole-Anne Vatcher, MSW, RSW; Freeman Woolnough, MEd, CCC;

# Purpose of this Workbook

The purpose of this workbook is to improve the skills you use to manage your anxiety and general functioning. It is important to note that anxiety can vary significantly in intensity and duration. The workbook is designed as a useful guide to managing anxiety of varying intensity, but is not intended to replace professional treatment where this is required.

**The workbook is NOT intended as a sole resource for anyone experiencing significant symptoms of anxiety. If you believe you may meet the criteria for a clinical anxiety disorder, we strongly urge you to seek professional assistance.**

The workbook is NOT a replacement for professional treatment. Please call Health, Counselling and Accessibility services to arrange an appointment with a counsellor or family physician if needed.

**Cote Sharpe Student Wellness Center  
613-533-2506**

The workbook is based on empirically validated research and clinical experience related to the effective treatment of mild to moderate anxiety. The book may be used alone when symptoms are mild, or as an aid to treatment with a mental health professional.



# Table of Contents

<b>Chapter 1: Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 2: Basic Anxiety Management Skills .....</b>	<b>7</b>
The Importance of Practice .....	8
Self-Care/SPEMS .....	9
Deep Breathing .....	15
Mindfulness .....	18
Progressive Muscle Relaxation .....	23
Worry Time .....	28
Time Management .....	30
Decision Making .....	34
The Thought Record .....	36
Behavioural Experiments .....	44
<b>Chapter 3: Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) .....</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Chapter 4: Panic .....</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>Chapter 5: Exam Anxiety .....</b>	<b>83</b>
<b>Chapter 6: Overwhelm .....</b>	<b>101</b>
<b>Chapter 7: Putting it All Together .....</b>	<b>127</b>
<b>Appendix A: Resources .....</b>	<b>131</b>
<b>Appendix B: Worksheets .....</b>	<b>138</b>





# 1

## Understanding Your Anxiety

# Introduction

Sometimes life can be stressful – that is especially true for anyone in university. When stress gets the better of us we can start to see it impact us in many realms of our life: school, family, friends, our health and happiness. The purpose of this workbook is to help guide you through the challenges of dealing with stress. Along the way, we will talk about what anxiety is, how it can be a positive thing, and when to recognize that it is becoming too big for us to handle. We also include many helpful tools and worksheets that you can learn how to use in order to manage your anxiety.

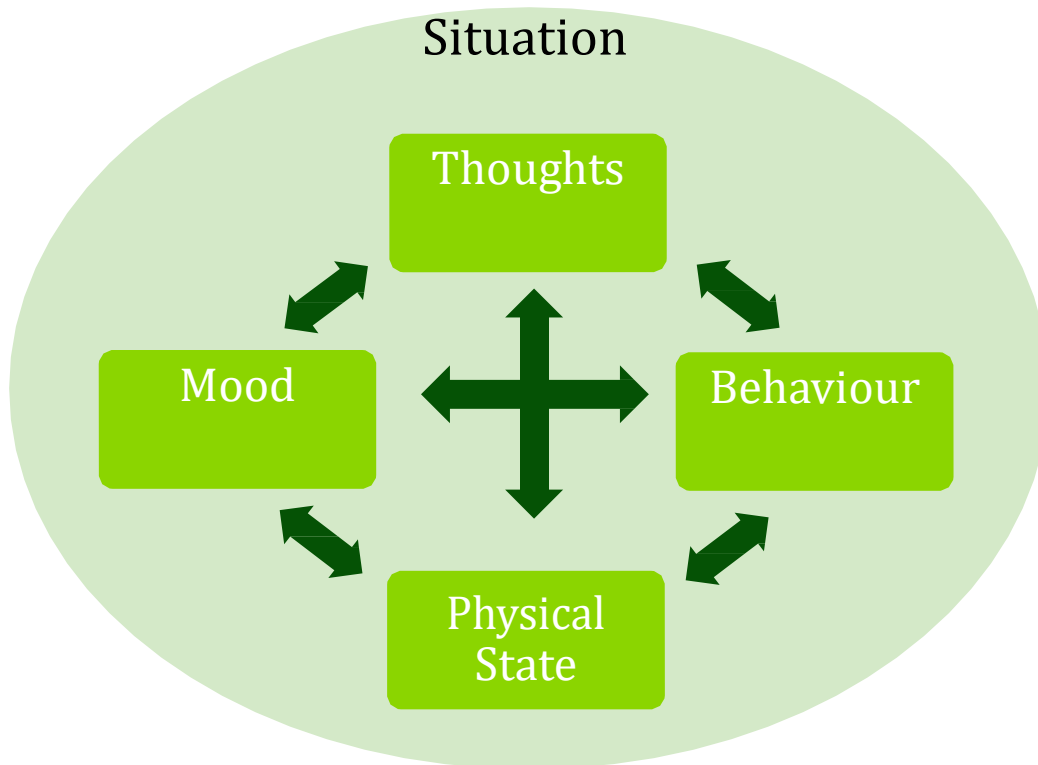
Remember, this workbook is intended to help reduce your anxiety, not become yet another thing on your to-do list. With some persistence and dedication, you can learn to take control of your anxiety and make it work for you instead of against you. Let's get started!

## *The Five Factor Model:*

Before moving into solutions for reducing anxiety, it's important to understand what anxiety is and how it operates.

Throughout this workbook, we will be using central concepts and strategies adapted from **Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)**. CBT is a short-term therapy that has been shown to be very effective in the treatment of anxiety. One of the central concepts underlying the practice of CBT is the inter-relationship between our thoughts, physical state, behaviour, and mood, in response to our situation or environment.

## Five Factor Model



As you can see from the illustration above, our ability to function is influenced by these five factors. All of these factors have an impact on one another; a change in one area will often produce change in another.

To illustrate, let's use the example of someone preparing to write an exam (**situation**). This could lead to a number of different **thoughts**, such as "I don't know the material" or "I'm going to fail". Thinking these thoughts, we might imagine that this student would become anxious (**mood**). Being anxious might lead to unpleasant **physical** symptoms such as a nervous stomach or heart racing. The physical sensations might then lead to more anxious **thoughts**, such as "If I'm anxious I won't be able to focus when writing my exam". The **thoughts** and the **physical** sensations might then lead this student to get up and surf the Internet for two hours (**behaviour**) in an effort to reduce their anxiety (**mood**).

Everyone's pattern of how these five factors relate might be different, but if you look closely you'll see that these factors do indeed intertwine in your life as well. By using interventions that target each of the five factors, you can develop healthy coping strategies that will reduce your anxiety and improve your overall functioning. Throughout this workbook you'll find strategies that will help you to intervene and reduce your own anxiety in all of these five key areas.

## Understanding Anxiety

Let's talk a little bit about what anxiety is and where it comes from.

First, it's important to understand that anxiety is a built-in human evolutionary survival mechanism. Just like all animals have evolved some kind of built-in biological survival mechanism to help protect them from predators, anxiety is our built-in response system for responding to physical danger. Our earliest ancestors survived because they experienced anxiety—also called the **fight-or-flight** response—in the face of a physical threat, which helped to mobilize them both mentally and physically to either stay and fight a predator, or to flee to safety by running. In this way we are physiologically hardwired to be on high alert in the face of danger. The fight-or-flight response immediately triggers multiple complex changes in our bodies and minds that stomp on the gas pedal and take action in the face of danger. In other words—from a survival perspective—anxiety is a good thing! The chart below describes the changes that occur in our bodies when in fight-or-flight mode. Which of these do you experience when you are feeling anxious?

### Anxiety in the Body

Symptom	What we feel	Why it's good
Heart rate increases	Chest pounding, heart racing	Pumping oxygen to muscles and the brain for quick reaction
Breathing rate increase	Shallow, rapid breathing, possible hyperventilation	Increases amount of oxygen available to body, especially the brain
Muscles tense	Tight muscles, soreness in the limbs if prolonged tension	Increased strength to flee or take on physical threats
Perspiration	Warmth, sweating	Cools down the increased level of heat in the body
Pupils dilate	Sensitivity to light, take in more details	Able to take in more sensory information about a potential threat
Mind racing	Rapid thoughts, hard to concentrate/focus on other tasks	Able to quickly respond to an immediate threat



Focused attention	Certain details become more available, others seem less important	Able to notice quickly if anything changes about a potential threat
Shaking	Shaking hands	Response to adrenalin
Goose bumps	Hair raises, bumpy skin	Response to muscle tension
Immune system slows	Tend to get sick easier, or illnesses last longer	Energy from immune system is directed toward maintaining other protective responses
Digestive system slows	Loss of appetite, nausea, or in certain cases get cravings for 'quick' food (fats/sugars)	Energy from digestive system is directed toward maintaining other protective responses

The above table highlights many of the physiological changes (changes in the body) that happen as a result of anxiety. To add a bit more context, you can think of each person as having a **gas pedal** and a **brake pedal** for our stress. The gas pedal is what we call the **sympathetic nervous system**. This is what kicks the fight-or-flight response into gear, and once that gas pedal has been pressed and the fight-or-flight response has momentum, the only way to stop it is by hitting the brake pedal. That brake pedal is known as the **parasympathetic nervous system**. Once we hit this brake pedal, it sends a signal from our brain down the vagus nerve—a big long nerve that runs throughout our body and branches into all of the body parts typically effected by stress (e.g., lungs, heart, GI tract). This nerve tells our brain to stop searching for danger, it tells our heartbeat to slow down, our muscles to relax, and our GI track to resume its regularly scheduled programming. You can learn to train your brake pedal to activate using a number of different tools, which we will discuss soon.

### What this means for us now...

In modern times, most of us rarely see physical threats to our lives anymore (except in exceptional circumstances). Rather, we tend to experience anxiety at differing levels of intensity in response to life stressors, or to perceived threats to our *social* survival, such as the fear of not getting a job, doing poorly on an exam, or losing someone close to us. It is crucial to remember throughout this workbook that anxiety is a *normal human response* to a stressor or perceived threat for which we are biologically hardwired. We all experience anxiety at different times. It's not desirable or even possible to eliminate anxiety entirely.

The difficulty with anxiety in modern times, however, is that we get 'stuck' with our foot on the gas (as though we are being threatened by a predator) and can't let go. Over time, this can begin to impede your ability to function in your life academically or personally. It can also lead you to experience ongoing distress, reduce your ability to enjoy your life, and eventually can lead to symptoms of exhaustion and burnout, which can further reduce your ability to function. While small amounts of anxiety in short bursts can actually be beneficial (such bursts can help energize you to focus and be mentally sharp, for

example, when writing an exam or preparing an assignment under a tight deadline), we were not built

to withstand prolonged exposure to the fight-or-flight response, and long periods of moderate to high anxiety take their toll.

Some of us are more prone to anxiety and worry than others. Regardless of your predisposition to anxiety, it is certain that we live in a society that breeds stress. This is especially true in university where the pressure for high grades, many extracurriculars, and trying to find a job after graduation are omnipresent. At the same time stress does not end at graduation; learning anxiety management skills now can be enormously beneficial for you in your life as you go forward. If you experience a great deal of anxiety or stress, this workbook provides techniques and strategies that can help you to self-soothe, calm, moderate, and reduce your anxiety to a more manageable level.

### *Outline of the Workbook*

In this workbook you will find (1) a description of different forms of anxiety that students often experience; (2) instructions for Basic Anxiety Management Skills; and (3) a chapter on each of 4 forms of anxiety commonly experienced by Queen's students.



# 2

## BASIC ANXIETY MANAGEMENT SKILLS

## The Importance of Practice

Would you play a piano concert in front of an audience without ever having played the piano? Or write a final exam without going to any classes, reading any material, or even thinking about the subject beforehand?

In this section, we discuss some **Basic Anxiety Management Skills**. You can think of each skill as a tool that you need to develop in order to help manage your anxiety. It's important to remember that these skills work like any other skill set; in order to get the most out of these tools you need to practice them.

Do you know how to drive a car? Think about learning how to drive. When you first get behind the wheel of a car there are so many things to keep in mind: the steering wheel, a whole bunch of mirrors, the back window, signals, traffic around you, try not to mix up the gas and the brake pedal! It's very difficult to keep all of these different things in your working memory at once. Everything is very mechanical and forced and you need to put in a lot of effort to juggle all of these things in your working memory at one time in order to drive safely.

Now think about driving after practicing for a long time. You can get from point A to point B without even thinking about it. It becomes much easier because the skill set of driving moves from your working memory (which is very limited!) to your long-term memory (which is very vast!). It becomes *automatic*. Learning Basic Anxiety Management Skills follows the same principle; in the beginning, these skills are awkward and difficult and may not seem all that helpful. In fact, some people may worry whether or not they are doing the basic skills right or they may get anxious if they don't feel instantly better. That's all normal; it's a skill in development. But in time it gets easier, more automatic, and more *effective*.

In a similar vein, we don't learn how to drive on the highway! We learn on the back roads or in parking lots. We learn where there are less distractions from juggling all the parts of this new skill in our working memory. If we only practice our Basic Skills when we really need them—like in the middle of a panic attack, for example—we are basically learning how to drive in the fast lane of the highway... and that isn't the best way to make the most of this skill set.

Keep in mind that many of the techniques found in this book may seem fairly simple, so it's tempting to try them out and then not use them again until we absolutely need them. But to our brain, we are adding an unfamiliar element to an already stressful situation, and our bodies do not like unfamiliar situations! Therefore, it is important to **practice the following Basic Skills when your stress isn't at its highest** (when you're on "the back roads" instead of on "the highway"), and to **maintain a consistent practice** in order to make these skills more automatic and more effective. Practicing during "down times", or when our body is not at a high level of stress, helps make the techniques routine, and will have a greater effect on decreasing the anxiety reaction when you actually need it!

Now, let's get started...

## Self Care/SPEMS

You may have heard of the term **Self Care** before. People talk about the concept of Self Care in a variety of ways: taking some ‘me time’, hanging out with friends, getting outside for a bit. When dealing with anxiety, however, it is important to unpack the idea of Self Care a bit more.

Self Care underlies healthy living in general, and it is particularly relevant for your mental health. For this reason, we’ve put this section before all other Basic Skills—ideally, you should check-in with your current Self Care and establish new, healthy Self Care habits before attempting any other Basic Skills. You won’t become a world-class skater without first buying a pair of skates—and you wouldn’t get to be very good if those skates were made of wood! Similarly, the Basic Skills and other techniques found in this workbook require a solid foundation; in this case **the bedrock of anxiety management is Self Care**.

Within this workbook we divide Self Care into five domains. These domains can be thought of as buckets that need filling. We are at our best when our buckets are full, or nearly full, but it takes work to keep them that way. When we are feeling low, or our anxiety is high, it may be because our buckets are low or—in some cases—empty. It’s important to look at all five buckets; it’s typical to lose sight of one or two of the buckets every once in a while, and these are often the ones that need filling the most!

Self Care is unique to the individual. We can fill our buckets in many different ways. Because there are so many ways to fill each bucket, something that works well for one person may not work well for another. Many people find it easier to think about each bucket as having different ‘taps’ that are able to fill it—maybe it’s a hot water tap, maybe it’s a cold water tap—but the crucial thing is that the bucket is getting filled, and with a fuller bucket you are more able to enjoy parts of your life. For example, if your friend’s social bucket is low, they may need to hang out with other people a bit more in order to fill it (let’s call this using the ‘hot water’ tap). But maybe when your social bucket is low, you find it gets filled better by getting away from social situations and giving yourself some time alone (the ‘cold water’ tap). Even though this may seem contradictory, remember that it is what works for *you* that counts. As you read through this section, think about how your buckets have been filled in the past and how are currently being filled (or not filled, as the case may be). Use the spaces provided to reflect on what you currently do to fill your buckets and how effective those practices are for you. You can also find this information in Worksheet 2.1 SPEMS: How Do You Fill Your Bucket, in Appendix B.

Below, we’ve listed the five different domains of Self Care and some ideas for how you can fill them. Note that we’ve listed two possible ‘taps’ for each of the buckets below, but you are not limited to two; feel free to get creative! These five domains include: **social, physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual**. Together, they create the acronym **SPEMS**. Acronyms generally make things easier to remember; however, this particular acronym is particularly appropriate because the word ‘spem’ is Latin for ‘**hope**’! This is fantastic, as SPEMS—and Self Care in general—is meant to give you hope for a better future!

## *Social Self Care:*

The Social bucket has to do with **people** around you, and **the connections** that you have with them. “People” can refer to pretty much anybody that you have a relationship with; they can be friends, classmates, or family members. In some cases, our social connections to others are not strong enough so we need to put effort into planning time to spend with others. On the other hand, we may spend too much time with the people in our lives (those social connections can become overloaded), in which case being able to take some time for ourselves may actually help to fill this bucket.

### Possible taps/ways to fill the bucket:

1. How can I connect with other people?

**Examples:** Going to a party, texting friends, re-connecting with high school friends, going for coffee with a classmate, reaching out for support when something is bothering you.

2. How can I disconnect when social interactions are getting too much?

**Examples:** Turning off your phone for an hour, going for a walk, going for coffee with yourself.

### *How do I fill my Social Bucket?*

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## *Physical Self Care:*

The Physical bucket takes a look at the **body**, and ensures that **healthy care habits** are happening. This bucket is primarily focused on physical activity, nutrition, and rest/sleep. Like anything else to do with Self Care, these three components can vary for the individual; however, there are some general guidelines to consider. Regular **physical activity** is important—ideally at least a moderate level of activity (enough to increase your heart rate)—several times per week. Regarding **nutrition**, aim to have snacks and meals that provide a wide variety and healthy range of nutrients in your diet. **Sleep** is a tricky one for many people to maintain (students especially). The amount of sleep your body requires decreases as you get older; for university-aged people, the average person needs just under 8 hours of sleep per night, while the average older adult require about 5 hours. Ensure that your sleep is consistent and an important part of your routine!

Possible taps/ways to fill the bucket:

1. How can I be physically active?

*Examples:* Going to the gym, taking a walk, doing yoga, hiking, biking.

2. How can I relax?

*Examples:* Taking a bath, having a nap, doing meditation, laying on the beach, going to bed early.

*How do I fill my Physical Bucket?*

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## *Emotional Self Care:*

The Emotional bucket is often forgotten. The important part of this bucket is to ensure that you are giving yourself **space and permission** to feel a range of emotions—both ‘positive’ and ‘negative’. Note that crucial word: *permission*. As with many aspects of dealing with anxiety, balance is key. Emotional Self Care ensures we aren’t trying to bottle up everything negative in our lives, but rather we are giving ourselves permission to experience some of those distressing emotions in a *healthy* and *effective* way.

### Possible taps/ways to fill the bucket:

1. How can I ensure I laugh?

**Examples:** Watching a funny video, telling a joke to a friend, reminiscing about good times, being around people who make you laugh.

2. How can I let myself worry – in a healthy way?

**Examples:** Planning ‘Worry Time’ every day, watching a sad movie, taking time to remember people who are no longer with you, journaling.

### *How do I fill my Emotional Bucket?*

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## *Mental Self Care:*

The Mental bucket is about both **activating and relaxing your brain**. There is a big caveat to Mental Self Care: it does *not* include school or homework! This is because school is generally not considered Self Care, as you are typically fulfilling requirements set by someone else, such as a professor or TA.

Obviously, you need to have time in your schedule as a student to focus on academics; however, life still exists outside of school. If learning and academia is really what excites you, try finding something to learn about beyond what you need to do for class (something interesting and just for you), even if it's just for five minutes a day—that is truly Mental Self Care!

### Possible taps/ways to fill the bucket:

1. How can I exercise my brain?

**Examples:** Doing puzzles, trying a new recipe, learning a new language outside of the classroom, having debates with friends.

2. How can I relax my thinking?

**Examples:** Watching TV, doing meditation, letting your mind wander, trying to do absolutely nothing for at least five minutes.

### *How do I fill my Mental Bucket?*

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## *Spiritual Self Care:*

The Spiritual bucket is about **recognizing things outside of yourself** and your own day-to-day life. This is often the most difficult bucket to define, as spirituality can mean so many different things, and it's important to note that it can—but does not necessarily—mean religion. For example, to many people Spiritual Self Care can simply be getting outside and taking the time to notice things in nature that they don't always have time to notice. Others may do the exact same activity and will take the time to reflect on their religious views. Within the same Spiritual bucket it is also good to recognize and reflect on yourself as an individual; different than being socially alone, this emphasizes that you are important and deserve to do things that you want 'just because' every once in a while!

### Possible taps/ways to fill the bucket:

1. How can I recognize things outside of myself?

**Examples:** Spending time in nature, going to religious services, reading spiritual texts, volunteering to help others.

2. How can I give myself 'me time', and recognize that what I want matters?

**Examples:** Eating ice cream just because, watching TV, saying no to other people, making time for solitude and quiet reflection.

### *How do I fill my Spiritual Bucket?*

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## Deep Breathing

Deep breathing, diaphragmatic breathing, or box breathing are all commonly-used names for this tool in our Anxiety Management Workbook. This tool may not be new to you, however, we hope that this workbook will help you understand *why* deep breathing can be helpful for you, and *how* to use it to maximize its effectiveness. The purpose of this exercise is to hit the brake pedal on stress, or activate the parasympathetic nervous system to calm our body's fight-or-flight response. Let's start by discussing *how* to use deep breathing as an anxiety management tool.

### *Before You Begin:*

1. Lie down or sit in a comfortable chair, maintaining good posture. Your body should be as relaxed as possible. Close your eyes. Scan your body for tension.
2. Find a quiet space where you won't be interrupted. Turn off your phone and, if you have housemates, put a sign on your door so you can have some uninterrupted time for yourself.
3. Start out by simply bringing your attention to your breathing. Place one hand on your abdomen, and one hand on your chest. When we are anxious, our breathing tends to be quick and shallow. If you are engaging in shallow breathing, the hand on your chest is the one more likely to be moving up and down. Notice which hand is moving, and how fast it is moving.

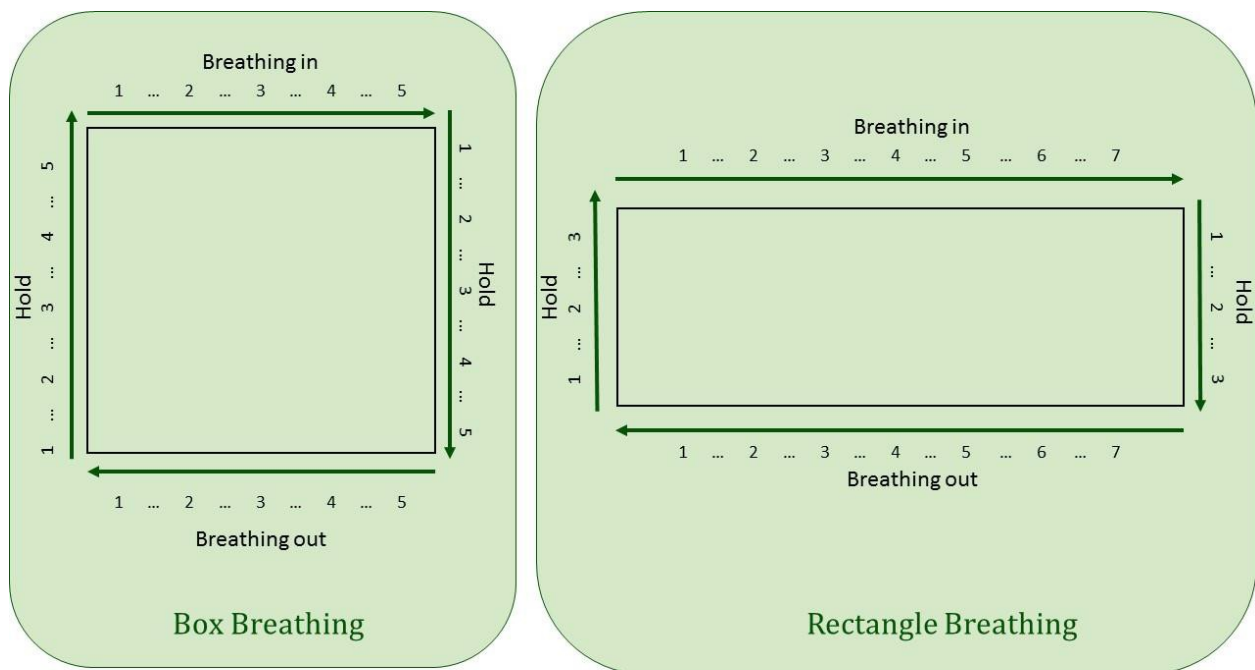
### *Getting Started:*

4. Begin by taking a slow, easy, mindful breath in, through your nose, gently pulling the air deep down into your abdomen. You should feel your abdomen rise with this inhalation and your chest should only move a little. Inhale for a count of 5.
5. Hold that breath deep in your lungs for a count of two.
6. Slowly exhale, making sure to keep your mouth, jaw, and tongue relaxed. Exhale for a count of 5-7. Notice which hand is moving (the one on your chest, or your abdomen?). As all of the air is released with exhalation, gently contract your abdominal muscles to completely empty your lungs of all air. It is important to remember that we deepen our breath by completely emptying our lungs on an exhale, not by filling them with more air on an inhale.
7. Repeat.

## *Variation 1: Box Breathing*

As you count during your inhale, hold, and exhale your breath, imagine that you are following the edges of a box. Breathe in for a count of 5, tracing the topside of the imaginary box in your mind. Now hold that breath in as you trace down one side of that box for a count of 5. Trace along the bottom of that imaginary box as you gently exhale for a count of 5. Finally, trace up the last side of the box as you hold your breath again, for a count of 5. Repeat.

Alternatively, you can also practice “rectangle” breathing, if you wish to hold your breath for shorter periods of time. For example, the imaginary edges of the inhale and exhale may be 5 units long, but the imaginary edges—where you hold your breath—may only be 2 or 3 units long (hence, “rectangle” breathing).



## *Variation 2: Three-Part Breathing*

As you inhale, imagine that your lungs are being filled in three stages. First, focus on the sensation of air entering into your nose and travelling past your throat. Second, focus on the air as it fills up your chest. Third, bring your attention to your abdomen and belly as your breath fills your lungs to their very base. As you exhale, focus on the same three stages in reverse order; first direct your attention to air leaving the base of your lungs; second, air leaving your chest; third, air leaving your throat. Repeat.

## *Additional Notes to Remember*

Practice deep breathing at least two times per day for 7-10 minutes each time. This is the minimum amount of time that it takes for your parasympathetic nervous system (i.e., brake pedal) to be fully activated (i.e., to hit the floor). Set an alarm so you don't need to worry about when your practice is over.

Note that, sometimes, individuals practicing deep breathing may start to feel lightheaded. This sensation simply means that your brain is getting more oxygen than it needs; absolutely nothing bad can come from this! Some people fear that the lightheadedness means that they are going to faint, but fainting is the result of the brain getting *too little* oxygen, not too much. If this happens to you, simply take a break from the exercise and breathe normally for a few minutes; the lightheaded feeling will pass. When you restart the exercise, just take it slow and easy. You can also try to leave a pause between breaths, or try not to breathe quite as deeply.

With time, deep breathing becomes more effective, and its effects are noticeable more quickly (that is, it takes less times for your brake pedal to fully reach the floor). So after a few weeks of practice, you can start to feel the calming response of deep breathing with as little as one to three deep breaths. This is a great tool to use when you don't have time to take 10 minutes to breathe, but need something quick or something in the moment to help reduce stress. It's a great tool; no equipment or assembly required, you can do it anywhere at any time and no one will even notice!

## Mindfulness

Mindfulness is **non-judgmental, purposeful attention to the present moment**. This may seem simple enough, but take a moment to reflect on how often you find yourself doing some sort of mundane activity—like having a shower or walking to class—where you realize that you are “on autopilot”, “a million miles away”, “off in space”, or just not really paying attention to what you’re doing. The countless idioms to describe our state of mind when we are not present in the moment perhaps reflect how often we engage in this behavior (whether we’re aware of it or not). Mindfulness is the exact opposite of this; it is the act of **staying present in the moment**. In other words, mindfulness is the act of keeping your mind here, in the present, instead of letting it wander.

Mindfulness is an important tool for anxiety management (and mental health, in general) because it teaches us to **observe our thoughts**. Thoughts are critical in anxiety (see Five Part Model, Page 2); they happen all of the time and are difficult to control. Mindfulness works by allowing us to **view our thoughts in a more objective, or non-judgmental way**. Mindfully noticing our thoughts can be looked at as the first step in **recognizing the connection** between our thoughts and our feelings or our behaviors, and also as a way to minimize the impact of negative emotions attached to harmful or anxious thoughts.

Mindfulness is in no way a new concept. Mindfulness originates from Buddhist meditative practices. Its conception dates back thousands of years; however, mindfulness is not necessarily religious or spiritual in its nature. Recently, mindfulness has been incorporated into Western medicine practices as an effective tool for improving mental health. This movement was largely the result of Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, a former molecular biologist from MIT, who sparked interest in the medical applications of this practice. As a result, the past few decades have produced a vast amount of scientific research demonstrating the effectiveness of mindfulness as a treatment for the management of anxiety, depression, pain, and even sexual dysfunction. This isn’t a “magic cure-all”, but instead, we are starting to learn that mindfulness improves people’s mental health by providing people a **tool to manage their thoughts**, which, as you know, play a key role in anxiety. Even brain-imaging studies have been used to show that people who undergo short-term mindfulness training programs experience increases in brain matter, more activation in the brain region associated with positive affect, and improved immune functioning. That is, only now is science starting to acknowledge what the Buddhist monks knew all along: **mindfulness can help improve our thinking, our mood, and our overall health!**

So how does mindfulness work? The neurons in our brains are constantly firing, which means that our minds are constantly thinking. How do you just “turn it off?” The answer is: you don’t. Instead, you learn to simply **observe** the thoughts as they happen, observe any feelings that may be attached to those thoughts, and then actively bring your attention back to the present. To illustrate: Imagine that it is a beautiful summer day and you are lying in the soft grass on top of a hill watching the clouds go by. Each thought that you have is like a passing cloud. You watch it as it passes, but you don’t get caught up in all of the intricate details of the cloud, or get swept away by whatever feelings come to mind when you see that cloud. Instead, you simply notice the cloud and allow it to pass as you continue to stare into the sky. More clouds will come, and that’s ok. You simply acknowledge them, and let them pass gently by.

There are many different mindfulness exercises. You will need to find what practice works best for you. In the beginning, staying present in the moment can be a difficult task, especially if you are someone who tends to have lots of anxious (worrying) thoughts! Below, we outline three simple mindfulness techniques. Get a feel for which is right for you, and remember that there are many other alternative mindfulness exercises out there.

# Option 1: Simple Mindfulness Meditation

In this option, you will use a point of focus, or an “anchor” to keep yourself present and in the moment.

## *Before you Begin*

1. Make sure you are in a comfortable position. Typically, it is recommended that you are in a “relaxed, alert posture”; this can mean sitting cross-legged on a pillow on the floor, or sitting in a comfortable chair with your head and neck supported. You want to make sure that you are in a relatively quiet place with few disruptions.
2. Set aside 15-30 minutes. Set an alarm to go off after the decided amount of time so you don’t have to worry about the time while you are practicing your mindfulness.
3. Decide whether you would like your eyes open or closed. Some people prefer their eyes closed in order to reduce distractions. Others prefer to keep their eyes open; if this is you, simply focus on a spot a little distance in front of your nose.

## *Getting Started*

4. **Pick a point of focus.** This could be anything, for example a short saying or mantra (e.g., “I am good”; “I am enough”; “everything is ok”), or your breath. Breath is a very common point of focus in mindfulness because it is constant, rhythmic, and it is always present.
5. **Slowly ease yourself into your practice.** Spend about one minute simply bringing awareness to yourself, giving your mind the opportunity to settle in to its practice. What sensations do you notice in your body? Do you have the urge to fidget? Is there anything around or within you that is calling your attention to it? Simply notice these things without attaching any labels or values to them.
6. **Bring your attention to your point of focus.** Actively bring your attention to your point of focus with the intention of keeping yourself in the present moment. That is, if your breath is your point of focus, simply pay attention to the sensation of air moving in through your nostrils, down your throat, notice as the air fills your lungs and as your chest and belly expand. Don’t do anything to change your breath, simply sit with it. Notice when your mind begins to wander and simply bring your attention back to your point of focus when this happens.
7. **Bring your attention back to your point of focus.** Know that your mind will wander. Simply recognize when this happens and try to use non-judgment to bring your attention back to your point of focus. Try to observe your thoughts with a passive curiosity, but do not get caught up in the emotions that may be attached to those thoughts. Bring your focus back to your point of focus. Thoughts will come and that is ok. Simply acknowledge where your mind has wandered each time, and bring your focus back each time.
8. **Bring your attention back to your point of focus some more.** In the beginning it may feel like you are doing this a lot. That’s ok. Our mind is used to jumping all over the place; this is especially true for people who tend to be anxious. This is why we call it a mindfulness *practice*. It takes time to develop the skill.



## Option 2: Grounding

In this option, you will use your five senses to bring yourself into the present moment and sustain this mindful presence.

### *Before you Begin*

1. Prepare yourself as you would for Option 1; make sure you are comfortable and in a place where you are not likely to be disturbed. This practice tends to be shorter in duration, so you may not feel the need to set an alarm (but if you predict that your thoughts will continuously be distracted by the time, you absolutely can).
2. Again, you will slowly ease yourself into the practice by taking one or two minutes to notice any sensations and begin to calm your mind. Start to bring your focus into the present moment. Recognize where your mind is and bring it back to the present if you find it is wandering.

### *Getting Started*

3. You will begin with your sense of sight. Take note of **five things that you can see around you**. Spend a moment really noticing each of the five things that you see. What colour is each object? What texture does it have? How is the light hitting it? Is it moving or stationary? Acknowledge each sensation with passive acceptance.
4. Next, take note of **five things that you can hear around you**. Feel free to close your eyes if this will help you be more present with each sound. Notice what you notice about each sound. Is the sound loud? Is it pleasant or unpleasant? What quality does the sound have? Sit with each sensation for a moment, just noticing them.
5. Now take note of **five things that you can feel**, just where you are. Perhaps you can feel your body resting on a chair or pillow? Is there a breeze where you are? What is the temperature like? Are there any internal sensations, from inside of your body that you can notice? Just be aware of these sensations, as you sit with each sensation in turn.
6. Finally, notice **five things that you can smell and/or taste**. Is this sensation strong or subtle? Pleasant or unpleasant or neutral? Simply notice and sit with each sensation before you move onto the next one.

## Option 3: Active Mindfulness

Some people prefer to be active as opposed to sitting passively in their mindfulness practice. This option incorporates active movement into mindfulness.

### *Before You Begin*

1. Decide on an activity that you can perform during your active mindfulness practice. This can be anything, really, but choose an activity that is fairly simple in order to give your mind the space it needs to be present in the moment. The activity you choose should be something that can be performed slowly and with a great deal of awareness. Examples of active mindfulness include: washing the dishes, taking a shower, leisurely cross-country skiing, or a slow walk. Be sure that any activity you choose is something that can be done safely!
2. Begin the activity you have planned. Allow yourself a minute or two to ease yourself into your practice. Simply observe what you notice about your experience in the present moment. Are there any internal sensations that you are having? Are there any external sensations? Where is your mind? Notice where your thoughts are, acknowledge this, and begin to actively bring them back to the present moment.

### *Getting Started*

3. Bring your attention to what you are doing in the present moment. For example, if you have chosen to walk, bring your attention to all of the physical sensations of walking. Notice as you lift one foot in the air and feel each muscle and tendon as you swing that leg forward. Bring your attention to the pad of your foot as it touches down on the ground. What part of your foot touches the ground first? What does the sensation of the weight of your body feel like coming down on your foot? On your leg? On your hip? What is happening to the other foot? At what point does the heel of your other foot come off the ground? What is happening to your hands and your arms? What does the contrast feel like between the left and the right side of your body at any given moment?
4. As you keep your attention on the physical sensations of the activity of your choice, remember to notice where your thoughts are. When your thoughts move away from the present moment—and they will—acknowledge this and simply bring them back to the moment. Notice if emotions are attached to those thoughts, but do not get engaged in those feelings; simply notice them as if you would notice clouds in the sky and gently bring your focus back to your activity and the present moment.

## *Additional Notes to Remember:*

Mindfulness is a very effective tool for stress management, but it is also a very tricky tool to master. Our minds are constantly on the go. Keeping thoughts in the present moment can feel like trying to herd a group of cats. With that being said, research shows that mindfulness can have positive effects on mental health regardless of the number of treatment sessions a person gets; that is, it may take a while to master the skill, but a **regular practice is all you need to reap the benefits of this tool**.

That brings us to the next thought; **practice!** Remember that mindfulness is not an easy skill to master, and that is ok! In the beginning, you will find that you are constantly bringing your thoughts back to the present moment. Sometimes, it may feel as if you spend most of your practice bringing your thoughts to the present and very little time in the present at all! Other times, you may not even realize that your thoughts have wandered until it's been a few minutes. This is all part of the practice of mindfulness. With time, it will get *easier* and it will become more *effective*.

Mindfulness is a tool that can be done anywhere, for any amount of time. We highly recommend setting up a **daily mindfulness practice for at least 15-30 minutes** once a day, but the more you practice the more benefit you will receive from this tool. Reminding yourself to be present at regular intervals throughout the day can help, too. Putting your phone away for chunks of time during the day is one great way to help. When you set up your practice, make it a part of your routine, like brushing your teeth, and resolve to practice mindfulness even (especially) when you don't feel like it. This is not a skill that you "need to be in the mood" for. In fact, some of your most effective mindfulness practice will likely be done when you "didn't really feel like it".

Take a moment in the space below to develop a plan for working a regular mindfulness practice into your daily routine. Remember to be specific with your plan. Finding a way to piggyback your mindfulness practice onto pre-existing routines can be very helpful (e.g., I will practice mindfulness when I wash the dishes after dinner, or when I walk to class).

*My plan to regularly practice mindfulness is...*

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## Progressive Muscle Relaxation

One of the more discrete changes that happen in our body when we are stressed or anxious is **muscle tension**. Muscle tension is an adaptive feature of the fight-or-flight response to help us escape danger. That is, shallow breathing helps blood cells fill up on oxygen, and an increased heart rate pumps that oxygenated blood to the muscles. The muscles use this oxygen-rich blood as fuel to build up tension in preparation to either fight, or to run away to safety (flight). You can think of an anxious person's muscles as an elastic band all stretched out and ready to snap in a burst of energy. Progressive Muscle Relaxation, or PMR, is a technique that helps release the tension that builds up in our muscles from anxiety or stress.

Although high muscle tension is a perfect mechanism for escaping danger, what happens when there is no immediate threat? Well, why don't you try it out. Make a tight fist with your hand, as tight as you can. Now tense up your wrist really tightly and bend it in towards your biceps, now bend in your biceps until your entire arm is as tense as you can possibly make it. Now hold and squeeze as hard as you can while you count to 10! Squeeze! Squeeze! Squeeze! Tight! Tight! Tight!

Now let go. Let your arm drop loosely to your side. Let all the tension melt away. Ahhh...

So what just happened? When you are anxious for long periods of time, your body is going through the same thing that your arm just went through; holding onto all of that muscle tension requires a lot of energy. Holding onto muscle tension throughout your body for the entire day is... well, exhausting. Highly anxious people tend to feel completely drained by the end of the day, but are unable to explain why. High muscle tension resulting from sympathetic nervous system activation is a good guess as to why that is; it's like running a marathon, even while you're sitting in your seat!

PMR works to promote relaxation by **letting the tension out of the muscles**. Similar to deep breathing, this sends a message through the vagus nerve, which runs throughout the body, to calm down and this, in turn, activates the parasympathetic nervous system, or the brake pedal of stress. Typically, PMR is practiced for a **minimum of 15 minutes**; however, we also include a shorter alternative in this chapter to use if anxiety strikes you in the moment. Follow the directions below to practice:

## *Before You Begin*

1. **Pick a spot.** Find a quiet, private spot where you can practice this exercise. As this exercise typically takes about 15–30 minutes, you want to find a place where you will likely not be disturbed for this length of time. For example, make sure that demanding pets with an affinity to walk all over you are not around. Try to find a place with minimal outside noise, turn off distractions like the TV and put your phone on airplane mode. A bedroom or reading area tend to make good places to practice.
2. **Get comfortable.** Ideally, you want to be seated in a comfortable chair that can support your legs, arms, head, and neck. It is also possible to practice PMR when you are lying down, but make sure that you are *not* practicing in your bed (according to rules of sleep hygiene, your bed is only for sleeping! Using it to practice PMR may actually disrupt your sleep schedule). If you choose to practice PMR lying down, try not to do it at a time or place where sleep would come easily; you don't want to sleep through this important tool!
3. **Set a timer.** If you are going through the exercise without an audio recording (i.e., running through the steps in your mind), make sure to set an alarm in order to remove the need to worry about keeping track of time. If you are really prone to worrying, set two alarms!

## *Getting Started*

4. **Tensing.** In order to truly relax each muscle group, you will first need to tense it as hard as you can. This is so that your body can recognize the contrast between tense and relaxed muscles. You will go in order from the tip of your toes to the top of your head (see page 29 for a full list of the muscle groups to focus on in your PMR exercise). Make sure that you are isolating your tension to only *one* muscle group at a time; don't let the tension seep into another muscle group. For example, if you are tensing your chest, make sure that your shoulders are not creeping up to your ears. Watch that your jaw is not tensing with other muscle groups, as well (it has a tendency to do that!).

As you tense each muscle group, focus on all of the sensations your body creates. Tease apart all of the feelings. Does it feel warm? Cold? Does the muscle feel strong? Is the muscle shaking? What values do you place on these feelings? Does it feel pleasant or not so nice? Stay with all of the feelings. Remember to squeeze as hard as you can for the entire time you are tensing the muscle group, but not so hard that it causes serious pain or injury. Continue to hold the tension for about 10 seconds.

5. **Relaxing.** Once you are done tensing, completely let go of all tension. Let that body part drop back down or feel that body part sink deeper into the chair/couch/floor that it's resting on. Imagine that all of the tension is flowing out of that muscle group like water (e.g., picture the tension dripping from your fingertips, or flowing down your legs to the floor). Focus on the new sensations that your body creates as the tension seeps out of that muscle group. See if you can contrast the feelings of relaxation with the sensations you experienced when the muscles were tense. What temperature is the muscle group now? What values would you place on the feelings now? Continue to release all tension for about 15 seconds (longer than the time you tensed it).

6. **Repeat.** Follow the same format for each muscle group in order from your toes to your head. Use the list below, and tense each muscle group one at a time. Remember to keep the tension isolated just to a single muscle group.
7. **Final check.** Once you've gone through flexing and relaxing all of the muscle groups, scan your body one last time. Is there any area that is still holding tension? If so, repeat the tensing and relaxing procedure a final time on those muscle groups. Once all of your body is feeling relaxed, take the remainder of your 15-30 minutes to sit with this sensation of full-body relaxation. Note if tension starts to creep into any muscle group and repeat the tense/relax procedures. Otherwise, sit with the feeling of relaxation. Be as present in your body as you can be. Enjoy.

## *List of Muscle Groups:*

1. **Toes and feet.** Tense the toes by curling them down into the bottom of your foot and rolling your ankles to point your feet as far down as you can.
2. **Calves (lower legs).** Flex your toes and ankle upward, as if you are trying to reach your calves with the tip of your toes.
3. **Thighs (upper legs).** Squeeze the muscles in your thighs as tightly as you can.
4. **Glutes (buttocks).** Pull your glute muscles towards each other. You should notice you are rising in your seat.
5. **Lower back.** Arch your back by tilting your pelvis forward, focusing on your low back. Note that this step should be skipped if you have chronic low back pain.
6. **Stomach.** Suck your stomach in; try to pull your bellybutton back to touch your spine.
7. **Chest.** Take a big, deep breath into your chest; puff out your ribs.
8. **Shoulders.** Pull your shoulders up and back; try to touch your ears with your shoulders without moving your neck.
9. **Biceps (upper arm).** Draw your fists up towards your shoulders, bending at the elbow. Squeeze the muscles in your biceps as tightly as you can.
10. **Triceps (lower arm).** Stretch your arms out and lock your elbows; reach your triceps up to the ceiling without moving your arms up.
11. **Wrist and hands.** Tighten your hands into a tight fist; draw your wrist up and back as if you're trying to touch your wrist with your knuckles.
12. **Neck.** Push your head into whatever your head is laying on as hard as you can. Note that this step should be skipped if you have chronic neck pain.
13. **Jaw.** Open your mouth as wide as you can, stretching your jaw out as much as you can.
14. **Face.** Scrunch your face up as tightly as you can. Purse your lips, scrunch up your nose, close your eyes as hard as you can, and scrunch down your eyebrows as far as they will go.

## *Variation 1: PMR on the Go*

If you do not have time to run through an entire PMR session, consider using the basic principles of PMR to tense and relax a single muscle group. Although this will not provide all of the benefits of a full session of PMR, it can certainly help reduce anxiety a bit. Depending on the muscle group you will be practicing on, you will likely want to sit in a relatively comfortable spot, although this may not be necessary. Just make sure that you will be able to fully relax the muscle group you're focusing on when the time comes.

Wherever you are, simply pick the muscle group that you would like to focus on. Tense that group as much as you can without causing pain and hold for 5-10 seconds. Then release all of the muscle tension for 10-15 seconds (remember to spend more time relaxing it than flexing it). Focus on the sensations in that part of your body and try to contrast the feeling of tension compared to relaxation.

With some practice, you will start to recognize certain body parts that you tend to tense more. For example, common points of tension tend to be the jaw (common cause of headaches) and the shoulders. These tend to be good sites on which to practice PMR on the go.

## *Additional Notes to Remember*

PMR, like many of the Basic Skills explored in this workbook, require **practice**. In the beginning, PMR may feel awkward, difficult, or unpleasant. This is especially true if you tend to be very introspective with respect to body sensations; that is, some people are much more aware of things going on inside of their bodies than other people. If this is you, tensing your muscles for up to 10 seconds may be very unpleasant and—perhaps in the beginning—even stressful. However, it is important to continue practicing and push through this emotional discomfort. It is only with practice that this tool will become more effective. And remind yourself that, as an anxious person with your fight-or-flight response constantly activated, your muscles are likely to be tense most of the time anyway; tensing your muscles for PMR is nothing new! Furthermore, PMR is working *with* your body by sending a message to the vagus nerve (i.e., “it’s ok for you to relax now, muscles”) in order to turn off the fight-or-flight response. Nothing bad can happen to you by practicing PMR. It may take a while for this skill to feel effective for you, but with practice, it will come!

If you think it would be easier to practice PMR with an audio-recording, as opposed to running through the script in your head, there are many options. First, you can consider recording yourself or ask a friend if you can record them reciting an adaptation of the script we provide. Alternatively, you can find many guided Progressive Muscle Relaxation scripts online.



## Worry Time

Everyone experiences worries at one point or another, but sometimes those worries can start to get in the way of other things. Worrying can act like a chain reaction: one worrying thought pops up, which tends to bring a different worrying thought, and that is attached to a number of additional worrying thoughts. Worry tends to increase in response to two different situations: (1) When we have a particular thing that is making us anxious (e.g., an upcoming exam); or (2) When our over-all anxiety is high. Worrying maintains or increases our anxiety, and it can eat up a lot of time and energy.

Thoughts tend to come up as if they're acting of their own accord. No one *enjoys* having worrying thoughts, but we all have them on occasion. **Worry Time** is a tool that gives you permission to worry in a controlled way, so that the worrying thoughts that pop up over the course of a day can be dealt with, instead of allowing them to eat up more than their share of your precious time and energy. Here's how it works:

### *Before You Begin*

1. Pick a time in the evening to practice your Worry Time. Make sure that you have plenty of time to “unwind” in between Worry Time and your bedtime so as not to interfere with your ability to fall asleep. Typically, it is a good idea to practice Worry Time just before you have something to do (like dinner time, or cleaning the dishes), so that you can shift your thoughts to something different immediately afterwards.
2. Find a quiet place, somewhere where you are unlikely to be disturbed.
3. Set a timer for no more than 15 minutes. This is the time that you are allowed to worry for. You don't want to make that time too long, otherwise you may cross over from “worrying” to “ruminating” (when the same negative thoughts just go round and round and round in your head), which is not helpful!

### *Getting Started*

4. Sit down with a pen and paper, or open up a new word processing document on your computer. Once your timer starts, begin writing down all of your worries. Use this time to worry your heart out! There is no worry too big or too small for Worry Time.
5. When the timer goes off, stop! Turn the paper over or take your hands away from the keyboard. Some people do not like to hold onto their worries, so feel free to rip up that paper or close the document without saving. That is it; the end of your Worry Time.
6. Try to immerse yourself in a different activity as soon as you can, in order to help prevent your mind from continuing on the trail of some of those worrying thoughts.
7. Throughout the day, if a worrying thought comes up for you, take note. Tell yourself “ok, that is something I will need to worry about in Worry Time tonight”. If it helps, you can even write that thought down on a notepad or in your phone to remember for Worry Time.

## *Variation 1:*

Instead of writing out your worries during Worry Time, you can talk them out. If you have a trusted person who wouldn't mind sitting with you and quietly listen to you vent, you can use them as a sounding board. It's not necessary for this person to provide feedback (in fact, this person should be silent during your Worry Time). This is a chance for you to get your worries out, not work them out! Alternatively, you can talk your worries out to yourself, if that would be easier for you.

## *Additional Notes to Remember*

Worry Time is different from ruminating or dwelling on thoughts because it offers you a controlled time to deal with them. For some people, one Worry Time per day isn't enough. That's just fine. You can have more than one Worry Time per day. With practice, you will begin to notice that you don't need as much Worry Time, and you can try reducing the number of times you practice this tool in a day.

Also, it is very important to leave your worries at Worry Time. This doesn't mean that you can absolutely stop thoughts from popping up during the day, but you *can* decide to limit the time you give these thoughts. This is why it is a good idea to have another activity planned for immediately after Worry Time; so you can move on from these thoughts. Additionally, consider using Mindfulness (page 18), Time Management Skills (page 30) or Thought Records (page 36) for more directive ways of dealing with worry outside of your Worry Time. This skill isn't intended for you to *avoid* your worries outside of Worry Time, it's meant to teach you how to *tolerate* these worries, and stop them from taking up too much of your valuable time.

# Time Management

When we don't have very effective time management strategies it can seem as if it's impossible to fit in the millions of assignments and readings that need to be finished before their due dates. Naturally, this leads to an increase in stress and anxiety. Managing your time is a skill that—when done effectively—can decrease the sensation of overwhelm by developing a strategy to manage the various tasks that often build up day-to-day.

The use of a well thought out schedule decreases the amount of pressure for individual tasks, and crossing items off the (do-able!) to-do list garners an incredible sense of achievement that can help to counteract anxiety. By practicing and developing the skill of Time Management, you will be setting yourself up for success in your studies. Properly navigating the time that you *do* have can increase your productivity, which affords you more energy to devote to the tasks that you truly enjoy (and, in turn, helps decrease overall levels of stress)! The wonderful part about learning Time Management skills is that you will be able to use these skills throughout the rest of your life—in jobs, with family, and even in relationships.

Steps in managing your time:

## *1. Analyze Your Current Situation*

Take some time to look at how you are actually using your time right now. This is an important first step, because it is very difficult to make a plan for where you're going unless you have an idea of where you currently are! Ironically enough, this part can take some time to do. In Appendix B you will find a blank schedule of a full week (Worksheet 2.2 Time Management: Scheduling Your Time). In order to evaluate how you tend to spend your time, make a plan to fill out the schedule at the end of each day for the next week. Be sure to include 'down time', such as hanging out with friends, eating, and of course include any time that you are sleeping, as well.

## *2. Prioritize*

Write down everything that you have to do. Once this list is complete, take a look at all of the things that need to get done. Note that seeing your entire to-do list on one page may increase your stress levels slightly at first, but it will be worth it in the end! By writing a list of everything you have to do, it allows you to plan the order to complete the tasks in a logical way that will most benefit you (i.e., prioritize!). Typically, you will want to deal with the most **urgent** and **important** items first. Once these "big ticket" items are completed, your stress should decrease, which makes it easier to complete the rest of your list.

In order to help decide which task needs doing first, use the following table to break up which items are urgent, which are important, and which are both (or neither). Items that are urgent and important should be at the top of your list. Ideally, you are aiming to minimize the number of urgent tasks you have, and mostly focus on important tasks. Typically, we define important as having at least one of the following characteristics:

1. It's a challenge
2. Completing it will put you ahead in some way
3. You are the only person who can do it

Use the following table to prioritize your to-do list according to the important/urgent criteria. You can also find this table in Appendix B (Worksheet 2.3 Time Management: Prioritizing Your To-Do List)

### WORKSHEET 2.3 Time Management: Prioritizing Your To-Do List

	Important	Not important
Urgent		
Not urgent		

## 3. Put Things into a Schedule

Once you have decided on your priorities, it's time to start putting all of your tasks into a schedule including items that are important (e.g. your partner's birthday party), urgent (e.g. an assignment due tomorrow afternoon), and even those that do not fall into either of these categories (e.g. finishing the final level of your newest video game). Remember that it's important to have a schedule laid out, because this is what will hold you accountable once you start crossing items off your list. It will also help you develop a realistic plan for completing all of your tasks in a timely manner. Many students find it useful to have a calendar for these reasons, either digitally or in paper form.

Remember that you have 168 hours every week—minus those hours during which you are sleeping, of course. That’s still quite a bit of time, and sometimes seeing how much space there is can lessen the overwhelm!

Using the blank schedule in Appendix B (Worksheet 2.2 Time Management: Scheduling Your Time); start by filling in those items that you cannot change, for example lectures and fixed appointments. Take a look at your schedule now and consider all of the free spaces you have! Fill in the rest of the schedule according to your priorities. Don’t forget to include downtime/SPEMS, and time for a good night’s sleep. Remember that it’s okay (and actually quite necessary) to have unplanned or white space, too.

## *4. Maximize Your Plan*

Every once in a while, when completing the above step, you will find that you have a decision to make—maybe two items conflict, or something comes up that is unexpected. Decision-making can be tough, but when it comes to time management, there are some questions you can ask yourself that may help:

- Is the timing that I’ve laid out appropriate? Am I better at doing certain tasks at certain times of the day?
- If I was an employer, would I pay myself to do what I’m doing/want to do?
- Put things into perspective—what will the impact of my decision be five minutes from now? Five hours? Five days? Five years?

If you are still having difficulties choosing between various priorities, have a look at the Decisional Balance Tool, found on page 34 and in Appendix B (Worksheet 2.4 Decision Making: Decisional Balance Sheet).

## *5. Ensure Accountability*

Many people will get through the above steps, pat themselves on the back, walk away feeling great about their Time Management skills... and never end up completing any of the plans that they set out to do! This is because they may be lacking **accountability**. Accountability is something (or someone) that will ensure you will actually complete the tasks that you have set out to do. Everybody is held accountable in different ways. For some people, it is enough to have a to-do list, because those people are able to stay accountable to themselves; however, these people are the exception, not the rule. Most of us need something more. Maybe it’s having a friend or family member call and check in, or maybe it’s setting up a game between classmates with challenges and rewards. How do *you* stay accountable?

## 6. *Be Adaptable!*

This is much easier said than done, but it is important to remember that no matter how much effort we've put into planning and managing our time, unexpected things always come up. Remember: it's okay to change your schedule, even if the reason is outside of your control. If some things on your list don't get completed as a result of schedule changes, there is literally another 168 hours waiting for you next week!

Some additional tips or strategies that students often find helpful in managing their time and becoming motivated:

- If to-do lists don't work for you, try making a '**not-to-do**' list. Figure out what things you do that are *not* helping (e.g., things you do to procrastinate), and tell yourself that you will not do them for a certain period of time. For example, 'I will not go on any social media sites from 6:00-8:00pm tonight'.
- Try the five-minute rule. Starting on a task is often the most difficult part of the process, so rather than looking at it as multiple hours of work, set a timer for **just five minutes**. Start the task and fully devote yourself to working on the task for those five minutes. When the timer rings, *give yourself permission to stop*. But if you are motivated to keep going, then continue! Remember, if you find yourself not wanting to continue, *that's fine*. At the very least, you still have completed five minutes' worth of work!
- Try to find ways to **build up motivation over the long-term**. Often times, once we've started working we can stay motivated for a while, but trying to get re-started after taking a break—whether it be a few minutes or a few days—can be very challenging. If you are taking a short break, try to keep your motivation going by stopping for your break five or ten minutes before you “run out of steam”. If you work until you are completely out of steam every time, it will very difficult to get back to work after a break. Alternatively, if you're taking a longer break (e.g., you're finishing up for the night and plan to keep working in the morning), consider leaving yourself a “fun” or engaging task to start up with after your long break. This way, you will be more motivated to start working tomorrow compared to if you stopped right before a task you really don't enjoy.
- **Routine** is very important—and helpful! Train your brain to know that certain times of the day are study times, and other times are relaxation times. The more you can keep up a similar schedule, the easier tasks become. Having a routine lets you go into “auto-pilot” mode, which takes away a lot of the decision-making that anxious people find so difficult, and therefore frees up a lot of time and valuable mental energy!
- Discover your “**productivity helpers**”. For those activities you must do yourself, find ways to be as efficient as you can, that is, your “productivity helpers”. How can you take the pressure off of yourself as much as possible? For example, create reusable templates for anything that you do repeatedly, or write out study notes *now* so you have them ready during exam time. Your time is your most valuable resource—don't squander it.

## Decision Making

Making decisions can be challenging for anybody, but anxiety can make it even more difficult. Anxiety often comes in the form of the fear of the unknown. In order to minimize anxiety, it's not uncommon to try to plan for every possible outcome (see Chapter 3 on GAD, page 53). The problem is that planning for all possible outcomes can be incredibly overwhelming, and often cripple our ability to make a decision. Alternatively, it may just be easier to avoid the situation all together, and not make a decision at all.

Below is a tool to help evaluate your options in order to make a decision; it's called a Decisional Balance Tool. This tool can be used for big decisions (e.g., "What do I want to major in?"; "Should I take this part-time job?"), or smaller decisions ("What do I want to eat for lunch?"; "Should I go out with friends tonight, or stay in and study?").

### *How to Use a Decisional Balance Sheet*

This tool is intended to help you come to a decision by: (1) Developing a reasonable number of options, and (2) Evaluating each option. First, you will write out all of your possible options (column 1). Sometimes there are only 2 options, sometimes there are more. Remember to try to look at *all* of the options available to you; ask for other people's opinions if you think you may be overlooking something. Next, write out the costs and benefits to each option. Keep these as *objective* as possible; base the benefits and costs on facts as much as you can, not on opinions or hypotheticals. Ask yourself, "if 3 other people were to look at this right now, would they agree?". If the answer is no, it's probably not an objective point.

#### *Example*

Andria is in her second year of BioChem, and is very unhappy with her program so far. She is considering changing into Philosophy, because she believes that she will enjoy it more, but she is having a very difficult time making this decision. Andria uses a Decisional Balance Sheet to work through this tough decision.

## WORKSHEET 2.4 Decision Making: Decisional Balance Sheet

Options:	Benefits:	Costs:
(1) Stay in BioChem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I've already spent 2 years in the program</li> <li>• ...??? (nothing else)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I do not enjoy the material</li> <li>• I find the material very difficult to understand, and I am struggling to keep up with the workload</li> <li>• My levels of anxiety are very high because I am struggling in the program</li> <li>• I am unhappy</li> <li>• I have few friends in my program</li> </ul>
(2) Switch into Philosophy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I will be doing something that I love</li> <li>• I will be happier and less stressed out</li> <li>• In my philosophy elective, my mark was very high and I expect I could maintain a high average in the program</li> <li>• I find writing easy, so I will likely have less difficulty keeping up with the workload</li> <li>• I already have 3 friends in the program</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My future job prospects may be less certain (<i>but I can't know for sure</i>)</li> <li>• I may need to take an extra year to catch up on courses; financial expenses</li> </ul>

In the back of this workbook, you will find a handout with a full-sized Decisional Balance Sheet (Appendix B, Worksheet 2.4 Decision Making: Decisional Balance Sheet). Use this handout to tackle a decision that you are struggling with now. Write down all possible options first, and then take some time to explore the benefits and costs of each option. At the bottom of the handout there is a space to write the decision that you come to. Be sure to fill this out when you have completed the Decisional Balance Sheet.



## The Thought Record

One of the most important Basic Anxiety Management Skills is the ability to **deal effectively with your thoughts**. Negative automatic thoughts—or ‘anxious cognitions’ as they are sometimes called—play a central role where anxiety is concerned. Remember the Five Factor Model? (Page 2). Recall that our thoughts, mood, physical state, behaviours, and situation all mutually influence one another. When we are feeling anxious our mind will tend to generate more and more anxious thoughts. And, conversely, the more anxious thoughts we think about and dwell upon, the more anxiety we will feel, both emotionally and physically. Anxious thoughts will, in turn, influence our behaviour and how we choose to handle our life situation. In the sections above we examined Basic Anxiety Management Skills that primarily help reduce the emotional, physical, behavioural, and situational effects of anxiety, although some of these—such as Mindfulness—can help quiet the mind as well. In this section, we will focus in on our anxious thoughts.

Thoughts pass through our minds all the time, including benign thoughts and more emotionally charged thoughts. This is what our minds love to do—our minds *love* to be busy and to think things. This is part of the benefit—and at times the liability—of being in possession of a higher order brain! Ideally, we want to be able to take advantage of the amazing things our brains can do, while also being able to slow and calm down our minds when they behave in ways that are unhelpful. Anxiety tends to ramp up the speed of our thoughts and compel us to think increasingly worrisome, extreme, and frightening thoughts. Getting pulled into this cycle is definitely unhelpful.

Recall that there is an evolutionary basis for anxiety. When our bodies, minds, and emotions get revved into high gear, this is known as the fight-or-flight response, and it is a survival mechanism that was useful early in human history when we needed to keep ourselves safe from predators. We needed to be able to think quickly (which is why our minds often race when anxious), and accurately assess danger (which is why our brains focus on all the bad things that can happen when we are feeling anxious).

When we think anxious thoughts, our bodies can’t differentiate between an actual physical threat in the world (like a sabre-toothed tiger) or a non-physical threat (like worry about passing a course or getting a job). *Our bodies respond as though we are actually in physical danger*. This is why anxiety is often accompanied by emotional and physical symptoms. Our bodies and minds are hardwired to do this and can handle this in short bursts. The problem with anxiety is that we get stuck in this high gear and can’t get out, which in turn leads to emotional distress, and over time, exhaustion and burnout.

So what can you do to intervene with your anxious thoughts? Well, you can’t **control** what you think. In fact, trying to do so sometimes increases anxiety. What does work is subjecting your anxious thoughts to the light of day by saying them out loud to someone else, or, as you’ll see below, writing them down on paper. Getting anxious thoughts out of our head is the first step in helping us to see the **distortion** in our thinking. The next step is to subject our thoughts to questioning, critique, or inquiry. When we do so, the anxious thought usually **lessens in intensity** and may even be released entirely from our mind, at least for a period of time, giving us some **relief** from our anxiety.

In order to go through this process, we use a widely-used tool called a **Thought Record**. The Thought Record helps us to articulate our anxious thoughts, and then walks us through a process of inquiry to question those thoughts. Finally, the Thought Record helps us to create a list of calmer, more balanced and reasonable ways of thinking about ourselves and our situation.

In the following section, you will find step-by-step instructions for how to complete your own Thought Record. Sample Thought Records will be included in subsequent chapters so that you can look at case examples for the specific type of anxiety you are experiencing. In addition, there are two versions of the blank Thought Record template in Appendix B for your use; one version is two pages (Worksheet 2.5a Thought Record (2 page version)), for when you have a lot on your mind; the second version is a single page (Worksheet 2.5b Thought Record (1 page version)), for quicker Thought Records.

## Introduction to the Thought Record

### *Developing Awareness*

In order to be able to use a Thought Record to reduce anxiety, you will first need to be aware of what your anxious thoughts actually are. It is possible that you are already quite aware of your anxious thoughts and are able to begin writing them down immediately. If so, please proceed to the next section on **Completing the Thought Record**. However, it is very common for people to have no conscious awareness, or perhaps only a vague semi-awareness of the anxious thoughts that go through their mind. If this is the case for you, try the following before attempting to use a Thought Record:

Over the next few days, practice Mindful Awareness of your anxious thoughts (for more information on Mindfulness, see page 18). Simply begin to bring your attention to the thoughts that go through your mind. As you go to class, get in the shower, or stand in line to get your lunch, notice what thoughts you are having. Pay special attention to what thoughts occur just before your anxiety spikes or during the times that you feel anxious. These are your anxious cognitions. You may wish to write the thoughts down in a special notebook or in your phone when they happen. Then you can transfer these anxious thoughts into a Thought Record at a later time.

## *Completing the Thought Record*

Once you have some idea of what your anxious thoughts are, it is time to move on to the completion of the actual Thought Record. There are three columns in the Thought Record. You can use the prompts at the bottom of each column to help you. But first, review these detailed instructions for how to complete your own personal Thought Record.

### *Column 1: Anxious/Negative Thoughts*

In Column 1, write down any anxious thoughts that you are currently having. Thought Records work best when they are done following an event that causes anxiety or if we are feeling particularly anxious. You can also write down anxious thoughts that you had earlier in the day (even if you are not feeling anxious now), or about a particular situation in your life around which you have been experiencing anxiety. Remember that you can complete as many Thought Records as you'd like, so don't feel as though you need to write down every anxious thought you have on just one form.

Once you have listed your current or most pressing Anxious/Negative Thoughts, circle your **Hot Thought** or group of related Hot Thoughts. Generally speaking, your Hot Thought is the anxious thought that triggers the most intense anxiety. The thought or thoughts you have circled will be the one(s) you will be working with for the remaining two columns of the Thought Record.

You are now ready to move on to Column 2.

### *Column 2: Identify Thought Distortions*

In Column 2 you are asked to identify what specific Anxious Thought Distortions best describe your Hot Thought(s). Read through the descriptions below of the most common Anxious Thought Distortions (For ease of reference you will also find these listed at the bottom of Column 2 of the Thought Record template).

## *Anxious Thought Distortions*

One of the things that anxiety does is it drives our thoughts to extremes. Anxiety pulls our thoughts down the road to believing in the most frightening, negative possible outcomes for situations, which in turn ramps up our anxiety even more. When we are feeling anxious, the challenge is to keep our thoughts as reality-based as possible.

Here is a list of the most common Anxious Thought Distortions. See if you can recognize your own anxious thinking in any of these:

1. **Catastrophizing.** This is probably the most common Anxious Thought Distortion. Catastrophizing occurs when your anxiety leads you to focus on and worry about the worst possible outcome of a given situation. Typically, people begin by worrying about some concerning aspect of their situation, then a snowball effect occurs in which one anxious thought leads to an even worse anxious thought, and so on, until finally they are worrying about the worst possible case scenario, which they then anxiously focus on. This leads us to the next Thought Distortion.
2. **Overestimating Probability.** When we anxiously worry about the worst possible outcome, we also tend to vastly overestimate the statistical probability of the worst thing happening. In life, terrible things usually only happen rarely. Most of the time things work out fine, or when we encounter difficulties we are able to resolve them. When we are anxious, we tend to believe that the worst possible outcome is very likely to occur when in fact, usually, it is statistically very *unlikely* to occur.
3. **Perfectionism.** Perfectionistic thoughts drive us to always do more or be better. There is nothing wrong with striving for excellence, but perfectionistic thought distortions are extreme, unrelenting, and unreasonable. Perfectionism tells us that we are never good enough, we aren't doing enough, and we aren't allowed to make mistakes. Perfectionistic thoughts often start with "I should" or "I have to".
4. **Focusing on only the Negatives.** Anxious thoughts tend to be (no surprise here) very negative. Anxiety drives scary thoughts about ourselves and the world. In the process, we lose sight of positive aspects of ourselves, our abilities, and our experiences in the world. We need to take a step back and look at the whole picture—which usually includes both negative *and* positive.
5. **Predicting the Future.** This is also sometimes called **Fortune Telling**. When we are anxious we tend to start having "What If?" thoughts. What if this bad thing happens or that bad thing happens? We get into a mindset where we are predicting what will happen and then we start believing our own predictions *as though they are reality*. We need to remind ourselves that we can't know what the future will bring, and reassure ourselves that it's okay to be in a state of openness and not knowing.
6. **Generalizing.** Generalizing happens when we believe that something will happen in a particular way because it has happened that way before. "Because I failed my Christmas exam in this course I know I'm going to fail the final". Just because something has happened badly once doesn't mean it will necessarily happen that way again. This is especially true if you are using new skills, such as Basic Anxiety Management Skills. Circumstances may have changed or be different now. It is important to look realistically at the unique aspects of each situation.

7. **Underestimating Your Ability to Cope.** The fact is that, occasionally, bad or difficult things do happen to us in life. We can't prevent all bad things from ever happening. The question is how do we cope or handle it when something difficult or upsetting does occur? This Anxious Thought Distortion tells us that we couldn't handle it, that we would fall apart, die of embarrassment, or lose everything if something bad happened. But studies have shown that, on average, people are much better at coping with terrible events than even they expect. Handling difficult life experiences can help people to discover their own inner strengths, receive support from others they didn't know they had, and learn important lessons in their lives. When bad things happen, we cope, we grow, and others rise up to help us. Try asking yourself "What would I do if my worst fear happened?"; "How would I handle it?"; "What are my options?"
8. **Mind Reading.** We Mind Read when we imagine that we know what someone else is thinking, for example: "She thinks I did a terrible job on my presentation". Once we assume we know what others are thinking or feeling we start worrying and become anxious about that. People think all kinds of things; none of us can possibly know what someone else is thinking. Also, we can't control what people think about us; often what others think is filtered through their own subjective perspective. Have you ever thought something not so great about someone else? Is it possible to do that but still absolutely like the person? Of course it is! Practice letting go of worrying about something you can't control: other people's thoughts.

## *Column 3: Balanced/Realistic Self-Talk*

You are now ready to move to the third and final column. To complete this column, try as best as you can to take a step back and examine your Hot Thought from a distance, as objectively as possible. Read it over. Say it out loud. Then use the following questions (also listed at the bottom of Column 3 of the Thought Record template) to question your Hot Thought(s):

- Is the Hot Thought true? Is it always true? Is it partially true? Are there ways in which it is not true? Are there times when it is not true?
- What is the evidence to support the Hot Thought? What is the evidence against it?
- If you had to debate this thought or make a counterargument against it, what would you say?
- Is there another way of looking at this?
- What's the bigger picture?
- If you are catastrophizing, what is the probability of this thought actually happening? If your feared outcome does happen, how terrible would it be? Could you handle it, figure out how to move on with your life?
- What would a good friend say to you about your perspective on this?
- Are there kinder, more respectful ways of thinking about yourself in your life that allow you to be a human being who makes mistakes, with strengths and limitations?

Then, using these questions as guides, write down your new insights and alternative perspectives in Column 3.

## *General Rules for Writing Balanced/Realistic Self-Talk:*

1. **Use “I” statements.** *E.g., “I now choose to stay present-focused when writing my exams”.*
2. **Use the present tense.** *E.g., “I am now calm and grounded while I figure out how to get all my work done”.*
3. **Use positive assertions, not negative ones.** *E.g. “I now use my Basic Skills to calm myself” versus “I’m not going to have a Panic Attack”.*
4. **Use simple, balanced statements of reality.** *E.g., “I can be anxious and still do this.”*

## *After Your Thought Record is Complete:*

Once you have completed a Thought Record, fold or detach the third column (Balanced/Realistic Self-Talk). Keep the column somewhere you can easily refer to it. Tape it on your bathroom mirror or carry it around in your bag with you for easy reference.

Then, use your Balanced/Realistic Self-Talk in one of two ways:

1. Read through the list repeatedly throughout the day to remind yourself of your balanced perspective.

And/Or

2. Pick one statement from the list and repeat it over and over to yourself in your own mind. This is especially important if you are entering a situation that triggers anxiety for you, or if you are experiencing a higher than usual level of anxiety. By doing this you are effectively interrupting your mind from thinking about and dwelling on anxious thoughts that ramp up your anxiety levels. Instead, you are consciously focusing your mind on more realistic, calming thoughts.

You can return to your Balanced/Realistic Self-Talk sheet any time your anxiety begins to spike. Remember that you can complete a Thought Record any time you are feeling anxious.

Take some time now to complete a Thought Record of your own. Or, review the chapter that addresses the particular form of anxiety that you are experiencing, then complete a Thought Record. Don’t forget that there are one- and two-page Thought Record templates in Appendix B.

Remember that by doing this work **consistently** with your anxious thoughts, you are creating new, more positive and calming mental habits for yourself. Be patient with yourself; it takes time to retrain your brain after months or even years of anxious thoughts taking hold. Be consistent, use your Thought Record whenever anxiety arises, and you will reap the rewards over time.

## WORKSHEET 2.5a Thought Record

Thought	
1. Anxious/Negative Thoughts:	2. Identify Thought Distortions: (select from list below)
1. Anxious/Negative Thoughts:	2. Identify Thought Distortions:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Write down Anxious/Negative Thoughts</li> <li>• Circle your Hot Thought or group of related Hot Thoughts</li> </ul>	<p><u>Catastrophizing</u> – focusing on the worst possible outcome</p> <p><u>Overestimating probability</u> – of bad things happening</p> <p><u>Perfectionism</u> – pressuring the self to be perfect: “I should...”</p> <p><u>Focusing on only the negatives</u> – ignoring positives</p> <p><u>Predicting the future</u> – how can you know what will happen?</p> <p><u>Generalizing</u> – ignoring differences in circumstances</p> <p><u>Underestimating your ability to cope</u> – if something bad does happen</p> <p><u>Mind reading</u> – imagining you know what another is thinking</p>

## WORKSHEET 2.5a Thought Record

### *Record*

#### **3. Balanced/Realistic Self-Talk:**

*(use the questions below)*

#### **3. Balanced/Realistic Self-Talk:**

*(Ask yourself...)*

- Is the Hot Thought true? Is it always true? Is it partially true? Are there ways in which it is not true? Are there times when it is not true?
- What is the evidence to support the Hot Thought? What is the evidence against it?
- If you had to debate this thought or make a counterargument against it, what would you say?
- Is there another way of looking at this?
- What's the bigger picture?
- If you are catastrophizing, what is the probability of this thought actually happening? If your feared outcome does happen, how terrible would it be? Could you handle it, figure out how to move on with your life?
- What would a good friend say to you about this?
- Are there kinder, more respectful ways of thinking about yourself in your life that allow you to be a human being who makes mistakes, with strengths and limitations?



## Behavioural Experiments

Keep in mind the Five Part Model (page 2), and how multiple factors impact anxiety. One tool that uses this model to manage anxiety is the Behavioural Experiment, which helps create more balanced, healthy thoughts by targeting your **behaviour**. Behavioural Experiments can be used in two different ways: (1) To test out an anxious thought in order to help build up evidence **against** that thought; or (2) To build up **evidence** in favour of a **new, balanced alternative thought** after filling out a Thought Record.

To illustrate how Behavioural Experiments work, think of your old, anxious thought as a comfort food, like grandma's fried chicken. You know fried chicken isn't really good for you, but you've been eating it for as long as you can remember and you can't see yourself without it. Now think of a helpful, balanced thought as a healthy habit, like going to the gym. You know that going to the gym is much better for you than grandma's fried chicken, but you're hesitant to move on: "What if I don't know how to use the machines at the gym and people laugh at me?"; "I'm not in as good shape as other people at the gym, they're going to feel sorry for me"; "I'm probably going to end up hurting myself"; "I don't think I'll like the gym that much anyway". But soon you find a workout class that you enjoy and those anxious thoughts suddenly hold less weight because you *learn that they aren't true*. After going to the gym for a few weeks you *don't* hurt yourself and you have *no objective evidence* to support that people feel sorry for you. Eventually, you start to crave the post-workout high, and one day you may even choose a salad over your grandma's grease-soaked poultry.

In the above example, the idea of going to the gym produced anxious thoughts predicting awful outcomes about embarrassment or injuries. Behavioural Experiments help us learn that **we never know how things will turn out unless we test it out**. "Facing your fears" is one of the most important skills you can use for managing or even eliminating anxiety. Additionally, the creation of new, balanced alternative thoughts may require some time and active practice before they become more believable, but Behavioural Experiments offer us a way to **buy into the new thoughts**, like one might buy into a new workout routine. So by testing out anxious thoughts (with behaviours), Behavioural Experiments help: (1) Reduce or eliminate anxious thoughts (your brain won't want to hold onto the thoughts if you see they aren't accurate); and (2) Give more weight to balanced, alternative thoughts (your brain *will* want to hold onto these thoughts if it sees they are *more* accurate). The more you expose yourself to these Behavioural Experiments, the more effective they become. That is, repeated exposure to these experiments helps condition our minds to accept new, more balanced ways of thinking. Behavioural Experiments offer a safe, structured way to disprove worrisome thoughts and give more support to balanced alternative thoughts!

## *How to Use Behavioural Experiments*

Behavioural Experiments are an important tool for testing out thoughts. They can be used to gather information for a Thought Record (i.e., evidence to support or not support your Hot Thought), or they can be used to help you “buy into” a new balanced, alternative thought (i.e., give more evidence to the thought by trying it out). Below, we include two different examples of people who use Behavioural Experiments to help with their anxiety.

After you explore the examples, find the blank Behavioural Experiment sheet in Appendix B (Worksheet 2.6 Behavioural Experiment) and complete your own!

## *Things to Remember*

It is important to remember that changes in our thoughts do not happen right away. Sometimes it will take many repeated Behavioural Experiments before you start to truly believe a new, healthy thought. Be patient with yourself, but also consider using this as incentive to practice regularly.

Start small and work your way up. If you need to, you can break down your Behavioural Experiment into multiple small experiments. With most of the skills we speak about in this workbook, you don’t want to set impossible goals for yourself or else you will just end up discouraged. If you are ever in doubt, make your behavioural experiment smaller or easier than you think you can handle and work your way up from there. This will help create a sense of accomplishment (just don’t make the goals *too* small so as not to make serious progress).

### *Example (following-up on a Thought Record)*

Sean has trouble saying no. He is in the fourth year of his engineering degree, and he is a coach at the gym 3 nights per week. Sean is very busy finishing up his degree, but the director at the gym asked Sean to take over another coach’s classes for a few weeks while that coach was recovering from an injury. Sean is very stressed out about this situation, so he did a Thought Record to help cope with this stress. His Hot Thought was “if I don’t say yes to the gym director, then he won’t be able to find a replacement coach and he’ll be disappointed in me” His balanced, alternative thought was “There are at least two other coaches the gym director could ask to help; just because I say no doesn’t mean I am completely letting him down”.

## WORKSHEET 2.6 Behavioural Experiment

<b>The thought to test</b>  <i>Write down the thought you are going to test; is it a balanced alternative thought, or an anxious thought? Make note of how much you believe the thought you are testing</i>	“There are at least two other coaches the gym director could ask to help; just because I say no doesn’t mean I am completely letting him down”	I believe this thought <u>30</u> %	This is a: <u>x</u> Balanced alternative thought  _____ Anxious thought
<b>Design your experiment</b>  <i>How can you put this thought to the test? Include specific information. Break it into small, manageable steps.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I will call the gym director on Thursday night</li> <li>• I will respectfully tell him that I cannot coach more than 3 days per week right now</li> </ul>		
<b>Problem-solving</b>  <i>What problems might come up during the experiment? How can you solve those problems? Have you ever faced a problem like this in the past? If so, how did you handle it? What is your anxiety telling you to do? Remember to consider “Safety Behaviours”, or small, subtle things we do to avoid anxiety. Don’t forget to plan for reducing those behaviours. See if you can identify any Thinking Traps popping up here, like overestimating probability or mind-reading.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I might get too scared to call him → I will address this by practicing deep breathing before I call him, I will set an alarm on my phone to remind me when to call him, and I will mention to him at the gym on Wednesday night to expect a call from me on Thursday, so I am accountable</li> <li>• I might forget what I want to say → I will write it down</li> <li>• My anxiety is telling me to... avoid the phone call → I will use my above plan to make myself accountable and remember to call him</li> <li>• My anxiety is telling me to... give in and agree to coach → I will remind myself that school is my first priority. I will use this behavioural experiment to try saying “no”</li> <li>• The gym director might be disappointed in me → this is a thinking trap (mind-reading, predicting the future). The only way I will know if he is disappointed is if he tells me so. If this happens, I will be able to deal with it by using my Basic Skills, or by responding with “Sorry I’m not to be able to help but school is my first priority right now”.</li> </ul>		
<b>Outcome</b>  <i>After the behavioural experiment, write down what actually happened</i>	I called the gym director on Thursday night; he didn’t seem very upset with me on the phone and he did not say he was disappointed in me. He even made a joke with me on the phone. I felt very anxious before calling him, but after the phone call I felt a lot better.		
<b>What I learned</b>  <i>Write down what you learned. Re-rate how much you believe in the</i>	Saying “no” to coaching additional nights did not ruin my relationship with the gym director. He found someone else to coach.	I believe this thought <u>75</u> %	

**Example (testing anxious thoughts)**

Lila worries about looking stupid in front of her classmates. She is in her second year of Commerce, and she feels that all of her friends are very intelligent and accomplished. She has a regular worry that she will say something wrong in front of her classmates, so she tends to be very quiet and only speak up if she knows something is right with absolute certainty.

**WORKSHEET 2.6 Behavioural Experiment****The thought to test**

*Write down the thought you are going to test; is it a balanced alternative thought, or an anxious thought?*

*Make note of how much you believe the thought you are testing*

"I'm going to say something dumb and everyone will think less of me"

I believe this thought

95 %

This is a:         
Balanced

alternative thought  
  x    
Anxious thought

**Design your experiment**

*How can you put this thought to the test? Include specific information. Break it into small, manageable steps.*

- During our study group tomorrow night I will purposefully answer a question wrong

**Problem-solving**

*What problems might come up during the experiment?*

*How can you solve those problems?*

*Have you ever faced a problem like this in the past? If so, how did you handle it?*

*What is your anxiety telling you to do? Remember to consider "Safety Behaviours", or small, subtle things we do to avoid anxiety. Don't forget to plan for reducing those behaviours.*

*See if you can identify any Thinking Traps popping up here, like overestimating probability or mind-reading.*

- There might not be the opportunity → I will make the opportunity by posing a question that I know the answer to, and then answering my own question with the wrong answer
- My anxiety is telling me to... skip the study group → I will make plans to walk over to the study group with my friend Ena so I can't skip it
- I predict that some people in the group will laugh at me → this is a thinking trap (predicting the future). This has happened to me before where my friend, Emily, laughed at me for saying something dumb. It wasn't that bad; I didn't even blush.

**Outcome**

*After the behavioural experiment, write down what actually happened*

Ena asked a question to the group and I answered it wrong. Emily corrected me, and she was very nice about it. No one made a comment, laughed at me, or called me stupid

**What I learned**

*Re-rate how much you*

*thought now.*

## Chapter 2 – Basic Anxiety Management Skills

I don't have to be right all of the time; it's ok if I  
make a mistake, I'm a human being.

I believe this thought  
80 %





# 3

## TYPES OF ANXIETY: GENERALIZED ANXIETY DISORDER

## Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)

In this chapter we will be discussing generalized anxiety. Generalized anxiety doesn't seem to be attached to one specific thing, like a phobia; instead, it is a **constant, pervasive** sense of anxiety that is usually accompanied by **excessive worrying**. When constant anxiety becomes so severe that it begins to have a big impact on your life, this may be diagnosed by a mental health professional as **Generalized Anxiety Disorder**.

### Curtis' Story

Curtis is in the first year of his Master's degree in Physiotherapy. For as long as Curtis can remember, he has been a "worrier". His friends and family are constantly telling him to "relax". Curtis always thought that as soon as he made it into the physiotherapy program he would be able to relax a little, but recently he has been finding the opposite. Curtis feels as if he is putting more time into his work than any of his peers, and for the first time in his life he handed in two assignments past their due date. Curtis has a difficult time getting started on assignments because he feels that he needs to read all of the information on a topic before he can begin. Other times, Curtis will avoid his schoolwork altogether, because if he limits the amount of time he works on it, he can also limit the amount of time he spends worrying about it. Curtis spends most of his days either in class, working at the library, organizing his Frisbee league, or at the gym. He doesn't like to relax because that is when he worries the most. He feels exhausted most of the time, but he also has a very difficult time falling asleep because he tends to worry and make mental to-do lists when he's lying in bed. Curtis' friends have mentioned that he is very irritable lately, and he has noticed that he has been having a hard time finding joy in anything these days.



## Lucy's Story

Lucy is a second year Psychology student. She worked very hard in high school and received a prestigious scholarship to attend university. Lucy really enjoys her program and her new friends, but she constantly feels “keyed up” and “on edge”. Lucy works very hard to be the top in her class because she fears that if she doesn’t work hard all of the time she will lose her scholarship and be unable to afford school. Her friends joke that she is a perfectionist. Lucy will spend hours re-reading her assignments before handing them in and will often ask friends to check over her emails before sending them. She even finds herself worrying about the emails after they are sent, like her choice of words or the font she used. Lucy has many fears, including fears about money, her future career, and her health—as well as the health of her family. She constantly checks up on her family members to make sure they are safe and healthy, and she spends a lot of time on the internet researching illnesses that she’s afraid she might have. After exams were finished last semester, Lucy’s anxiety became so high that she had what she thought was a panic attack. It seemed to come out of nowhere. Lucy feels like she doesn’t know where her anxiety comes from sometimes, and she worries that she could have another panic attack at any time.

## *What is Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)?*

Generalized Anxiety Disorder, or GAD, is characterized by **chronic, excessive** worry that feels as if it is **out of your control**. It is an anxiety disorder that affects approximately 5% of the population, and is roughly twice as common in women as it is in men. People who have GAD tend to worry about a wide range of things in daily life, and these worries often prevent them from doing things that they would like to do. Experiencing anxiety for long periods of times often leads to physical complaints, like fatigue, muscle soreness, and digestive problems (see: Anxiety in the Body on page 4).

If you could wake up tomorrow and have all of your anxiety magically disappear, what would you be able to do that you are not doing now? What would change in your life? What is anxiety or worrying keeping you from doing now?

### *Examples:*

If Curtis could stop his constant worrying, he would be able to get a good night’s rest; he has a difficult time falling asleep because he frequently worries in bed. If Curtis’ anxiety magically disappeared, he would stop avoiding his schoolwork, and he would finish work on time.

Last year, Lucy turned down a vacation with her family so that she could study over the winter holiday in order to maintain a very high average. She also regularly turns down invitations from her friends to spend time together on weekends. If Lucy’s fears about having a panic attack were to magically disappear, she would not have missed out on these opportunities.

## WORKSHEET 3.1 GAD: What is Anxiety Keeping You From?

Use the space below to write down what anxiety prevents you from doing. Beside each point, make a note about the sort of impact not doing this activity has on your life, overall?

Anxiety prevents me from... (doing what?)	This impacts my life... (how?)

## Unhealthy Strategies for Coping with Anxiety

Anxiety can be a very unpleasant feeling, especially if it feels as if it is **constant**, or if it is **at a higher level than the situation warrants**. People who suffer from **chronic** anxiety tend to engage in many behaviours in order to get some relief from their anxiety. See the list below. Do any of these behaviours sound like things that you do to reduce or deal with your anxiety or worries? Make a check in the box beside any and all of the behaviours that you have found yourself doing.

☐

**Avoidance.** Putting off going things that lead you to experience anxiety, not doing those things at all, or distracting yourself from your worrying or anxious thoughts. *E.g.*, watching TV or surfing the internet instead of starting on school assignments; not answering phone calls or text messages, even if they're from friends; trying to "keep busy" all day long so you don't have time to worry.

☐

**"What if" questions.** Regularly worrying about possible outcomes to even small decisions, and trying to plan for each possible outcome. *E.g.*, spending large amounts of time thinking about what would happen if you fail a course or get kicked out of school; spending time worrying about what would happen if a close relative or friend died.

☐

**Checking behaviour.** Making sure that things were completed, "done right", or done without error. *E.g.*, re-reading emails or assignments a number times before sending them; calling or texting a loved one to make sure they are safe; re-reading messages multiple times to make sure you have the right meeting time/place.

- ☐ **Reassurance-seeking.** Relying on someone else to help alleviate your worries. *E.g.*, making regular doctor’s appointments to reduce health concerns; asking teachers or TAs to confirm information that you already know to be correct, like due dates or assignment guidelines; consulting with others before making even minor decisions.
- ☐ **Excessive information-seeking or list-making.** Spending a great deal of time planning or thinking about every possible outcome to a situation and creating a strategy to deal with each. *E.g.*, having many elaborate to-do lists on the go; never feeling like you have “enough” information to make decisions or complete assignments.
- ☐ **Refusal to delegate tasks to others.** Having a difficult time letting others contribute out of fear that they will not do the task “right” or because you like it “just so”. *E.g.*, insisting on doing house chores because you’re the only one who does it the proper way; being unable to say “no” to doing more work; having difficulty working in a group, or doing other group members work for them without discussing it with them.
- ☐ **Using recreational drugs or alcohol to relax.** Using substances to help “turn off your mind” and reducing or stopping worries. *E.g.*, smoking weed before bed in order to fall asleep; having a few drinks in the evening to “unwind” or calm yourself down.

How many of the above behaviours did you check off as having engaged in? How do you tend to feel **as soon as** you do one of these behaviours? You probably feel pretty good! For example, if you have an assignment due in a week and you decided to catch up on your favorite show instead of doing some research, it might feel really good in the moment to forget about the stressful assignment. Or if you discover a skin spot that you never noticed before, it might feel good to have a friend tell you it’s nothing to worry about. But let’s fast-forward a few hours or a few days. How might you feel then? Suddenly you are three seasons deep into your show, but your assignment is now due in two days and it still hasn’t been touched. Or fears about the skin spot continue to bug you, and internet searches about frightening skin lesions have you wanting to make a doctor’s appointment ASAP.

Unfortunately, although commonly used, many of the behaviours listed above help reduce our anxiety or our worries in the **short-term**, but they tend to make anxiety even **worse in the long-term**. We call these **unhelpful coping strategies**, or tools that we may think help with our anxiety—and maybe they do in the short-term—but they ultimately **do not help in the long-term**.

What are some **helpful** coping strategies that you can start using today in order to help reduce your anxiety **in the long-term**? What are some things that you are avoiding now? What do you need to do in order to stop putting things off?

**Examples:**

Curtis discovered techniques to reduce his procrastination by checking out the Learning Commons Resource Center at Stauffer library. Curtis found that what worked for him was to set an alarm for 5 minutes and try to get started in that time. If he couldn't "get into" his work in that time he would take a short break and try again, but most of the time that was enough to get started. Curtis also asked for help organizing the Frisbee league, and used his free time to relax by practicing Deep Breathing (page 15) and Mindfulness techniques (page 18) to help him actually enjoy his down time.

Lucy decided to test what would happen if she sent an email to her professor after reading it over only one time. She also decided to reduce the number of times she would text her younger brother to check if he was safe. She resolved to send only one text a day to her brother, and promised herself that it would be something other than a question asking if he is ok. Whenever she got the urge to text him during the day, she would instead send a joke to her friend.

## WORKSHEET 3.2 GAD: Unhealthy Coping Strategies

In the spaces below, write down two unhelpful coping strategies that you tend to use to reduce your anxiety in the short-term. In the column beside it, write a plan for how you can reduce these behaviours.

Strategies I use that reduce my anxiety in the short-term only:	How can I reduce this behaviour?

Now, in the space below, write down some new strategies that you can use to help reduce your anxiety in the long-term (hint: you may want to check out the chapter on Basic Anxiety Management Skills to help you fill out this part). Ask yourself: “what can I do instead, that will help me in the long-term?”

*Strategies I can use to reduce my anxiety in the long-term...*

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It is important to remember that regular practice of Basic Anxiety Management Skills, as well as using the self-help plan that you are formulating in this chapter are ways to help reduce your **overall anxiety**, and as a result, you will eventually begin to find that you have fewer worries, too. But what happens when worries continue to be a problem?

## Worry

In this chapter we’ve been discussing **worry**, and how this is one of the biggest issues for people with generalized anxiety. In the Introduction of the workbook we talked about the Five Part model of anxiety (page 2), and how thoughts, behaviours, feelings, physical sensations, and situation all interact to lead to anxiety. Worries are thoughts, and we know that we don’t have much control over our thoughts—but that doesn’t mean that we are totally powerless against them. Let’s discuss worrying thoughts a bit more before we discuss what to do about them. There are two types of worries:

1. Worries about things that are happening **right now**, or **current worries**.

*Examples:*

“Have I written enough information for the answer to this test question?”; “Am I going to be late to class?”; “I want to get together with my friend right now, but I don’t want to bother him if he’s busy or uninterested.”

2. Worries that **have not happened yet**, or **future worries**.

*Examples:*

“What if I don’t get a good enough job when I graduate?”; “What if my mom gets cancer one day?”; “What am I going to do if I get kicked out of school for doing poorly on exams at the end of the term?”

The major difference between current worries and future worries is the **amount of control** you have over them. When you worry about a situation that is happening right now, you generally have some control over those worries because you can do something about it.

**Examples:**

Curtis is worried because he needs to find extra players for his Frisbee game tonight, but he is really busy trying to finish an assignment.

*This is an example of a **current worry**. Curtis has some control over this worry because he can do something right now to work towards fixing the problem. Curtis can call a friend who is less busy with homework and delegate this task by asking for help finding extra players for tonight's game.*

Lucy worries about maintaining her high average so that she doesn't lose her scholarship.

*This is an example of a **future worry**. There is nothing that Lucy can do **right now** about her scholarship or her grades. She cannot write her final exams right now, in the middle of the term, and she has no say over the criteria for maintaining scholarships. Lucy has very little control over this worry in the moment.*

### WORKSHEET 3.3 GAD: What Are My Worries?

What sorts of worries tend to occupy your thoughts? In the spaces below, write down a list of some of your top worries. Make sure you don't give yourself too much time on this task (if you feel like you need more time getting your worries out, consider trying "Worry Time" on page 28). Beside each worry, check the box indicating whether this is a current worry or a future worry.

List of my top worries	Current worry?	Future worry?

Take a look at the thoughts that you marked as current worries. What can you do about these worries *right now*? Dealing with these worries is likely going to require some **problem solving** skills. Be sure to check out information about Time Management and Problem Solving on page 30 to help make a plan for dealing with these issues, instead of just dwelling on them.

*Ways I can deal with my top worries right now...*

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In the future, learn to cope with anxiety in a healthy way by **keeping track of your worries**. Remember that worries like to eat up time, so use “Worry Time” (page 28) in order to limit the amount of time that these worries are allowed to take up.

One of the hardest things for people with generalized anxiety to cope with is the second type of worry: future worries, or things that you have very little control over. Time travel hasn’t been invented yet (that we know of!), so until then, none of us can say that we *know* what is going to happen in the future. Sometimes we might have an idea of what will happen; we may even believe that we have a *good* idea of what will happen. But the bottom line is we **cannot be 100% sure** (not without a time travel machine). Yet, many of us invest a *huge* amount of our time thinking and worrying about what will happen. People with generalized anxiety tend to spend a large amount of time planning for what *could* or what *might* happen. But there is no way to know 100% for sure how things will play out, so it would be *impossible* to plan for the unknown because no matter how much time we spend thinking about it, there is *always* going to be a possibility that we miss. So all of that time spent thinking and planning and worrying about the future is—brace yourself—completely *useless*!

## *Tolerating Uncertainty*

People with generalized anxiety are **intolerant of uncertainty**. That is, they have a very difficult time coping with situations for which they do not know the outcome. It is absolutely normal to have some discomfort about the unknown, and people tend to vary in their ability to tolerate uncertainty. People who have a very difficult time dealing with uncertainty spend a great deal of time worrying about that uncertainty. It’s an exhausting, fruitless game to play.

You can think of intolerance of uncertainty in the same way you would think of a dietary allergy, like lactose intolerance. When someone who is lactose intolerant drinks a large glass of milk, they will experience bloating, painful cramps, and gas. When someone who is intolerant of uncertainty faces an unknown, they will experience anxiety, worry, and excessive planning. Both experiences can be debilitating, but just as there are treatment protocols for lactose intolerance, one can learn to cope with uncertainty.

## Acting “As If”

Our thoughts, feelings, and behaviours all contribute to worry and intolerance of uncertainty. So how do you learn to tolerate the unknown? Well, you cannot simply change your emotions or physical sensations (although sometimes that would be nice!), and sometimes you cannot change your situation. According to the Five Part Model (page 2) that leaves your **thoughts** and **behaviours**. The next section (“GAD Thought Record”) discusses strategies to target your anxious thoughts, but for learning to tolerate uncertainty, targeting our behaviour can be a very useful strategy. That is, one of the best ways to learn how to cope with the unknown and worries associated with the unknown is to “**act as if**” you are tolerant of uncertainty. There are five steps to “**acting as if**” you are tolerant of uncertainty. After you explore these five steps, turn to the blank “Acting As If” form in appendix B (Worksheet 3.4ab GAD: Acting “As If”):

1. Make a list of all of the behaviours you engage in when you are unable to tolerate uncertainty. Consider referring to the list you filled out earlier about behaviours used to reduce anxiety in the short-term. Do you typically try to plan for every possible outcome? Do you seek reassurance from others? Do you avoid the situation all together? Use the space below (under “Step 1”) to outline typical behaviours you use when faced with uncertainty.
2. Take a look at the behaviours you just filled out. Imagine how you would feel if you **were not able** to do them. How anxious, on a scale of 0 (*not at all*) to 10 (*most anxious ever*) would you feel if you weren’t allowed to do each behaviour? Write down this rating in the space provided beside each behaviour (under “Step 2”).

### WORKSHEET 3.4a GAD: Acting “As If”

**Example:**

Step 1: Behaviours I engage in to deal with uncertainty:	Step 2: My anxiety if I could not do the behaviour (0-10):
<i>I turn down friend’s invitations to hang out on weekends to study instead</i>	7
<i>When I’m working in a group, I take over other people’s work because I know that I can do a better job than them</i>	8
<i>I send emails to the professor and TA to double check that I know assignment due dates and formatting, even when this information is written in the syllabus</i>	1
<i>I check my assignments 2 or 3 times before submitting them, even after I have a friend read them over, too</i>	4



3. Now it is time to practice. Start out by choosing the behaviour that would cause the *least* amount of anxiety if you weren't allowed to do it. Make a plan to practice tolerating anxiety by *not* engaging in this behaviour. Is there a healthy coping strategy that you can do instead? Use the space below to write out your plan (under "Step 3"), and begin practicing. Don't forget to include **how many times** you plan to practice not engaging in old behaviours to tolerate uncertainty this week. We suggest 3 times:
  
4. After you practice, **write down how it went**. It's important to remember that when we are dealing with uncertainty, things are bound to go differently than we expect. If this happens, and you are still around to write about it, congratulations! This is a big step in learning to tolerate uncertainty: realizing that things usually don't go as poorly as we imagine they will. Use the space below (under "Step 4") to record how it went when you **"acted as if"**. Try to answer as many of the following questions as you can:
  - What happened?
  - How did you feel **at first** when you didn't engage in your typical behaviour?
  - How did you feel **after** it was all over?
  - Did things go well, even if you weren't 100% certain of the outcome beforehand?
  - If things didn't go well, were you able to handle it?
  - If things didn't go well, what did you do to cope with it?

### WORKSHEET 3.4b GAD: Acting "As If"

**Example:**

Step 3: Behaviour to change	Step 3: New strategy to cope	Step 4: How it went
<i>This week I plan to practice tolerating uncertainty by not sending an email to my professor confirming the due date of our next assignment, and asking for more information about the format he would like the assignment to be.</i>	<p><i>I will check my course syllabus one time for the assignment due date, and I will write this due date in my agenda. If I have the urge to check, I will ask myself "what's the worst that could happen if the date in the syllabus is wrong?"</i></p> <p><i>I will also practice "Worry Time" (see Page 28) twice each day, so I can write down my worries about the assignment during this time.</i></p>	<p><i>I followed my plan for the week. In the beginning of the week I felt anxious. My anxiety felt like a heavy weight on my chest and I was jittery. After about 15 minutes my anxiety became less unpleasant.</i></p> <p><i>My plan did not go exactly as I expected. I missed the part in the instructions that explained how the paper's headings should be organized. I coped with this by reminding myself that the content of my paper was good, so I probably will not fail the assignment just because my headings didn't meet the exact criteria. I know that my friend Faye also missed that part of the instructions, so I am not the only student in the class to make this mistake.</i></p>

5. After you’ve gotten enough practice with the behaviours that trigger lower levels of anxiety, try to push yourself a little bit with behaviours that trigger higher levels of anxiety. Remember not to push too hard, though, or else you won’t want to continue working towards becoming tolerant of uncertainty. And don’t forget: reward yourself for being brave! Write down two things that you can do to reward yourself for being brave by “**acting as if**” you are tolerant of anxiety.

**Example:**

1. Reward my bravery with a calming, enjoyable bath.
2. Reward my bravery by ordering dinner from my favourite restaurant.

*Ways I can reward myself...*

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## *GAD Thought Record*

The previous section targets behaviour as a way to manage anxiety—specifically by learning to tolerate anxiety—but remember that thoughts are also a critical component in anxiety management. The Thought Record, which is a tool explored many times throughout this workbook, can also prove very helpful in dealing with GAD.

Remember that a great deal of anxiety comes from Future Thoughts; that is, worrying about or planning for what *might* happen. One simple tool is to challenge these Future Thoughts by asking yourself “**what’s the worst that can happen?**” This tool can either be incorporated into your GAD Thought Record (challenging your thoughts) or it can be used as a standalone tool whenever you notice Future Thoughts creeping into your mind. Anxious thoughts can hold a lot of power when they are not fully defined; anything could happen! But by forcing yourself to explicitly outline what you think *will* happen, you will begin to realize that likely outcomes are rarely as horrible as the notion that something “unknown but terrible” will happen.

After looking over the example of Curtis’ Thought Record, try filling one out for yourself. There are blank Thought Records in Appendix B. Refer to the section on Thought Records (page 36) for additional guidance.

## WORKSHEET 2.5 Thought

Anxiety Thought Record: Curtis		
1. Anxious/Negative Thoughts:	2. Identify Thought Distortions: (Select from list in box below)	3. Balanced/Realistic Self-Talk: (Use the questions below)
1. This assignment is too big and difficult for me to do! 2. If I don't do really well on this assignment, then there's no point even trying. 3. I'm the one who said he would organize the Frisbee team, so I need to be the one to make sure everything gets done no matter what.	1. Underestimating ability to cope, focusing only on the negative	1. This assignment may be challenging, but I have managed to start and complete other similarly difficult assignments in the past. I've done well in school up to this point and I believe I can continue to do well. If I try to get started on the assignment, the worst that could happen is I will feel frustrated.
1. Anxious/Negative Thoughts:	2. Identify Thought Distortions:	3. Balanced/Realistic Self-Talk: (Ask Yourself...)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Write down Anxious/Negative Thoughts</li> <li>Circle your Hot Thought or group of related Hot Thoughts</li> </ul>	<p><u>Catastro p h izin g</u> – focusing on the worst possible outcome</p> <p><u>Ov erti m at in g p ro b ab ility</u> – of bad things happening</p> <p><u>Perfe ctio n is m</u> – pressuring the self to be perfect: "I should.."</p> <p><u>Focu sin g o n o n ly t h e n e g a t i v e s</u> – ignoring positives</p> <p>Predicting the future – how can you know what will happen?</p> <p>Generalizing – ignoring differences in circumstances</p> <p><u>Un d e r e s t i m a t i n g y o u r a b i l i t y t o c o p e</u> – If something bad does happen</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is the Hot Thought true? Is it always true? Is it partially true? Are there ways in which it is not true? Are there times when it is not true?</li> <li>What is the evidence to support the Hot Thought? What is the evidence against it?</li> <li>If you had to debate this thought or make a counterargument against it, what would you say?</li> <li>Is there another way of looking at this?</li> <li>If you are catastrophizing, what is the probability of this thought actually happening? If your feared outcome does happen, how terrible would it be?</li> </ul>

## Letting Go of Worry

Worrying isn't a completely random behaviour. Behind our worries there is generally a purpose. That is, worrying usually accomplishes something for us, or at least we believe that it does. Think about the reasons why you worry and write it in the space below. What are you afraid will happen if you stopped worrying all together?

*If I let go of all worry, I'm afraid of...*

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Many people with generalized anxiety feel like they *need* to worry in order to stay motivated or on track. They believe that if they didn't worry, they might fail or stop getting as much done. But is this logic really sound? Earlier in the book we spoke about many of the physiological symptoms of stress and anxiety (see page 4). Some of the core features of anxiety include reduced concentration (our brain is scanning for danger!), fatigue (our muscles have been readying to fight or run all day long!), and upset stomachs (our GI tract grinds to a halt!). This does not sound like the ideal situation for getting work done.

Remember that there is a fine balance between a good amount of anxiety (i.e., enough to motivate you to study for an exam) and too much anxiety (i.e., can't concentrate on the exam). Anxiety is a normal human experience that we all face at different times. No matter how hard you work at it, it's not going away. But the goal isn't to completely get rid of anxiety—that's just not possible! The goal is to learn how to manage anxiety. We want to *reduce* anxiety and find that "sweet spot" of anxiety, where we are motivated, not overwhelmed.



# 4

## TYPES OF ANXIETY: PANIC

# Panic

Anxiety can come on very quickly; sometimes in response to a specific cause, but other times for no identifiable reason at all. For people who have high anxiety to begin with, this can feel like their anxiety is “bubbling over” or quickly rising to an “anxiety peak”. These periods of intense anxiety—which are very unpleasant and frightening—are called panic attacks. Panic attacks are not uncommon, but when they reoccur they can cause a great deal of distress and begin to affect our lives in very negative ways. In this chapter, we discuss what panic attacks are and how to deal with them. Although panic attacks can be a very unpleasant, and often terrifying experience, they actually tend to be very responsive to treatment. With consistent practice, the tools outlined in this chapter can be used to effectively reduce the frequency and severity of panic attacks.

## Danielle’s Story

Danielle is a third year student in Film and Media studies. Danielle has always been an anxious person, but she felt that she had it under control. Recently, however, Danielle has started experiencing regular panic attacks. The first panic attack happened when Danielle was in a lecture; it was terrifying. She started to feel her heart beat fast and hard in her chest, her palms began to sweat, she started shaking, and she became afraid that she would faint or vomit. Danielle’s anxiety became so severe so quickly that she thought she was having a heart attack or maybe going crazy. Although the panic attack only lasted about 10 minutes, it was a very traumatic experience for her, and she remained more anxious than usual the rest of the day. Since the first attack, Danielle has started having panic attacks on an increasingly regular basis; they are now happening about 3 times a week. At first they would only happen in lecture, but they have started happening at other times, too. Danielle is quickly becoming preoccupied with worries about when and where the next panic attack will happen.

## *What is a Panic Attack?*

We have already discussed the physiological reactions that happen in the body as a result of the fight-or-flight response getting turned on by stress (page 4). Anxiety is when the fight-or-flight response stays activated over a long period of time; it is **chronic**. A panic attack is also an activation of the fight-or-flight response, but it tends to be **acute** (usually 5-10 minutes) and **severe**. In other words, if you think of anxiety as someone placing enough pressure on the gas pedal of stress to keep you at a leisurely pace down the highway, a panic attack would be someone stomping down on the gas pedal in a street race.

A panic attack is a **sudden** onset of **high anxiety**. It can be very unpleasant, uncomfortable, and frightening; it is not uncommon for someone's first panic attack to be viewed as a traumatic event. Although very unpleasant, panic attacks are actually very common. It has been estimated that 1 in 3 people will experience a panic attack in a year, so if you have had a panic attack, you are certainly not alone. It's important to remember that panic attacks are simply the body's fight-or-flight response kicked into gear very quickly; they are a **completely natural response** and you **cannot** be hurt or die by one.

## *What do Panic Attacks Look Like?*

Panic attacks involve a number of unpleasant symptoms. According to the most recent version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), a panic attack is a short period of fear or discomfort that peaks within a 10-minute window. At least four (but possibly more) of the symptoms listed in a table on the next page are present in a panic attack. Note that these symptoms have been separated into physiological symptoms (body reactions), and cognitive symptoms (thoughts).

Use the table on the next page to start understanding **your** panic attacks better. Place a checkmark in the box beside each symptom that **you have experienced**. Next to that, **rate** how bad the symptom is for you, or how anxious each symptom makes you on a scale of **0** (*not at all upsetting/anxious*) to **10** (*most upsetting/anxious possible*). Note that this table is also available in Appendix B (Worksheet 4.1 What Do My Panic Attacks Look Like?). The first step to treating panic attacks is to understand what they look like for you, since panic attacks can look different in different people. But more on this later...

## WORKSHEET 4.1 What Do My Panic Attacks Look Like?

		Have I experienced this?	How anxious did it make me (0-10)?
<b>Body Reactions:</b>	1. Palpitations, pounding heart, or accelerated heart rate		
	2. Sweating		
	3. Trembling or shaking		
	4. Sensations of shortness of breath or smothering		
	5. Feeling of choking		
	6. Chest pain or discomfort		
	7. Nausea or abdominal distress		
	8. Feeling dizzy, unsteady, lightheaded, or faint		
	9. Numbness or tingling sensations (paresthesias)		
	10. Chills or hot flushes		
<b>Thoughts:</b>	11. Feelings of unreality (derealization) or being detached from oneself (depersonalization)		
	12. Fear of losing control or going crazy		
	13. Fear of dying		



## *What's the Difference Between a Panic Attack and Panic Disorder?*

You should be aware that panic attacks and panic disorder are not the same thing. Panic attacks are a relatively common body reaction that a large portion of people will experience at least once in their life. Having a panic attack does not mean that you have panic disorder. A diagnosis of panic disorder is given by a health care professional (e.g., clinical psychologist, psychiatrist) if you have **frequent panic attacks**, if these attacks seem to be **unrelated** to any one specific situation, if you are experiencing a great deal of **worry** about having another panic attack, or if you or people in your life have noticed a **change in your behaviour**, usually in order to avoid having future panic attacks (e.g., avoiding places where panic attacks have occurred in the past). For example, if you have a panic attack every time you are faced with a clown, this would be considered a phobia, *not* a panic disorder, because there is a specific trigger for the panic (the clown). Or if you sometimes have panic attacks, but your daily functioning is not affected because you don't worry too much about having another attack, this would also *not* warrant a medical diagnosis of panic disorder. Instead, this is just an unpleasant part of being a human being. If the above description of panic disorder sounds like you, you may want to **make an appointment with a health care professional** such as a doctor or psychologist, as they are the only ones who are able to provide a diagnosis of panic disorder.

## *What is Agoraphobia?*

Agoraphobia is the **fear** and **avoidance** of places or situations where one feels they **would not be able to escape easily** in the event of a panic attack. Agoraphobia often—but not always—develops as a result of panic attacks. That means that not everyone who experiences panic attacks will go on to develop agoraphobia, and not everyone with agoraphobia experiences panic attacks. Examples of situations that people with agoraphobia typically try to avoid include:

- Being alone (without someone they consider safe, who could help in the event of a panic attack)
- Being in a new or unfamiliar environment (e.g., leaving the house; visiting a new city)
- Crowded or noisy (public) spaces (e.g., shopping mall, concert hall)
- Driving (either as a passenger, as a driver, or both)

Panic attacks are very unpleasant; nobody *wants* to have one. People often believe that the best way to stop panic attacks from happening is to avoid whatever might have brought on the panic attack in the first place. People who experience regular panic attacks will often avoid **situations** where an attack has happened (e.g., standing in a crowded room), **places** where an attack has happened (e.g., the library), or **activities** that they were doing when an attack has happened (e.g., running, exercise). Really, agoraphobia is meant to be a coping strategy (e.g., “I don't want another panic attack, so I will avoid anything I think is likely to make me have another one”). Unfortunately, like other strategies discussed in previous chapters, this is an example of an unhealthy coping strategy; one that actually makes matters worse in the long-term. Read on as we discuss what's going on when a panic attack is happening, and how you can use this information to work towards the goal of reducing—and ultimately eliminating—panic attacks from your life.

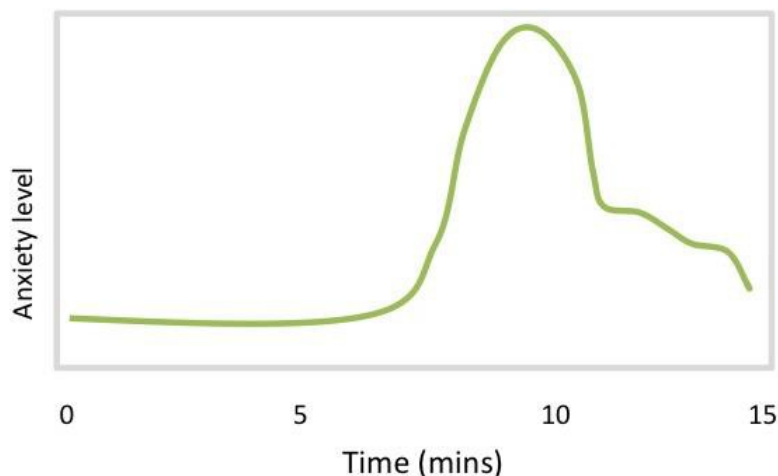
## *What's Happening When I Have a Panic Attack?*

Imagine for a moment that you were about to skydive out of a plane. Picture yourself in as much detail as you can. What would you be feeling? You would likely feel your heart pounding hard against your chest, you might feel shaky or like your legs are made of rubber, you may have sweaty palms, feel unable to catch your breath as your thoughts race. Your mouth might feel dry, you might fear that you will throw up, or you might feel like you're watching yourself from outside of your body because there's no way you're about to jump out of an actual plane oh my gosh! But now imagine at the moment right before you jumped from the plane—when all of those feelings are at their very peak—you were instantly transported into an exam room, or a restaurant, or your bedroom. How would you feel then?

A panic attack is just the body's normal response to fear, but it happens **out of context**. Experiencing those feelings before jumping out of a plane may be exhilarating and an exciting part of the skydiving experience—in fact many people choose to skydive *in order to* experience those intense feelings—but facing those feelings with no easily identifiable cause can be just plain terrifying.

In order to understand panic, there are a few things that you need to understand about anxiety and the body. First, be sure to read the section of this workbook about Anxiety in the Body (page 4). As we know, anxiety is a physiological reaction in the body, typically in response to a stressor, like a threat to our safety. It was **adaptive** for our ancestors to feel anxious because it acted as a security system to help keep them from getting killed in the face of danger. Think about it: if you were faced with real, imminent danger, like an angry bear rushing at you, you need to have an instantaneous reaction in response to that threat in order to keep you safe. That is, your body really needs to “step on it!” in order to keep you out of danger. Our body “steps on it” by releasing a big dose of adrenaline, which triggers the fight-or-flight response and all of the physiological symptoms that come along with it in. This is the fuel your body needs to help you escape the threat. But sometimes that security system is set off by a false alarm, and our stress peaks with no real threat present. This is when a panic attack happens.

It is important to understand how panic attacks work in order to take some of the fear out of them, as fear about having future panic attacks is one of the core features of panic disorder. Take a look at the graph below:



This graph depicts the course of a panic attack over approximately 15 minutes (some are shorter, some are longer, but none last for very long). Anxiety levels start out relatively low but they peak very rapidly. After anxiety peaks, it may take some time for anxiety to come all the way back to the pre-attack levels; sometimes even hours. But pay special attention to the *peak*. This is when anxiety is at its absolute worst. Now, how long does the *peak* last? What's very important message here is that if you understand how anxiety works in the body, then you know acute panic is **only sustainable for 5-10 minutes, maximum**. Certainly some of the symptoms of panic may take a while to fully subside (we know that general anxiety can last for a very long time), but **acute panic** is simply **not sustainable in our body for longer than a few minutes**. One of the reasons why panic attacks are so scary is because we *forget* that panic is not sustainable. We think (irrationally), that the curve of that graph will never stop rising once it has started and it will continue to go up and up and up until we die or go crazy. This is neither true nor is it even possible.

So what sets people who experience reoccurring panic attacks apart from those who do not? Well, research has shown us that there is **some genetic component** (e.g., twin and family studies have shown a strong heritable component to panic attacks). **Environment** has also been shown to impact the likelihood of an individual experiencing panic attacks (e.g., panic attacks often follow a recent stressor, such as the loss of a loved one, or a major change in one's life, like moving away from home for the first time). But one of the most important differences between people who do and those who do not experience regular panic attacks is that people who do experience reoccurring panic attacks tend to be much more **introspective** about their bodily reactions. In other words, these people tend to be very in-tuned with even small changes that go on inside of their body. So when the sympathetic nervous system is activated and their body starts to experience some normal responses to stress (e.g., increased heart rate), these people tend to interpret these normal and healthy changes as a catastrophic sign of something horrible (e.g., a heart attack). These **thoughts** and **interpretations** of normal responses lead to increased anxiety, which in turn leads to a stronger physiological reaction, and this feedback loop can easily cause anxiety to spiral up into a full blown panic attack, sometimes very quickly.

## *Misreading the Signs of Stress*

We have now discussed three very important things about panic attacks: (1) Our body cannot physically sustain acute panic for a very long period of time; (2) panic attacks are the result of the fight-or-flight response getting kicked into high gear when no real threat is present; and (3) high levels of introspection cause a normal stress response to be misread as something dangerous or something going wrong (e.g., "I'm dying!"). Below we will look at typical ways that the stress response is misread, and by doing so, begin to understand how this feeds into panic. Be sure to refer to the section anxiety in the body, found in the Introduction (page 4) for an explanation of *why* these reactions are happening, and how they are normal.

At this stage, we are only going to be practicing **recognizing** our reactions or thoughts in response to stress. Managing panic attacks starts by learning to recognize the thoughts behind the panic, because you can't fight against something if you don't know it's there, and oftentimes our anxious thoughts have a special way of creeping below the surface without us knowing it.

**Example:**

Danielle experiences regular panic attacks. She uses this Worksheet to document what reactions she has to stress, whether they are body reactions or thoughts, and how she interprets these experiences.

## WORKSHEET 4.2 My Panic Interpretation

Body reaction or thought?	Feeling in your body:	Your panic interpretation:
Body	I can feel my heart pounding really hard in chest; I get bad chest pains	"I'm having a heart attack!"
Body	I feel very dizzy, lightheaded	"I'm going to pass out right here, and everyone is going to see it and make a big deal about it."
Body	It feels hard to catch my breath; It's like there is a heavy weight on my chest	"I'm going to stop breathing and I will suffocate."
Thought	It feels like I'm watching myself from outside of my body	"I'm going to lose control of myself and just go crazy."

Thought	I feel like something terrible is happening, or like I am dying	"I think I am going to die."
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Use the example on the previous page to fill out your own Panic Interpretation. Note that you can also find this Worksheet in Appendix B (Worksheet 4.2 My Panic Interpretation).

### WORKSHEET 4.2 My Panic Interpretation

Body reaction or thought?	Feeling in your body:	Your panic interpretation:
Body		
Body		
Body		
Thought		
Thought		

## *How do I Deal with My Panic Attacks?*

In this section, we will outline techniques that you can use in order to manage your panic attacks. At this point it is important to do a personal check-in and make sure that you are reading this section with **realistic expectations**. We've already mentioned that panic attacks are a very normal part of being human, and most people will experience at least one attack in their lifetime. So know that if you are having regular panic attacks now, a goal of never having another panic attack may not be realistic. However, if you are willing and able to dedicate **hard work** and **time** to develop a **regular practice** of the evidence-based techniques outlined in this chapter, in combination with regular practice of the Basic Skills, then you can expect a **drastic reduction** in the **frequency** and **severity** of your panic attacks.

## 1. *Becoming a Pro at the Basic Skills*

The very first step to managing panic happens long before a panic attack is even close to happening. This is practicing your Basic Anxiety Management Skills. Like with any of the anxiety issues discussed in this book, it is very important that you practice the Basic Skills first, in order to set the foundation for your work with panic. The likelihood of a panic attack can be increased by heightened anxiety overall, so by keeping your **baseline anxiety levels lower**, it will be **harder** for your gas pedal of stress to hit the floor. Other things to consider include staying away from stimulant drugs, like caffeine, which can induce a panic attack. In rare cases, panic attacks can be a symptom of an ongoing medical condition, such as a thyroid problem. Be sure to **check with your doctor first** to rule out biological causes of panic attacks.

### *Example:*

Danielle developed a plan to practice her Basic Skills on a daily basis. She started by making new, healthier eating habits; she made sure she was not skipping meals, and became careful about having three balanced meals a day. Danielle had always gone to the gym on and off, but she started going more regularly, and even arranged to go with a “workout buddy” to keep her motivated and on task. Danielle made realistic goals to practice at least one Basic Skill for 30 minutes each day; usually in the late afternoon when she knew her anxiety tended to be highest.

In the space below, develop a game plan for practicing the Basic Skills. Be sure to keep your plan **realistic**, and include **measurable** and **timely** goals:

*My plan for practicing the Basic Anxiety Management Skills is...*

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## 2. Personalize Your Panic

Above, we spoke about the signs and symptoms of a panic attack. It is important to learn to recognize your own, personal signs of panic, both before and during a panic attack. Be sure to fill out the earlier activities in this chapter to help familiarize yourself with your own flavor of panic, as many of the symptoms often go unnoticed (Worksheet 4.1 What Do My Panic Attacks Look Like? and Worksheet 4.2 My Panic Interpretation, also available in Appendix B). It's important to be able to recognize the individual symptoms of a panic attack so that you have specific behaviours, feelings, and thoughts to target with your panic attack management skills.

### Example:

After completing earlier sections of this chapter ("What do my panic attacks look like?" and "Panic Interpretation"), Danielle has a better grip on her anxiety attacks, and what they look like for her.

**Before a panic attack:** Danielle's panic attacks feel like they come out of nowhere; they do not come with much warning, so this part was tricky for her. After monitoring herself for a few weeks by paying attention to her body's reactions to stress, she was able to recognize that, right before a panic attack, she will often experience racing thoughts, and her palms will sweat.

**During a panic attack:** While Danielle is having a panic attack she noticed that she tends to focus her attention on her racing heart (in "What do my panic attacks look like?" she rated this as an 10 out of 10 for the amount of anxiety this causes her), and feeling dizzy or lightheaded (she rated this 8 out of 10). She also worries that she is going crazy or that she will lose control (9 out of 10). Other symptoms cause less anxiety for her, like her sweating palms (1 out of 10), and shaking (3 out of 10).

### WORKSHEET 4.3a Managing My Panic Attacks

Use the spaces below to document what your panic attacks look like for you:

What I feel before a panic attack:	What I feel during a panic attack:

### 3. Time to Stop Hiding!

As we discussed above, one of the core features of panic attacks—and anxiety in general—is the desire to **avoid**. Avoid what might make us anxious. Avoid what might cue a panic attack. Avoid. Avoid. Avoid! But avoidance does nothing more than **maintain** the fear, and **limit** what we can do in our lives (in the case of agoraphobia, avoidance can be very debilitating). It is important to reduce and eventually eliminate avoidance behaviours. Some of these behaviours may be very obvious (e.g., steering clear of situations, places, or activities), but some of these behaviours may be very subtle (e.g., always sitting near an exit, bringing medication with you just in case). Make a plan to reduce and eventually eliminate these avoidance behaviours. Don't forget that you have your Basic Skills to help deal with any anxiety that may come up by facing these situations.

#### *Example:*

Danielle has stopped attending the class where her first panic attack took place. She also refuses to drive in a car unless her boyfriend—who she feels safe with—is driving.

Danielle makes a plan to start reducing her avoidance, slowly. She starts by going to the lecture hall after hours with a friend. Next, she walks to class during class time and leaves without staying the entire lecture. Finally, she is able to attend the entire class with no panic attacks. She makes a plan for the same gradual process for driving. First, she sits in a stationary car with a trusted friend behind the wheel. Next, she lets her friend drive around but only in a parking lot. Eventually, Danielle gets in the car with a friend to drive to the mall. Danielle practices Deep Breathing, and Grounding techniques while she tries to reduce and eventually stop her avoidance behaviours.

### WORKSHEET 4.3b Managing My Panic Attacks

In the space below, write out some of the things that you are avoiding, whether they are situations, places, or activities. Don't forget to include some of the more subtle avoidance, or “safety” behaviours. Next to each point write out 3 or 4 steps that you can take to reduce your avoidance behaviour, with the eventual goal of eliminating it all together.

Things I am avoiding because of anxiety:	My plan to reduce my avoidance:



## 4. Facing Your Fears

By this point in the chapter, you are now well aware that—although very unpleasant—the feelings and sensations that come with a panic attack are not at all dangerous. In fact, they can actually be quite helpful if we need to get away from imminent danger. The symptoms of a panic attack are nothing more than the fight-or-flight response getting ramped up into high gear; they just feel so awful and frightening during a panic attack because they are happening out of context. Remember that if you were about to jump out of a plane, the exact same feelings of panic wouldn't be nearly as frightening. But when panic symptoms (1) happen with no context, (2) happen to someone who is very introspective, *and* (3) are accompanied by catastrophizing thoughts... well this is the perfect recipe for a panic attack.

One of the most important steps towards managing panic attacks is to **reduce how frightening the physical sensations of panic are to you**. If panic attacks weren't so frightening, well, they wouldn't be panic attacks at all, right? Recall that panic attacks are the result of a feedback loop that happens when someone is very sensitive to the physiological responses to stress. These people feel anxiety in their body and as a result they have very frightening and upsetting thoughts about those reactions; thoughts such as "I'm doing to die", "This isn't right", or "I'm going to vomit or faint and everyone will stare at me". Now, if anxiety is natural and we can't get rid of the effect anxiety has on our body, how do we deflate the fear attached to those nasty sensations, or get used to those feelings? The answer is in the form of another natural aspect of our human wiring: something called **habituation**.

Have you ever had the experience of working in an office or library with a big, droning air conditioner? At first the noise is really loud and distracting, but after a time you forget about it. That is, until the air conditioner clicks off and suddenly you realize how quiet it is! This is the process of **habituation**; your nervous system **desensitizes**, or **becomes numb** to a new stimulus after repeated or continuous exposure to it. After a while, the new stimulus (e.g., the drone of the AC) just fades into the background. We use this natural principle of habituation to **get used to** the otherwise frightening reactions in our body when we experience stress.

In order to begin desensitizing yourself to an unpleasant feeling, you need to **expose yourself** to that unpleasant feeling. This important step involves inducing a symptom of panic (e.g., pounding heart) in a safe, controlled environment, and using your Basic Skills to keep your anxiety under control so that you can practice coping with the feeling. With enough practice your body becomes desensitized and the sensation that was once very distressing becomes less and less so until it is not frightening at all. Although this may not sound like fun at first, it's important to remind yourself that this step is **necessary** for getting panic attacks under control. Remember, too, that this can—and in fact *should*—be done in small **baby steps**.

Look back at Worksheet 4.1 What Do My Panic Attacks Look Like? and rank your feared panic sensations from the least to the most anxiety provoking. Starting with the sensation that is least anxiety provoking, come up with a plan to induce this feeling. Practice this multiple times until it is no longer frightening (that is, your body has habituated to it). This should take at least a few days. Remember to focus on only one step at a time; don't move onto your next highest step until the step you are on is causing you very little anxiety on multiple occasions. This isn't a race! Below is a list of common anxiety symptoms that cause fear along with ways to artificially and **safely** induce these feelings:

**Pounding heart:** Run on the spot, or run up and down stairs as fast as you can for 30 – 60 seconds

**Dizziness:** Spin around on the spot (standing or in a chair) for 30 – 60 seconds

**Shortness of breath:** Breathe through a straw for 30 – 60 seconds

**Faint/lightheadedness:** Hyperventilate (breathe in and out very rapidly) for 30 – 60 seconds while seated, and stand up very quickly when you're done

**Depersonalization/feelings of unreality:** Stare at your hands for 2 – 3 minutes

***Example.***

Danielle practiced facing her feared sensations every day. It wasn't always easy, especially in the beginning, but with time she started to get used to some of the sensations that had been very distressing to her previously. She made sure that she built these skills up slowly. For example, when it was time to face her fear of dizziness, she tried just shaking her head for 30 seconds, which brought her anxiety up to a 6 out of 10. She practiced this a few times every day, until eventually it only brought her anxiety up to 2 out of 10. Danielle was sure to practice this step 3 or 4 more times, and each time her anxiety went up to a 2 or 3 out of 10. At this point, she started to practice spinning in a circle for 20 seconds, which brought her anxiety up to 6 out of 10. Her next planned step is to spin for 45 seconds.

Use the worksheet on the next page to write out your plan for facing your feared body reactions. Make sure to include the following:

- Ranking of feared bodily sensations, in increasing order
- How will you induce each fear?
- When will you practice it each day of the week? For how long?
- Remember to keep note of how much anxiety the sensation causes each time you try to induce it. What happens with repeated practice? (Hint: if you are a human being, then your nervous system will habituate, meaning that it will become easier with time!)

## WORKSHEET 4.4 Facing Your Fears

List of exposures:

Ranked order	Sensation	Amount of anxiety it causes me
1		
2		
3		

My plan for exposure:

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Exposure 1:

The symptom I am inducing is:

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My anxiety ratings:

Date of practice	Pre-inducing anxiety (out of 10)	Post-inducing anxiety (out of 10)

See Appendix B (Worksheet 4.4 Facing Your Fears) for a full Worksheet on Fear Exposures. Filly this sheet out and keep it somewhere you can look at if often (e.g., in your wallet, under your pillow, on your bathroom mirror).

## 5. Practice Realistic Thinking

The previous step (“Facing your Fears”) focuses on working with **behaviours** to help manage—and ultimately reduce—the frequency and severity of panic attacks. The second side to the same coin is our **thinking**. As we’ve discussed, there are many anxious thoughts that exacerbate panic attacks. For example, when Danielle starts to become anxious, she immediately begins to have thoughts, such as “I’m dying”, “I can’t breathe”, “This is so embarrassing! Everyone can tell I’m having a panic attack”, or “I’m going to pass out right here!”

When panic attacks occur—or anxiety in general, for that matter—our otherwise rational thoughts are suddenly over-taken by anxiety. If you’ve read the Thought Record section of this workbook (page 36), then you already have a pretty good understanding of how these anxious Thought Filters can severely alter the way you interpret your surroundings. Panic attacks are usually associated with two specific thought filters: **overestimating probability** (just because something *could* happen doesn't mean it *will* happen), and **catastrophizing** (focusing on the *worst* possible outcome instead of a *likely* outcome). Take Danielle’s thoughts, for example. She overestimates the probability of dying or passing out, while she catastrophizes about how bad it would be if everyone knew she was having a panic attack.

In order to fight panic attacks, you will need to practice fighting these Thought Filters. A very useful tool for this is one that we have already introduced: Thought Records (page 36). In this chapter, we have adapted the Thought Record to help you specifically challenge the panic attack thinking filters overestimating probability and catastrophizing. First, see Danielle’s sample Thought Record, then use the blank Thought Record template (see Appendix B Worksheets 2.5ab) to complete your own.

## Adapted Panic Thought Record

Anxious/Negative Thoughts:	Thinking Errors:	Challenge Yourself:	Balanced/Realistic Alternative Thought:
<p><i>I'm dying</i></p> <p><i>This is so embarrassing! Everyone can tell I'm having a panic attack</i></p>	<p>Overestimating probability</p> <p>Catastrophizing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>How many times have I had this thought during a panic attack? How did it turn out?</b> → Many times! But it turned out fine...</li> <li>- <b>How many times has this actually happened?</b> → Never</li> <li>- <b>Realistically, what is the likelihood this will happen next time I have this thought?</b> → Very low</li> <li>- <b>What's the WORST that could happen?</b> → Everyone in lecture will turn to look at me. I will be so embarrassed I'll just sit there and look dumb</li> <li>- <b>Will it make a difference in my life in a week from now? In a year from now?</b> → A week? Probably! But maybe not in a year</li> <li>- <b>What could I do to cope if this did happen?</b> → I could excuse myself and leave the lecture hall</li> <li>- <b>Have I been embarrassed in the past? How did it turn out?</b> → Yes! Once I slipped on ice on the way to class! I was embarrassed but I just got up and brushed it off. I didn't even hear anyone laugh, and no one stared at me when I walked to class the next day like I feared they would.</li> </ul>	<p>I am probably not dying, I am just having a panic attack, and panic attacks suck!</p> <p>If I did have a panic attack in class, it's unlikely anyone would notice. But if they did, I could cope with it.</p>
Anxious/Negative Thoughts:	Thinking Errors:	Challenge Yourself:	Balanced/Realistic Alternative Thought:
<p>Write down Anxious/Negative Thoughts</p> <p>Circle your Hot Thought or group of related Hot Thoughts</p>	<p><u>Overestimating probability</u> – of bad things happening</p> <p><u>Catastrophizing</u> – focusing on the worst possible outcome</p>	<p>Ask yourself:</p> <p><b>For overestimating:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How many times have I had this thought during a panic attack? How did it turn out?</li> <li>- How many times has this actually happened?</li> <li>- Realistically, what is the likelihood this will happen next time I have this thought?</li> </ul> <p><b>For catastrophizing:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What's the absolute WORST that could happen?</li> <li>- Will it make a difference in my life in a week from now? In a year from now?</li> <li>- What could I do to cope if this did happen?</li> <li>- Have I been embarrassed in the past? How did it turn out?</li> </ul>	<p>Use the information from the previous column to rethink your original hot thought. Repeat this new, healthier thought next time the Hot Thought comes up.</p>

## 6. Coping Statements

Challenging your panic attacks can be really hard work. It isn't easy making yourself sit through physical sensations that are usually terrifying, or challenging thoughts that have been with you for as long as you can remember. One tool that is often helpful getting through the more challenging tasks is the use of coping statements. It's easy to do! Come up with a few simple coping statements—you can even use your balanced, realistic thoughts from Thought Records you've completed. Write the statement(s) down on a cue card, a small piece of paper you can carry with you, or on a note app on your phone. Every time you feel anxiety start to kick up, or you feel overwhelmed, simply look to this coping card and remember that **you can do this**.

Some examples of coping statements are as follows:

Panic can't last forever!  
I have the tools to do this. I can fight my panic.

Use the space provided to write 2 or 3 coping statements of your own:

*My coping statements...*

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## 7. Practice. Practice. Practice!

Develop a plan to practice addressing your anxiety **every single day**. Make sure your plan is **realistic** so that you aren't setting goals impossibly high and getting discouraged when you can't meet them. If you're ever unsure whether your goal is realistic, always err on the side of caution and make it *easier* than you think you should. At worst, you just meet the goal. At best, you surpass the goal by a wide margin and feel *even better* about your progress! Make yourself **accountable** by confiding with someone close to you who can act as your cheerleader. Make **clear, measurable** goals that you can constantly work towards, and **adapt** these goals as needed. Working with panic is a lot of hard work, but the payoff is certainly worth it!

Use the space below to write out your plan for practicing:

*My plan for practicing skills to manage my anxiety...*

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Finally, don't forget to **reward** yourself for your bravery and your strength. Write out some possible rewards below:

*My rewards for facing my anxiety will be...*

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# 5

## TYPES OF ANXIETY: EXAM ANXIETY



## Exam Anxiety

Most people experience some degree of stress or anxiety before writing an exam. Mild nervousness can actually help improve exam performance. However, high levels of anxiety can impede your ability to think clearly and answer questions effectively. Fortunately there are some straightforward strategies that you can use to help reduce anxiety to a manageable level and improve your grades at exam time. This chapter will walk you through those strategies and help you to create your own unique anxiety reduction program before, during, and after the exam period.

### Cal's Story

Cal is a second year Biology student. He became very anxious when writing exams in first year, as exams were much more difficult than they had been in high school. In addition, last year he failed an exam for the first time ever, although he did manage to pass the course. Since then, Cal has been experiencing increasing levels of anxiety prior to each exam, including shortness of breath and tightness in his chest. To make matters worse, Cal's anxiety makes it difficult to fall asleep the night before his exam and so he has to write on only four hours' sleep. During a recent exam, Cal "blanked out" and had great difficulty remembering the answers to exam questions; as a result he ran out of time and wrote incomplete answers, leading him to receive a lower grade than was reflective of his actual knowledge. Cal's housemates are all in the same program as he is; they talk about the exam material at home and on the way to the exam hall, which only increases Cal's anxiety. Cal is gripped by thoughts like "I'm going to fail", "I'll end up on academic probation", "I can't do this" "I'll get kicked out of Queen's", "I'm not as smart as other people", and "I'll never get into medical school".

### Lisa's Story

Lisa is a fourth year Engineering student. She is set to graduate at the end of this year. Lisa is a straight A student. She has always had some exam anxiety but this year her anxiety has become much worse. Lisa now becomes so anxious that it is difficult for her to concentrate while studying. Her anxiety is further elevated as she is conducting a job search in her field for after she graduates. Lisa is plagued by thoughts like "I have to memorize every detail perfectly or I will fail", "If I don't get the highest grades I will never get a job" and "I can never do enough".

## Before Exams Begin:

Believe it or not, reducing your exam anxiety actually begins at the start of the term. It's important to start practicing your Basic Anxiety Management Skills in advance, *before* you are feeling highly anxious. That way you will know how to use the Skills and they'll be more effective when your anxiety is high. In addition, there are other important things that you can do early in the term, both practical and academic, that can greatly reduce your exam anxiety down the road.

Find some quiet time and work through the following Worksheet, also located in Appendix B (Worksheet 5.1 Exam Anxiety: Before Exams). Consider what you could put in place for yourself now that would help reduce your exam anxiety later in the term.

### 1. Reflect on Your Strengths

What kinds of things have you done in the past during the term that have helped to reduce your anxiety at exam time? What do you know already works for you?

#### *Examples:*

Cal noticed that the more he kept up with course material through the term, the more confident he felt, and the less anxious he was about writing exams.

For Lisa, maintaining her regular yoga practice and exercise routine greatly helped keep her anxiety at a lower baseline level through the term and heading into exams.

On the lines below write down two things that you have done in the past throughout the term that have helped you to reduce your exam anxiety. Commit to resuming or maintaining those things above that you know from past experience work for you. Block them into your daily or weekly schedule. (Need help planning your schedule? See page 30 for techniques to improve Time Management!)

*In the past, these things have helped reduce my exam anxiety...*

1.

---

---

2.

---

---

---

## 2. Review Your Basic Skills

It is important to begin a regular practice of deep breathing and relaxation, and SPEMS (good Self Care that includes eating healthily, getting enough sleep, and making time to exercise) early on to help calm, strengthen, and ground you and to prepare your body and mind for the demands that will be placed upon you during exams.

How can you begin practicing these skills early in the term? Use the space below to help you plan:

Review the chapter on Basic Anxiety Management Skills (Page 4). On the lines below write down three Basic Skills you will begin to practice regularly in your daily life:

### *Examples.*

I will practice breathing twice per day.

I will do one 10-minute relaxation exercise before bed every night.

I will bring healthy snacks with me onto campus to eat between classes during the day.

### *The Basic Anxiety Management Skills I will start practicing are...*

1.

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---

2.

---

---

3.

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Remember, what helps reduce anxiety is the *regular practice* of Basic Anxiety Management Skills. These don't need to take up a lot of time but they do need to be practiced regularly in order to be effective. Block these into your daily and weekly schedule and commit to maintaining them (see page 30 for tips).

### 3. Trying Something New

Ask yourself if there's anything you *haven't* tried before that could help you to reduce your anxiety at exam time.

#### *Examples.*

Cal realized that he had a strong tendency to procrastinate. He decided to challenge himself to be consistently proactive by speaking to his professor or TA if there was material he didn't understand during the term rather than waiting until he was studying for finals to understand the material. He also decided to put a study schedule in place for himself prior to the exam period; this would help him to minimize procrastination and reduce anxiety by having a plan for how to get through his heavy workload.

Lisa decided to backburner her job search until after the final exam period. She gave herself permission to relax her expectations on herself and to move back home before pursuing her job search during the summer months. This helped to lower Lisa's general anxiety level and therefore reduced her exam anxiety as well.

On the lines below write down two things you haven't tried before that you could begin doing early on in the term to help reduce your exam anxiety later on:

*Early in the exam, I can try the following...*

1. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Experiment with these ideas. Try them for one term and see if they do in fact reduce your exam anxiety. If they do, keep them. If they don't, you can always tweak or change them next term, or try something else entirely.

Good work! You've now set the stage for an easier and less anxious exam period.

## During Exams:

During the exam period it is very important that you make working on your anxiety a priority. What does this mean? It means a regular practice with your Basic Anxiety Management Skills: practice abdominal breathing at least twice a day and whenever anxious, and relaxation at least once a day. It also means practicing the basics of good Self Care (SPEMS) as much as you can make time for. It's very easy to neglect these when the academic demands on you are high. However, now is the time when you need to be practicing these more than ever. Doing so will help keep your anxiety at a lower level, which will help you to feel better, study more productively, and, ultimately, perform better on your exams.

At this time, it's also important that you deal with your anxious thoughts, which are likely to increase during this period.

### *Exam Anxiety Thought Record*

Review the section on Introducing the Thought Record in the Basic Anxiety Management Skills chapter (page 4). Recall that the Thought Record is the tool that we use to neutralize anxious thoughts by critically questioning those thoughts. It's very important to directly address anxious thoughts because they tend to quickly take on a life of their own and can significantly increase the unpleasant emotional and physical symptoms of anxiety, especially at exam time.

Let's look at Cal and Lisa's Exam Anxiety Thought Records. Then, you can complete your own Exam Anxiety Thought Record, found in Appendix B (Worksheet 2.5 ab Thought Record).

## WORKSHEET 2.5 Thought

Anxiety Thought Record: Cal		
1. Anxious/Negative Thoughts:	2. Identify Thought Distortions: (Select from list in box below)	3. Balanced/Realistic Self-Talk: (Use the questions below)
1. I'll blank out again when writing an exam. 2. I'll forget everything that I studied. 3. I don't know anything. 4. I can't do this. 5. I'm going to fail. 6. I'll end up on academic probation. 7. I'm not as smart as other people.	1. Generalizing, Predicting the future, Catastrophizing  7. Focusing only on the negatives, Underestimating my ability to cope	1. I am working on calming myself, which will help me to concentrate. Just because I blanked out once doesn't mean it will happen again. I now choose to breathe and bring my present focus to each exam.  7. I am smart enough to have gotten here. I have been successful in many areas of my life. I now choose to value my strengths. I can't control whether I am accepted or not. All I can do is my best.
1. Anxious/Negative Thoughts:	2. Identify Thought Distortions:	3. Balanced/Realistic Self-Talk (Ask Yourself...)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Write down Anxious/Negative Thoughts</li> <li>• Circle your Hot Thought or group of related Hot Thoughts</li> </ul>	<u>Catastrophizing</u> – focusing on the worst possible outcome <u>Overestimating probability</u> – of bad things happening <u>Perfectionism</u> – pressuring the self to be perfect: "I should.." <u>Focusing on only the negatives</u> – ignoring positives Predicting the future – how can you know what will happen? Generalizing – ignoring differences in circumstances <u>Underestimating your ability to cope</u> – something bad does happen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is the Hot Thought true? Is it always true? Is it partially true? Are there ways in which it is not true? Are there times when it is not true?</li> <li>• What is the evidence to support the Hot Thought? What is the evidence against it?</li> <li>• If you had to debate this thought or make a counterargument against it, what would you say?</li> <li>• Is there another way of looking at this?</li> <li>• If you are catastrophizing, what is the probability of this thought actually happening? If your feared outcome does happen, how terrible would it be?</li> </ul>

## WORKSHEET 2.5 Thought

## Anxiety Thought Record: Lisa

1. Anxious/Negative Thoughts:	2. Identify Thought Distortions: (Select from list in box below)	3. Balanced/Realistic Self-Talk: (Use the questions below)
1. I have to memorize every detail perfectly or I will fail. 2. I don't have enough time to study. 3. I'm going to do badly. 4. I'm going to fail. 5. If I don't get the highest grades I will never get a job.	2. Focusing only on the negatives, Catastrophizing  4. Catastrophizing, Predicting the future	2. I have two full days to study and I will use that time as productively as I can.  4. I have never failed an exam before so it is unlikely that I would do so now. I may do less well but it is unlikely that I would fail. If I do fail, I will handle it.
1. Anxious/Negative Thoughts:	2. Identify Thought Distortions:	3. Balanced/Realistic Self-Talk: (Ask Yourself...)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Write down Anxious/Negative Thoughts</li> <li>Circle your Hot Thought or group of related Hot Thoughts</li> </ul>	<p><u>Catastrophizing</u> – focusing on the worst possible outcome</p> <p><u>Overestimating probability</u> – of bad things happening</p> <p><u>Perfectionism</u> – pressuring the self to perfect: "I should.."</p> <p><u>Focusing on only the negatives</u> – positives</p> <p>Predicting the future – how can you know what will happen?</p> <p>Generalizing – ignoring differences in circumstances</p> <p><u>Underestimating your ability to cope</u> – something bad does happen</p> <p><u>Mind Reading</u> – imagining you know what another is thinking</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is the Hot Thought true? Is it always true? Is it partially true? Are there ways in which it is not true? Are there times when it is not true?</li> <li>What is the evidence to support the Hot Thought? What is the evidence against it?</li> <li>If you had to debate this thought or make a counterargument against it, what would you say?</li> <li>Is there another way of looking at this?</li> <li>If you are catastrophizing, what is the probability of this thought actually happening? If your feared outcome does happen, how terrible would it be?</li> </ul>

Now, it's your turn to complete your own Thought Record, which can be found in Appendix B. Make some quiet time to do this exercise when you won't be interrupted. First, list your anxious thoughts in the left hand column, circle the Hot Thought(s) that you wish to work on, then use the prompts at the bottom of the form to question those thoughts. List your Balanced/Realistic thoughts in the right hand column. You can complete a Thought Record for any anxious thought that arises about your exam anxiety; you can complete as many as you need to in order to get relief.

## *After Your Thought Record is Complete:*

Once you have completed a Thought Record, fold or detach the third column (Balanced/Realistic Self-Talk). Keep the column somewhere you can easily refer to it. Tape it on your bathroom mirror or carry it around in your bag with you for easy reference.

Then, use your Balanced/Realistic Self-Talk in one of two ways:

1. Read through the list repeatedly throughout the day to remind yourself of your balanced perspective. If you are permitted to bring allowed materials into the exam room, you may wish to bring your list or lists into the exam with you.

And/or

2. Pick one statement from the list and repeat it over and over to yourself in your own mind. This is especially important when you are walking to your exam, sitting down preparing to write your exam, and anytime you become anxious during the exam. By doing this, you are effectively interrupting and distracting your mind from thinking about and dwelling on anxious thoughts that ramp up your anxiety levels. Instead, you are consciously focusing your mind on more realistic, calming thoughts.

## *Mindful Awareness*

Remember that you can also practice **Mindful Awareness** in regards to your anxious thoughts about exams. Review the section on Mindfulness in the chapter on Basic Anxiety Management Skills (page 4). If a new anxious thought appears, just notice, take a step back from the thought, and say "That's just an anxious thought." Let the thought float through your mind like a cloud blowing across the sky. Remember that just because you have an anxious thought doesn't mean you have to believe it, engage with it, start working on it or worry about what it says. You just name it as an anxious thought and practice **mindfulness** by allowing it to pass on through.



# Additional Behavioral Strategies to Use During Exams:

The following strategies can also be found in Appendix B (Worksheet 5.1 Exam Anxiety: Additional Behavioural Strategies to Use During Exams).

## *1. Backburner Other Life Concerns.*

Life happens, even during exams. In Lisa's case, she needed to suspend her job search during her upcoming exam period and prioritize focusing only on her exams. Lisa decided she would resume her job search once her exams were over. Similarly, if you are dealing with a significant stressor in your personal life, such as a relationship conflict or difficulty, try to postpone addressing those difficulties until after your exams are finished. Why? Other life stressors can have the effect of increasing your overall anxiety, and therefore ramp up your exam anxiety too. Conversely, exam stress can make other life stressors feel very big, and limit your ability to deal with them effectively. Life challenges will almost always wait for you until you're ready to deal with them. Doing so will reduce your overall anxiety level and create space both to study and to use your strategies to reduce your anxiety.

Write down one major personal concern or stressor that you could postpone dealing with until after exams:

*I can postpone this personal concern ...*

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What action would you need to take in order to effectively postpone dealing with the stressor? For example, do you need to let someone know you'll get back to them after exams? Or that they won't be hearing from you for the next few weeks? Do you need to put the issue out of your own mind using self-talk or mindfulness techniques? Would making a To-do list or a list of your concerns and then putting the list away somewhere help get the issue off your mind?

*My plan for postponing my personal concern is...*

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## 2. Take Some Alone Time.

Like Cal in our case example, many people find that talking with other students who will be writing the same exam actually escalates their anxiety. Doing so can lead you to compare yourself to others and trigger anxious thoughts about not adequately knowing the material. If this is true for you, seriously consider *not* talking to friends about your upcoming exam. You can let trusted friends know that you are dealing with exam anxiety and you just need to be by yourself prior to your exams. Or just quietly take space for yourself. You might find, for example, that walking to your exam alone rather than with others is helpful. During that time you can also be practicing your Basic Anxiety Management Skills (breathing, self-talk).

When could you carve out some alone time in the days and hours leading up to an exam? What alone time would be most impactful in reducing your exam anxiety? Walking to your exam alone? Not hanging out with others the night before who are writing the same exam as you?

*I can take the following times for a lone time...*

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---

How can you handle this in your relationships? Let others know that you need time to study? Or that you need to take a little alone time to get in the zone?

*My plan for taking a lone time is...*

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### 3. *Bring a Present-Minded Focus While Writing Your Exams*

While you are writing an exam it is not the time to be calculating your course grade or your GPA, or to be thinking about how this exam will affect your grades, program, or the rest of your life. If you find your mind wandering, breathe, then gently and kindly remind yourself to bring your focus and attention to the exam question in front of you.

While writing the exam, slow yourself down. Often when people are anxious they tend to rush and then either make mistakes or forget to include things in their answers that would get additional marks. Tell yourself that you can take the time you need to answer each question. Breathe. Sit with each question for a minute until you can start to think through each answer. Don't let your mind rush ahead and start worrying about future questions. Remember, a present-minded focus means focusing on just one thing at a time.

On the lines below write down three things that you can do during your exams to maintain a present-minded focus:

Here is a sample list:

Breathe

Use the self-statement "I now choose to focus on one question at a time"

If my mind wanders and starts worrying about my grades, I'll interrupt my thoughts and gently bring my focus back to my exam

*During my exam, I can maintain a present-minded focus by...*

1.

---

---

2.

---

---

3.

---

---

---

## 4. Have a Plan in Place That You Follow Prior to Writing Each Exam

This includes the night before and the day of your exam. Choose what you are going to wear the night before. Reduce as much stress or decision-making on the day of the exam as possible. It is also very important to incorporate your Basic Anxiety Management Skills into your planned schedule heading into your exam. Ask yourself what would help you to feel as calm and prepared as possible?

### *Example:*

For Cal, it was important to put a relaxing bedtime routine in place to help him to fall asleep earlier. He decided what time he would get up, what he was going to have for breakfast, and what time he was going to leave for the exam hall.

What three things will you do the night before you write your exam?

Here is a sample list:

I will put away all exam materials by 9:30 pm.

Between 9:30 and 10:00 pm I will do my Basic Anxiety Management Skills (breathing and relaxation)

I will be in bed by 10:00 pm

Write your three strategies below:

To manage my anxiety, I can do the following the night before my exam...

1. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## 5. Practice Radical Acceptance of Your Anxiety.

Your anxiety will likely be elevated during this period. That's okay. Say "My anxiety is a little high right now; I will use my Basic Skills and focus on my exams."

Know that you are in survival mode. This is as tough as it gets. Remind yourself that you can do it, even if you are feeling anxious. Say "I can feel anxious and write my exam anyway". Acknowledge that you are not only experiencing the pressure that writing exams brings; on top of it you are also doing work on your anxiety. You are doing double the work compared with students who aren't also coping with exam anxiety. Be gentle, caring and compassionate with yourself during this period. If your anxiety spikes during this period, simply re-start your Basic Skills and go to your Thought Record for relief.

### When Exams Are Over:

Following the exam period, consider doing the following three things:

1. **De-stress.** Take a break. Relax. Use your Basic Skills. Allow your body and mind to go back to a lower baseline level of anxiety.
2. **Reward yourself.** Take the opportunity to recognize and reward all of your hard work throughout the term and the exam period. Acknowledge your successes. Give yourself a pat on the back. Reward yourself by splurging on a special treat or do something that you really enjoy.

#### *Examples:*

Cal rewarded himself by taking a trip to Montreal for two days with friends.

Lisa celebrated the end of exams by taking a week off to pack up, hang out, and say goodbye to people before heading home to look for work.

What can you do to de-stress and reward yourself now that exams are over?

Write down two things you could do that would help bring your stress levels down and enable you to relax:

Now that exams are over, I can bring my stress down in the following ways ...

1. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

What reward could you give yourself for the hard academic and personal work you've done?

I could give myself the following reward after exams...

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. **Take stock.** Now that you are calmer and on the other side of the exam period, take the opportunity to do a review or “autopsy” of what worked and what didn’t work for you to reduce your exam anxiety. Take as objective a perspective as you can—no judging or blaming—just look for ways to strengthen and help yourself further going forward. Recommit to doing what worked at the start of next term and the next exam period. Remind yourself what a difference it made.

Next, take a step back and look at the bigger picture. Are there any larger issues that need to get addressed? Be totally honest with yourself. Note that the following strategies for assessing yourself can also be found in Appendix B (Worksheet 5.3 Exam Anxiety: Assessing Yourself).

*Assess yourself academically:*

- Are your study habits as strong as they could be? Could you be studying ‘smarter’ not ‘harder’? Are you trying to memorize every detail or is there a more efficient way for you to study? Are you keeping up with material during the term or cramming at the last minute? Do you get tripped up on multiple-choice exams? Are you taking needed breaks when you study to boost your productivity? Do you have a working study schedule that you follow? Maybe a trip to Learning Strategies is in order to maximize your study capabilities and reduce your anxiety (see the Resources section in the Appendix for Learning Strategies contact information).
- How are your essay writing skills? Do you struggle to answer essay questions on exams? An appointment at The Writing Centre could help you get better at structuring your exam essay questions (see the Resources section in the Appendix for The Writing Centre contact information).
- Are you engaging enough help? Would it be useful to join a study group or get a study partner? Ask questions of your professor or your TA when you don’t understand something? Hire a tutor?
- Are you happy with your program? Is the program you are in aligned with your strengths and interests? If not, consider speaking with an Academic Advisor to explore your options (see the Appendix Resources section to find your program’s Academic Advisor).
- Are you overstretched, not giving yourself enough time to study? Are you working too many hours in a part-time job? Consider cutting back your hours, especially at exam time. Are you taking more courses than is manageable? Reducing your course load might be something for you to consider. Do you have too many extracurricular activities or volunteer commitments? Take a hard look at how much you are loading on your plate. For more on this, see the chapter on Overwhelm. What would you need to change, remove from your schedule, or cut back on in order to feel calmer and more confident when writing your exams?

Sit quietly and reflect on the previous term and exam period. As truthfully as you can, identify what academic area(s) could use improvement. On the lines below write down two areas in which you could improve:

*I could improve the following academic areas...*

1.

---

---

2.

---

---

---

Next, write down what action you will take in order to improve in these areas. Is there something you can do on your own? Or will you reach out for some on-campus help for new ideas about how to manage your academics?

*My plan to improve my academics is...*

1.

---

---

2.

---

---

---

*Assess yourself personally:*

- Are there any personal life stressors that may be contributing to your exam anxiety? Are you experiencing conflict or difficulties in an important relationship? A difficult situation in your family? Other practical stressors? Get support from trusted friends or family members. See if you can figure out a way to resolve, backburner or minimize the effects the issues at hand has on you. If you feel stuck or have continuing difficulty, make an appointment to see a Personal Counsellor in Counselling Services to explore new perspectives or options (See the Resources section in Appendix A for Counselling Services contact information).

Make some quiet time and reflect on your personal life. Are you experiencing any personal issues or close relationships that are increasing your anxiety or stress levels? Write these down on the lines below:

*I could improve the following personal areas...*

---

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Next, write down any steps you could take to reduce stress in these areas. Set new boundaries in relationships? Seek Personal Counselling for a difficult issue?

*My plan to improve my personal life is...*

1.

2.

## *Conclusion*

Good for you for doing this work on yourself. Know that you are not alone—many students experience exam anxiety. Take good care of yourself, breathe, challenge your thoughts, and be caring and supportive of yourself as you write your exams. If you need additional support or resources, help is just a phone call away. Don't hesitate to reach out for the support that you need.



# 6

## TYPES OF ANXIETY: OVERWHELM

# Overwhelm

Overwhelm occurs when the demands being placed upon us exceed our ability to cope with them. We can be overwhelmed intellectually, organizationally, or emotionally. Generally speaking, overwhelm happens under one of three circumstances:

- (1) We have too much to do and a limited time in which to do it. This is what most of us experience as a ‘time crunch’;
- (2) We have an enormous task to complete (such as a project or an assignment) and we don’t know where to begin;
- (3) We are trying to cope emotionally or psychologically with a difficult personal situation while simultaneously trying to deal with a high level of academic demand.

When you are overwhelmed you are likely to experience one or more of the following:

## *On an emotional level:*

- A high level of anxiety
- Increased stress
- Emotional numbing out
- Irritability or anger with other people, or in general, for no apparent reason
- Emotions that are close to the surface, such as sadness or tearfulness
- A sense of being overloaded, swamped, deluged, or drowning
- A feeling of powerlessness or helplessness to deal effectively with your situation

## *On an intellectual level:*

- A racing mind
- Difficulty focusing or concentrating on any one thing
- A feeling of mental paralysis; an inability to ‘think straight’
- The experience of trying to work on one thing while your mind is simultaneously thinking about all of the other things that you also need to get done

## *On a behavioural level:*

- Avoidance of doing work so as not to have the feeling of overwhelm
- Running around trying to get everything done that needs to get done but not doing anything particularly well

If your overwhelm goes on for an extended period of time, you will likely start to experience worsening fatigue, exhaustion, reduced productivity levels, physical symptoms such as headaches or stomach upset, and a deteriorating ability to cope emotionally. This occurs for the simple reason that our bodies and minds have been taxed at too high a level for too long and need a rest. As a result, we begin to experience a level of exhaustion commonly known as “burnout”.

It is important to note that we all get overwhelmed at times and for different reasons. Fortunately, there is a lot you can do to reduce overwhelm. In this chapter we'll discuss concrete practical, academic, and personal strategies for reducing overwhelm before, during, and after the more stressful academic times of the year.

## Ana's Story

Ana is a third year Political Science major. She has been a high achiever all her life. Ana has always been active with extracurricular activities and done well in school. Ana enjoys being engaged and involved in things, and has an ongoing need to be busy. She has experienced periods of high stress and overwhelm at peak times throughout High School and in University. Recently, however, Ana has experienced a lengthier period of overwhelm that—for the first time in her life—is interfering in her ability to function. Ana is enrolled in 5 courses, volunteers at the Peer Support Centre, works part-time as a lifeguard 10 hours per week, and is on the Varsity Gymnastics Team. She has begun having difficulty concentrating and has 4 essays due in the next 3 weeks. Even when she has time to work on her papers she finds she gets overwhelmed, doesn't know where to start, and can't begin to organize herself. Her feeling of stress and overwhelm is increasing as each day goes by and she is unable to get almost any work done. Lately, she has begun to feel exhausted; she noticed she is drinking more coffee than usual and is experiencing low energy during the day, which is reducing her productivity further. Ana has thoughts like "I have to get everything done", "I have to hurry up", "I'm so behind", "I should be able to do this", and "I have to be productive at all times".

## Ben's Story

Ben is a first year Engineering student. He has always worked hard in order to do well in school, and has many friends. Ben was excited to come to Queen's, is enjoying Res, and has made new friends. Ben has found adjusting to academics at the University level quite challenging; both the volume and difficulty of the work have been much greater and, therefore, more challenging compared with High School. Ben had been struggling to keep up and do the work but was learning to manage by developing some new study skills, such as joining a study group. At Thanksgiving, Ben and his girlfriend of two years mutually decided to break up, and his grandfather passed away. When Ben returned to Queen's after Thanksgiving, he found himself feeling upset and was preoccupied with thoughts of both his ex-girlfriend and his grandfather. Ben found it very difficult to focus enough to do his work. He began to feel overwhelmed with the work that was piling up and the material that he did not understand. Ben began engaging in avoidance behaviours in order to protect himself from feelings of overwhelm. He spent more and more time playing computer games, and missed several quizzes and short assignments. Heading into his December final exams, Ben felt totally overwhelmed. His grades had already suffered, and, most concerning of all, Ben was way behind in studying for his exams. Ben was afraid that, for the first time in his life, he might not pass some of his finals. He still felt great difficulty being able to focus, and was beginning to feel powerless to deal with the academic mountain of work in front of him. Ben had thoughts like "I can't do this," "I might fail," and "I just want to give up."

## *Looking Ahead*

It can be enormously helpful to plan ahead in order to ward off overwhelm during more demanding times to come. For most University students, overwhelm is more likely to occur at key times in the year, notably midterms, end of term, and heading into final fall- and spring-time exams. Of course, depending on your own personal circumstances, you may feel overwhelm at other times as well. Here are some proactive steps that you can take early in the term (or even during the summer months, looking to the academic year ahead) to reduce your overwhelm later on:

## *1. Make a Schedule.*

Making a schedule and following it is the single best way to stay on top of your academics. It helps protect you from getting behind on your readings, studying, and assignments, thereby preventing you from hitting a wall of overwhelm that comes when trying to write multiple essays at the last minute or cram for an exam the night before.

See the section on Time Management in Basic Anxiety Management Skills for more information about scheduling your time (page 30). Alternatively, you can visit the Queen’s University Learning Strategies website for helpful scheduling tips and strategist, or to make an appointment to meet one-one-one with a Learning Strategist at Learning Strategies in Student Academic Success Services in the Stauffer library (see their contact information in the list of Resources in Appendix A).

### *Examples:*

When Ana made up her term schedule, she realized that she couldn’t possibly do everything she had committed to do. Ana used the schedule template as a guide to help her to set a limit on what she could take on and what she couldn’t.

Ben met with a Learning Strategist when he returned to campus in January and created a term schedule for himself. Having a plan in place for how his work was going to get done was enormously relieving. Because Ben was calmer and less overwhelmed, he was able to think more clearly and grasp the material more easily, getting work done in a shorter amount of time. Ben also felt increased motivation to do his work, and stopped avoiding study time.

Setting up a schedule for yourself in September or January can be enormously helpful in keeping your academic stress and overwhelm at more manageable levels throughout the term. As an added bonus, you might see your grades improve as well!

## *2. Practice Good Self Care*

Remember “SPEMS” from the Basic Anxiety Management Skills section (Page 4)? Good Self Care involves attending to our social, physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual needs. We need to make room to meet these deep needs in our lives or we will not have the energy or resources to meet the significant demands placed upon us. When we are depleted in one or more of these areas we will be more vulnerable to overwhelm and, subsequently, burnout. It is crucial to keep our bodies, minds, and selves energized, vibrant and healthy.

What does this mean? It means ensuring that we are getting approximately 8 hours of sleep a night, eating regular healthy snacks and meals throughout the day, engaging in moderate exercise, making time to spend with supportive friends or family, and finding ways to nourish ourselves emotionally.

Don't overlook one important aspect of Self Care: **DOING NOTHING**. You need to make time to do nothing at regular intervals in order to keep stress levels down by giving your body and mind a chance to recover from stress. You will be more productive when you return to your work if you do this. Finally, doing nothing affords us the opportunity to follow our bliss or to do something just because we feel like it; a luxury in our highly structured lives where there is so much that we *have* to get done every day.

When we have a lot that we need to do, or are in a state of stress or overwhelm, our tendency is to neglect our basic needs in order to get the things done that we need to get done. This is a crucial mistake: **The more demands placed upon us, the more we need to be engaging in good Self Care**. Of course we all drop the ball on our Self Care sometimes. However, it's important that if you do, you resume these activities as soon as possible and not neglect them for prolonged periods of time. Remember, too, that caring for yourself will boost your productivity and your ability to perform academically, as our brains work better when our bodies and selves are well cared for. The time spent on yourself in these areas is time well spent.

### *Examples.*

Ana realized that she had almost no time available for Self Care, personal time, or time to do nothing. On some days, Ana didn't even leave herself enough time to eat! Ana committed to booking time in her schedule for SPEMS in order to re-balance her life and live in a state of wellness. She realized that she couldn't keep on driving herself like this without her academics starting to fall apart.

Ben had previously been very good about working out regularly at the gym. However, when he became overwhelmed, he stopped going. Ben made the commitment to resume and maintain his workouts three times per week throughout the term.

Remember to block all of your Self Care activities into your Weekly Schedule (including doing nothing!). This is one of the greatest gifts you can give yourself: committing to and prioritizing taking care of **YOU** first.

On the lines below write down two things that you are good at maintaining with regards to your Self Care:

*I a m good a t the followin g Self Car e stra tegies...*

1.

2.

On the lines below write down two Self Care priorities that you could either introduce or be more consistent with that could help reduce anxiety and prevent overwhelm:

*Two Self Car e s tra tegies I wou ld like to pr ior itize in clu de...*

1.

2.

Now, book all four of these items into your weekly schedule for the remainder of the term. Commit to maintaining them. Over the course of the term, notice how practicing regular Self Care helps your anxiety/stress, physical well-being, emotions, and productivity level.



### *3. Practice Other Basic Anxiety Management Skills:*

The same techniques we teach people for anxiety are very effective at warding off the effects of everyday stress and overwhelm. Deep Breathing, Mindfulness, and Relaxation have been shown to be highly effective in helping us manage our stress levels. Experiment and see what best helps you to reduce your feelings of overwhelm.

Briefly review the sections on Breathing, Grounding/Mindfulness, Yoga, Progressive Muscle Relaxation, and Thought Records in the Basic Anxiety Management Skills chapter (Page10).

On the lines below, write down two Basic Anxiety Management Skills that you will practice for one term:

***Examples:***

I will practice abdominal breathing once a day at bedtime.

I will attend one yoga class per week.

*Two Basic Anxiety Management Skills I will practice for one term include...*

1.

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2.

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Notice over the course of the term how these practices affect your anxiety/stress, physical well-being, emotions, and productivity level.

**Assess Yourself: What Tends to Put Me Into Overwhelm?**

Take some time early in the term to consider what it is that tends to make you personally vulnerable to overwhelm. First, we'll review some common contributing causes for students. Then you'll have a chance to reflect on yourself

## 4. Do You Overcommit Yourself?

### Example.

For Ana, overwhelm was the result of overcommitting herself. On top of her schoolwork, Ana was volunteering, participating in extracurricular activities, and working a part-time job. Ana realized that she wasn't being realistic about how much time and energy she actually had to dedicate to her various activities in addition to her academics. She came to understand that **anyone** would become overwhelmed with a plate this overloaded.

Always keep in mind that being enrolled in five courses *is a full-time job in and of itself*. Queen's students are known for being engaged, involved, and active students—which is great—as long as it's within a healthy range. Past that point, once you are in overwhelm you aren't much good to yourself or to anybody else. You need to take care of yourself, too.

If, like Ana, you tend to get overwhelmed by overcommitting, try the following:

1. **Make space for your own needs.** People who overcommit tend to deny their own needs. When we do this chronically, we get burned out. When are you going to eat? Sleep? Exercise? Spend time with friends? Do nothing? Ask yourself, how do you want to feel in your life? Stressed, rushed, overloaded, chaotic, disorganized, running from one thing to the next? Or more relaxed, grounded, able to laugh and enjoy your life, calmer, on top of things, confident that things will get done, with time to also do things you *like* to do?
2. **Consider your priorities at this time.** Set priorities or goals and evaluate requests made of you in relation to those priorities. No matter how interesting a given opportunity might be, ask yourself, does this activity align with my personal goals right now? For example, if your priority is to increase your grades in order to apply to Grad school, then you will want to make more time for your academic work. That will necessitate that you reduce the amount of time you are dedicating to other commitments. Similarly, if a volunteer commitment is in the same area that you intend to pursue as a career, you may want to prioritize making time for that commitment, and something else will have to go.
3. **Be thoughtful about what you commit to.** Really take time before you say yes to evaluate the merits of each opportunity. Think about what this commitment will actually require of your time and energy. Be realistic. Think ahead. It's easy to feel enthusiastic about an opportunity in the first week of September but how will this be for you at crunch time when midterms arrive, not to mention at end of term and heading into exams? How busy are you going to choose to be? At the more extreme end, is it possible that being this busy could jeopardize something in your life, like your grades, your relationship(s), or your health?

4. **Feel entitled to say yes or no.** Be assertively in charge of your life choices. Take the driver’s seat of your life. Be protective of your time and health. Put your highest best interest first before committing to anything. If an activity isn’t a clear “yes” according to these criteria, then consider saying no. If you are ambivalent or concerned about something you are taking on and you can’t resolve your concern, say no. For help saying no, consider Sean’s example in the Behaviour Experiment Basic Skill (page 44).

Listen to your own deepest needs, have your own back, and stand for your own highest interests. Be very realistic about what and how much you can commit to. No matter how high your enthusiasm is, or how badly others want you to be involved in something, you need to take stock of the rest of your life too, and where and how this new opportunity will fit in.

Do you overcommit yourself? On the lines below, list the top two ways in which you get pulled in to overcommit. Note that this Worksheet is also available in Appendix B (Worksheet 6.1 Overwhelm: Overcommitting Yourself). For example, is it hard for you to say no? Are you a time optimist—always thinking you’ll have more time available than you do? Is it hard for you to be assertive about your own life priorities? Do you feel as though you always need to be there for others or can’t let others down? What specifically gets you emotionally “hooked in” to overcommit?

*Two ways I overcommit are...*

1.

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2.

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Next, write down two small steps you could take this term to let go of, or challenge, your “emotional hooks” and reduce your overwhelm down the road. For example, “I will remind myself that it’s not my job to meet everyone else’s needs,” “I will say no to requests to cover other people’s shifts from mid-October onwards this term,” “I will cut out one of my extracurricular activities that isn’t aligned with the priorities I’ve set for myself this academic year.”

*Two ways I can let go of overwhelm...*

1.

2.

## 5. Do You Avoid?

### ***Example.***

When Ben became overwhelmed academically, his coping strategy was to engage in a pattern of avoidance in order to reduce feelings of overwhelm. As Ben did so, his academic situation grew worse and worse as work continued to pile up, and he became more and more behind. Ben realized that he needed to challenge this pull to avoid in the future and be more active and assertive in dealing with difficulties when they arose in his life.

Avoidance is a common coping strategy that people employ—often without realizing it—in the face of overwhelm. If opening your textbook floods you with feelings of anxiety and overwhelm, isn’t it easier in the moment to go for a coffee, answer a friend’s text, or go play a computer game for a while? As we talked about in the chapter on Generalized Anxiety, avoidance gives short-term relief but creates a snowball effect of problems in the medium- and long-term, which only serves to increase your anxiety and overwhelm further. Most of us avoid sometimes. But when avoidance becomes a pattern for managing stress or overwhelm, it can start to have negative effects on our lives.

Here are some strategies for challenging avoidance:

- Practice **Mindful Awareness** of your internal pull to avoid. Notice the powerful emotional draw to escape feelings of overwhelm, and to distract yourself with another activity (see Mindfulness on page 18).
- Rather than the escapism of avoidance, **challenge yourself to stop and face the situation directly**. Breathe. Come up with a plan for how to deal with what is happening in reality. Remind yourself that, as difficult as it might feel, you will feel so much better if you deal with the issue head-on rather than letting things fester and worsen over time. Reach out for help. People who avoid tend to go off alone to deal with their difficulties.
- **Ask a friend** to help you with a problem set you don't understand. Go talk to your professor. Make an appointment in Counselling Services to deal with personal difficulties or go to Learning Strategies to put an academic plan in place.

Use the worksheet on the following page (and in Appendix B). In the Worksheet 6.2 Overwhelm: Avoiding, list two things that you tend to do to avoid in the first column, and what the consequences of those are in the second.

**Example.**

Avoidance Behaviour: I hang out with my housemates

Effect: I don't study when I should be studying

Next, in the third column, write down two strategies you will begin using this term to resist the urge to avoid:

**Example.**

I will go to the library to study where there are fewer distractions

I will limit my computer time to one hour per day after my work is completed.

## WORKSHEET 6.2 Overwhelm: Avoiding

Avoidance Behaviour	Effect	How I will Resist the Urge to Avoid

Overcoming avoidance can increase your stress in the short-term. However, as you practice being more assertive and engaged, you will feel stronger, more confident, and more emotionally present—in short, more alive—in your life. And you will develop and build important life skills that will enhance your work and your relationships going forward.

## 6. *Do You Struggle Academically?*

When you have an academic difficulty or challenge, you are more vulnerable to overwhelm for the simple reason that you have more to overcome in order to get your work done.

Some of the common academic difficulties that people encounter include the following (see if you recognize yourself anywhere on this list):

- It's difficult for you to organize yourself. You work in chaos, usually completing assignments at the last minute when you realize they are due.
- You find it hard to get motivated. You procrastinate during the term, hanging out during your days, and then you have to learn large amounts of new material heading into midterms or final exams.
- You have difficulty writing essays; you feel you never really learned the skills you need to write easily or well.
- You are in first year, or a later more challenging year, and like Ben in the case example above, you are trying to get used to the increased volume and difficulty of work. Perhaps you are also getting used to working independently and having to be so responsible for your learning compared with High School.

- Your study habits need updating. You don't have a study strategy, you don't take breaks, you are a perfectionist who tries to learn every detail versus focusing in on important material, you are easily distracted when somebody calls or texts you.
- You have a learning disability that makes learning more challenging than someone else as smart as you.

Don't let academic difficulties become chronic. Take charge of your learning, and make life easier on yourself. Learning Strategies is an excellent resource for developing better skills, from improving motivation, to studying 'smarter not harder'. Don't try to soldier on alone. Make life easier on yourself by being proactive and learning some new ways of doing things.

If you have a learning disability, make an appointment with Disability Services (See Appendix A for Contact information). Staff there can advise you whether you qualify for accommodations or specialized learning tools. Also, Learning Strategies offers many adaptive strategies that can be helpful to counteract the challenges that a learning disability presents. Make an appointment with a Learning Strategist for help (Appendix A).

## *7. Is There a Personal Issue in Your Life that Needs Addressing?*

Recall that overwhelm can be emotional, as well as practical, or academic. When we are upset about something, we tend to think more about it, and it takes up more of our mental space to process or manage our feelings about whatever it is that's going on. This makes us more vulnerable to overwhelm, especially if we are also trying to deal with academic and our other life demands.

Are there longstanding patterns or personal situations in your life that are overloading you that need to be addressed in order to reduce your overwhelm? Here are some common situations that students face. See if any of these apply to you:

- Do you manage a mental health issue, such as depression? Are you taking steps to manage that, such as seeking out professional care, or following strategies that you've previously learned that work for you?
- Do you overfunction in your relationships? For example, are you the 'go to' person for your friends? Do friends consistently call only you for support when they're upset about something in their own lives to the extent that *you* are becoming upset or stressed? Do you spend time being there for them when you really need to be studying? Or are you taking a high level of responsibility for someone else's ongoing significant life problems? Seriously consider setting some limits on your availability in order to preserve your own well-being and reduce overwhelm. There's nothing wrong with supporting others, as long as it's not compromising your own health and ability to function. Consider setting limits on the time you spend providing support to others, or suggest a friend in need make an appointment in Counselling Services for needed support.

- Do you have financial difficulties? Create a budget, or re-work an existing budget, speak with your parents, or go to the Queen's Financial Aid office for assistance (see Appendix A for contact information). University can place significant financial stresses on students, but remember that you are not alone. There are resources available to help!
- Do you deal with challenges in your immediate family, such as parental separation or conflicts in family relationships? Are there ways that you can protect yourself from the effects of your situation, by distancing yourself or setting limits? Consider making an appointment in Counselling Services for support.

It's crucial to determine how to change, manage, or set limits on ongoing personal matters so that you can do what you're here to do: study, get your degree, and have a positive, rich experience of your time here at Queen's.

On the lines below, write down a personal situation in your own life that tends to elevate your anxiety or overwhelm:

*On e p e r s o n a l s i t u a t i o n t h a t h e i g h t e n s m y a n x i e t y...*

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Next, write down two things that you could do to reduce the negative effect of this on yourself. This could be a course of action, or it could be as simple as the decision to reach out for help:

*I c a n r e d u c e t h e n e g a t i v e e f f e c t o f t h e a b o v e p e r s o n a l s i t u a t i o n b y...*

1. 

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2. 

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# In The Weeds: What to do if you are Totally Overwhelmed

Even when we've made our best efforts to prevent overwhelm it can still happen to us for various reasons. In this section, we'll discuss some ideas for what to do if you are experiencing overwhelm.

## *Academic Overwhelm:*

If it is crunch time and you are hitting a wall of academic overwhelm:

First of all, breathe.

Next, stop, take a step back, and *make a plan*.

Strongly resist the urge to either avoid, or run around trying to get everything done all at once. Neither one of these coping approaches will help you if you are in over your head, for the reasons discussed above. Instead, put an Emergency Plan in place for yourself.

## *Creating an Emergency Plan:*

Lay out all of your work in front of you and take an honest look at all of your due dates and deadlines. Is there a *realistic* way that you can get all this work done? If so, how? Create Emergency Weekly and Term Schedules using the Learning Strategies templates and tips discussed above. Make a schedule by blocking in everything that you need to do. Decide on the order of priority for working on your assignments and studying based on due dates. Figure out a plan to complete one item at a time, then move on to the next. Scheduling time for each item will help your mind from racing ahead to all the other things you also need to work on. If your mind does start racing ahead, gently bring your focus and attention back to the work in front of you. Say to yourself, "I now choose to focus on one thing at a time".

When creating your Emergency Plan, ask yourself what you would need to remove from your life in order to get your work done. This is especially true if you tend to overcommit. Be creative and also be ruthless. For example, do you need to take a break from your volunteer commitment(s), cancel plans you have with friends, or cut back your hours at your part-time job? Remember that cutting things out can be temporary while you get through your period of overwhelm.

What do you need to remove from your plate in order to make your Emergency Plan work? Remember to be creative and ruthless. On the lines below, list two things you could remove from your schedule in order to be able to meet your academic deadlines.

*In order to make my Emergency Plan work, I need to remove the following...*

1.

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2.

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## *Being in Survival Mode*

When you are in academic overwhelm, it is sometimes helpful to think about yourself as being in **Survival Mode**. In the same way that you needed to make an Emergency Plan for meeting your academic demands, you also need to make an emergency plan for how to do some Self Care. The reality is that under the circumstances you don't have much time for Self Care or Basic Anxiety Management Skills. You do, however, need to do just enough of these to have the energy to be productive and to sufficiently reduce overwhelm so that you can think straight.

Ask yourself, what can you do for yourself that is the *most* impactful and *least* time-consuming that will deliver the biggest payoff for what your body and mind need right now? The bare minimum involves getting enough sleep and eating healthily and regularly through the day. In addition, getting even a minimum amount of exercise will be helpful. For example, maybe a 20 minute run in the morning twice a week is all you have time for right now but is just enough to get energy flowing in your body and to reduce your stress level. Note that creating a survival mode plan can also be found in Appendix B (Worksheet 6.3 Overwhelm: Survival Mode).

Being realistic with regards to everything you have to get done, what Self Care strategies can you focus on and prioritize in order to boost your productivity and reduce overwhelm?

*The Self Care strategies I can use right now include...*

1.

---

---

2.

---

---

---

Where can you strategically place these in your schedule to maximize their effectiveness and ensure they will get done?

*I can put the following in my schedule to maximize my effectiveness ...*

1.

---

---

2.

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If you are having difficulty creating a workable plan, make an appointment at Learning Strategies or Counselling Services to help you create and put a plan in place. If your academic situation is so serious as to warrant withdrawal or academic accommodation, or if you want more information about your options, speak with your professor or with an Academic Advisor in your program.

## *Some Further Ideas for Dealing with Academic Overwhelm:*

### Writing:

If you are overwhelmed with regards to an essay or a written assignment, try the following:

**Take a break.** Often times with writing, an idea will come to you when you aren't actually working on the paper, for example, when you are walking home from the library, grabbing a coffee, or getting out of the shower in the morning.

**Move away from your computer to write.** Instead, do some reading on the subject; input some new ideas and see what gets sparked. Or go sit somewhere else with a pen and paper and just brainstorm some rough ideas; often getting away from the felt pressure that comes when sitting at a computer screen can allow for ideas to flow.

**Make an appointment in The Writing Centre.** A Writing Consultant can help give you tips on how to start a paper, organize or re-organize a paper, or do a final edit to create a more polished essay. This can be enormously helpful to move things along, as well as to learn skills that will make writing essays easier in the future.

### Tests and Exams:

If you are overwhelmed preparing for a test or exam:

**Get organized.** Break course materials down into parts. Create a study schedule to review those parts.

**Visit the Learning Strategies Online Resources** web page for tips on how to study smarter not harder.

**Focus on key concepts.** Now is not the time to get bogged down by the fine details. If you focus your energy on understanding the key concepts, you will likely be able to deduce the finer details from your understanding of the material.

**Ask a friend for help.** Study with friends or a study group.

**Attend a Workshop at Learning Strategies.** Prior to each exam period, Learning Strategies runs specialized workshops, for example: "How to Prepare for Multiple Choice Exams", "How to Prepare for Math and Science Exams", "How to Prepare for Essay and Short Answer Exams".

If you are struggling academically, don't try to soldier on alone, doing what you've always done. Get help and support to get things done quicker, better, and easier. Learn new skills that will make things easier and reduce your overwhelm going forward.

## *If You are Overwhelmed by a Personal Issue:*

### *Example.*

Ben was just barely able to manage his academics; breaking up with his girlfriend and the death of his grandfather tipped Ben over into overwhelm.

If you are experiencing a personal difficulty or are feeling emotionally overwhelmed about a situation in your personal life, try the following:

**Backburner It.** If it is crunch time or you have pressing academic demands on you presently, see if there is a way that you can 'backburner' the issue. Backburnering means that you find a way to defer, delay, or put off dealing with a personal matter until after your academic deadlines are behind you.

### *Examples.*

You have been experiencing conflict in your relationship with your girlfriend. Since the arguments upset you and make it difficult for you to study, you decide you will not raise contentious issues with her until after your exams are over.

Your brother has been calling you for support about a difficult situation in his own life. You have two essays due and talking to him for an hour every night is seriously interrupting your ability to write. You tell your brother that you're very sorry but you need to focus on your essays for the next week. Is there someone else he could talk to about what he's dealing with?

An important aspect of the backburnering technique involves being able to put matters out of your mind as well so that you can concentrate on your work. Some people can do this fairly easily while others have a more difficult time with it. Of course, the ability to do this also depends on the seriousness of your circumstances. See if you can try putting ruminations and worry out of your mind when thoughts about your situation arise. Say "I now choose to focus on my work. I will deal with this issue in two weeks' time". Practicing the Backburnering technique can often be enormously relieving when feeling overwhelmed with academics *and* a personal matter at the same time. In addition, letting things sit can sometimes help put things into perspective when you do return to address the situation, or allow things to work themselves out without your intervention.

**Get support.** Is there someone you can talk to about your situation, such as a trusted friend or family member? It can be very helpful in reducing distress to tell someone else what's going on. It can be especially helpful to get advice or feedback from someone you respect who knows you well and cares about you. Choose someone safe who isn't going to judge you and who will keep the information confidential.

**Create An Outlet.** Make space to emotionally process what it is you are dealing with. Journaling can be very helpful to release pent up emotions and to gain insight or clarity about complex situations in our lives. Such a release can help you feel better emotionally, thereby reducing overwhelm to a lower level where things feel more manageable. Try to journal with the intent of releasing powerful emotion or moving towards more empowering ways of seeing your situation. Just remember to be mindful of *how* you journal; it should be used as a tool for *working through difficulties*, not *ruminating on issues*.

***Example.***

Ben talked to his best friend since childhood about the breakup. Just talking about it felt better, and he was reminded that other people in his life besides his ex-girlfriend are there for him and care about him. For the next few days Ben was better able to sit down and study.

## *Some Final Notes on Personal Overwhelm:*

If you experience a personal crisis or difficulty at any time, do not hesitate to contact Counselling Services to make an appointment to talk with a Personal Counsellor. If your personal situation is so serious as to warrant withdrawal or academic accommodation, or if you want more information about your options, speak with an Academic Advisor in your program, or make an appointment in Counselling Services.

## *Dealing with Your Thoughts:*

Review the section on Introducing the Thought Record in the Basic Anxiety Management Skills chapter (Page 4). Recall that the Thought Record is the tool that we use to neutralize anxious thoughts by critically questioning those thoughts. It can be very important to deal with one's thoughts when overwhelmed, as anxious thoughts are likely to be playing a role in our feeling of overwhelm, and weakening us from taking steps to act in our own best interest.

Let's look at Ana and Ben's Overwhelm Thought Records. Then, you can complete your own Overwhelm Thought Record, found in Appendix B (Worksheet 2.5ab Thought Record):

## WORKSHEET 2.5 Thought

# Anxiety Thought Record: Ana

1. Anxious/Negative Thoughts:	2. Identify Thought Distortions: (Select from list in box below)	3. Balanced/Realistic Self-Talk: (Use the questions below)
1. I have to get everything done. 2. I have to hurry up. 3. I'm so behind. 4. I should be able to do this. 5. I have to be productive at all times.	3. Focusing on only the negatives, Perfectionism  5. Perfectionism	3. I'm exactly where I need to be. I now choose to focus on how to go forward from here. I now calmly focus on creating workable solutions.  5. I now choose to put my own needs in a place of priority in my life. I now make room for Self Care, enjoyment, and rest. I now choose to alternate being productive with downtime. I am more productive when I give myself downtime; having downtime <i>is</i> being productive.
1. Anxious/Negative Thoughts:	2. Identify Thought Distortions:	3. Balanced/Realistic Self-Talk (Ask Yourself...)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Write down Anxious/Negative Thoughts</li> <li>• Circle your Hot Thought or group of related Hot Thoughts</li> </ul>	<u>Catastro p hizin g</u> – focusing on the worst possible outcome <u>Ov resti mat in g p ro b ab ility</u> – of things happening <u>Perfe ctio n is m</u> – pressuring the self to be perfect: “I should..” <u>Focu sin g o n o n ly t h e n e g a t i v</u> ignoring positives Predicting the future – how can you know what will happen? <u>Gen era lizin g</u> – ignoring differences in circumstances <u>Un d ere stimatin g y o u r a b ility t o c o p e</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is the Hot Thought true? Is it always true? Is it partially true? Are there ways in which it is not true? Are there times when it is not true?</li> <li>• What is the evidence to support the Hot Thought? What is the evidence against it?</li> <li>• If you had to debate this thought or make a counterargument against it, what would you say?</li> <li>• Is there another way of looking at this?</li> <li>• If you are catastrophizing, what is the probability of this thought actually happening? If your feared outcome does happen, how terrible would it be?</li> </ul>

## WORKSHEET 2.5 Thought

Anxiety Thought Record: Ben		
1. Anxious/Negative Thoughts:	2. Identify Thought Distortions: (Select from list in box below)	3. Balanced/Realistic Self-Talk: (Use the questions below)
1. I can't do this. 2. I might fail. 3. I just want to give up.	1. Catastrophizing, Focusing on only the negatives, Predicting the future, Underestimating your ability to cope.	1. This is a difficult time but I can get through it. I now choose to get help and support with this problem. I have options for how to handle this situation. I will decide on my options and take steps to help myself feel better so that I can cope.
1. Anxious/Negative Thoughts:	2. Identify Thought Distortions:	3. Balanced/Realistic Self-Talk: (Ask Yourself...)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Write down Anxious/Negative Thoughts</li> <li>• Circle your Hot Thought or group of related Hot Thoughts</li> </ul>	<p><u>Catastro p h izin g</u> – focusing on the worst possible outcome</p> <p><u>Ov eresti mat in g p ro b ab ility</u> – of bad things happening</p> <p><u>Perfe ctio n is m</u> – pressuring the self to be perfect: "I should.."</p> <p><u>Focu sin g o n o n ly t h e n egat iv es</u> – ignoring positives</p> <p>Predicting the future – how can you know what will happen?</p> <p>Underestimating your ability to cope – if something bad does happen</p> <p><u>Min d Read in g</u> – imagining you know another is thinking</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is the Hot Thought true? Is it always true? Is it partially true? Are there ways in which it is not true? Are there times when it is not true?</li> <li>• What is the evidence to support the Hot Thought? What is the evidence against it?</li> <li>• If you had to debate this thought or make a counterargument against it, what would you say?</li> <li>• Is there another way of looking at this?</li> <li>• If you are catastrophizing, what is the probability of this thought actually happening? If your feared outcome does happen, how terrible would it be?</li> </ul>



## *Taking Stock: On the Other Side*

The worst has passed, you got through and you're now feeling less overwhelmed. Take some time at the end of the term, academic year, or after a period of overwhelm has passed for personal reflection. Take stock and review what happened and how you managed. Use the spaces below, and the Worksheet in Appendix B (Worksheet 6.4 Overwhelm: Taking Stock).

### ***Examples.***

Ana realized when doing her Thought Record that she was harshly perfectionistic, and put an unfair amount of pressure on herself to do things perfectly. She committed to treat herself with greater care and gentleness going forward, and to make more time for downtime and Self Care.

Ben developed both academic and personal strategies while overwhelmed. Academically, he got better at assertiveness skills such as asking friends for help and meeting with his TA for help outside of class. Personally, he learned how to reach out to a friend for personal support when dealing with life stressors. Ben was proud of himself for learning and practicing these skills while under pressure.

Find some quiet time when you won't be interrupted. Ask yourself the following questions:  
How did I do with regards to overwhelm this year? Did I do better or worse than the term before?

*How did I do with regards to overwhelm this year? Did I do better or worse than the term before?*

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*What academic strategies worked for me?*

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*What personal strategies worked for me?*

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*What do I want to commit to maintaining next term or academic year?*

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*What am I most proud of myself for handling, changing, or doing differently this term or year?*

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*What have I learned about myself by coming through a period of overwhelm?*

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## *Conclusion:*

Good for you for taking care of yourself by doing this work. Know that you are not alone—many students experience overwhelm. As you go forward, continue to do what works for you to reduce your own personal overwhelm. Take care of yourself, be kind to yourself, and remember to prioritize your own personal needs. If you need any additional support, don't hesitate to reach out: help is just a phone call away.

## Chapter 7 – Putting it All Together



# Putting it All Together

## Chapter 7 – Putting it All Together

Congratulations! You have reached the final Chapter of Your Best You: Managing Your Anxiety. Remember that the very first step towards learning to manage your anxiety is to increase yourself-efficacy and seek help. Turning to this workbook is exactly that. You did it! So now what?

The aim of this workbook is to increase your competency in managing your anxiety and your overall ability to cope with stress. This workbook contains information and many tools that have been shown to be effective for many people. Recall, however, that practice is a key component needed to achieve this goal (see page 8 on the Importance of Practice). Now that you have the knowledge and the skills, it is time to develop a **plan** and **put it into action**.

Anxiety can be manageable, but it requires active work on your part.

Use this final chapter to develop a plan for continuing to manage your anxiety. Don't forget to check in with your expectations, too. Recall that anxiety is a natural part of being a human being; that means we can't absolutely get rid of anxiety (in fact, we wouldn't want to! Anxiety can be helpful!), but we can learn to manage it so it doesn't control our lives. Use this final Worksheet (also found in Appendix B Worksheet 7.1 Putting it All Together) to formalize your plan for the future. Don't forget to check in from time to time and adjust the plan as situations in your life change. If one strategy really works for you, plan to use it more; if another strategy really doesn't work, stop using you! You are the expert on you, and with a little help, you can build up the skills required to manage your anxiety.

## WORKSHEET 7.1 Putting it All Together

Below is a list of Basic Anxiety Management Skills. In the first column below, select the strategies you've tried so far. In the second column, select the strategies that you are planning to try in the future. Use the space at the bottom to make note of strategies not mentioned in this workbook that you have or plan to try.

Tried so far	Planning to try	Strategies
		Self Care/SPEMS
		Deep Breathing
		Mindfulness
		Progressive Muscle Relaxation
		Worry Time
		Time Management
		Decision Making
		The Thought Record
		Behavioural Experiments
		Other (specify):

Use the space below to set goals for the future. What is your game plan to practice your Basic Anxiety Management Skills moving forward? Be sure to set goals that are **SMART** (*specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely*).

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# Appendix A

## Worksheets

All Worksheets used throughout the workbook have been reproduced here for easy downloading, printing, or copying

## WORKSHEET 2.1 SPEMS: How Do You Fill Your Bucket?

How do I fill my Social Bucket?

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How do I fill my Physical Bucket?

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How do I fill my Emotional Bucket?

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How do I fill my Emotional Bucket?

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How do I fill my Mental Bucket?

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How do I fill my Spiritual Bucket?

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**WORKSHEET 2.2 Time Management: Scheduling Your**

Time	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
7:00 AM							
8:00 AM							
9:00 AM							
10:00 AM							
11:00 AM							
12:00 PM							
1:00 PM							
2:00 PM							
3:00 PM							
4:00 PM							
5:00 PM							
6:00 PM							
7:00 PM							
8:00 PM							
9:00 PM							
10:00 PM							

**WORKSHEET 2.3 Time  
Management: Prioritizing Your  
To-Do List**

	Important	Not important
Urgent		
Not urgent		

**WORKSHEET 2.4 Decision  
Making: Decisional Balance  
Sheet**

Options:	Benefits:	Costs:
(1)		
(2)		
(3)		
(4)		

My Decision is:

## WORKSHEET 2.5a Thought Record (2 page version)

### Thought

1. Anxious/Negative Thoughts:

2. Identify Thought Distortions:

(select from list below)

1. Anxious/Negative Thoughts:

2. Identify Thought Distortions:

• Write down Anxious/Negative Thoughts

• Circle your Hot Thought or group of related Hot Thoughts

Catastrophizing – focusing on the worst possible outcome

Overestimating probability – of bad things happening

Perfectionism – pressuring the self to be perfect: “I should...”

Focusing on only the negatives – ignoring positives

Predicting the future – how can you know what will happen?

Generalizing – ignoring differences in circumstances

Underestimating your ability to cope – if something bad does happen

Mind reading – imagining you know what another is thinking

## WORKSHEET 2.5a Thought Record (2 page version)

### *Record*

#### **3. Balanced/Realistic Self-Talk:**

*(use the questions below)*

#### **3. Balanced/Realistic Self-Talk:**

*(Ask yourself...)*

- Is the Hot Thought true? Is it always true? Is it partially true? Are there ways in which it is not true? Are there times when it is not true?
- What is the evidence to support the Hot Thought? What is the evidence against it?
- If you had to debate this thought or make a counterargument against it, what would you say?
- Is there another way of looking at this?
- What's the bigger picture?
- If you are catastrophizing, what is the probability of this thought actually happening? If your feared outcome does happen, how terrible would it be? Could you handle it, figure out how to move on with your life?
- What would a good friend say to you about this?
- Are there kinder, more respectful ways of thinking about yourself in your life that allow you to be a human being who makes mistakes, with strengths and limitations?

Anxiety Thought Record		
1. Anxious/Negative Thoughts:	2. Identify Thought Distortions: (Select from list in box below)	3. Balanced/Realistic Self-Talk: (Use the questions below)
1. Anxious/Negative Thoughts:	2. Identify Thought Distortions:	3. Balanced/Realistic Self-Talk (Ask Yourself...)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Write down Anxious/Negative Thoughts</li> <li>• Circle your Hot Thought or group of related Hot Thoughts</li> </ul>	<p><u>Catastro p h izin g</u> – focusing on the worst possible outcome</p> <p><u>Ov eresti mat in g p ro b a b ility</u> – of bad happening</p> <p><u>Perfe ctio n is m</u> – pressuring the self to be perfect: “I should..”</p> <p><u>Focu sin g o n o n ly t h e n egat iv es</u> – ignoring positives</p> <p>Predicting the future – how can you know what will happen?</p> <p>Generalizing – ignoring differences in circumstances</p> <p><u>Un d ere stimatin g y o u r ab ility t o co p e</u> – if something bad does happen</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is the Hot Thought true? Is it always true? Is it partially true? Are there ways in which it is not true? Are there times when it is not true?</li> <li>• What is the evidence to support the Hot Thought? What is the evidence against it?</li> <li>• If you had to debate this thought or make a counterargument against it, what would you say?</li> <li>• Is there another way of looking at this?</li> <li>• If you are catastrophizing, what is the probability of this thought actually happening? If your feared outcome does happen, how terrible would it be?</li> </ul>

## WORKSHEET 2.6 Behavioural Experiment

### The thought to test

*Write down the thought you are going to test; is it a balanced alternative thought, or an anxious thought?*

*Make note of how much you believe the thought you are testing*

I believe  
this  
thought  
\_\_\_\_%

This is a:

\_\_\_\_  
Balanced  
alternative  
thought

\_\_\_\_  
Anxious  
thought

### Design your experiment

*How can you put this thought to the test?*

*Include specific information. Break it into small, manageable steps.*

### Problem-solving

*What problems might come up during the experiment?*

*How can you solve those problems?*

*Have you ever faced a problem like this in the past? If so, how did you handle it?*

*What is your anxiety telling you to do? Remember to consider "Safety Behaviours", or small, subtle things we do to avoid anxiety. Don't forget to plan for reducing those behaviours.*

*See if you can identify any Thinking Traps popping up here, like overestimating probability or mind-reading.*

### Outcome

*After the behavioural experiment, write down what actually happened*

### What I learned

*Write down what you learned.*

*Re-rate how much you believe in the original*

I believe  
this  
thought  
\_\_\_\_  
%

## WORKSHEET 3.1 GAD: What is Anxiety Keeping You From?

Anxiety prevents me from... <i>(doing what?)</i>	This impacts my life... <i>(how?)</i>



## WORKSHEET 3.2 GAD: Unhealthy Coping Strategies

Strategies I use that reduce my anxiety in the short-term only:	How can I reduce this behaviour?	new strategies to help reduce anxiety in the long-term

### WORKSHEET 3.3 GAD: What Are My Worries?

List of my top worries	Current worry?	Future worry?

Ways I can deal with my top worries right now...

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## WORKSHEET 3.4ab GAD: Acting “As If”

Step 1: Behaviours I engage in to deal with uncertainty:	Step 2: My anxiety if I could not do the behaviour (0-10):

Step 3: Behaviour to change	Step 3: New strategy to cope	Step 4: How it went

**Step 5:** Ways I can reward my bravery...

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## WORKSHEET 4.1 What Do My Panic Attacks Look Like?

		Have I experienced this?	How anxious did it make me (0-10)?
Body Reactions:	1. Palpitations, pounding heart, or accelerated heart rate		
	2. Sweating		
	3. Trembling or shaking		
	4. Sensations of shortness of breath or smothering		
	5. Feeling of choking		
	6. Chest pain or discomfort		
	7. Nausea or abdominal distress		
	8. Feeling dizzy, unsteady, lightheaded, or faint		
	9. Numbness or tingling sensations (paresthesias)		
	10. Chills or hot flushes		
Thoughts:	11. Feelings of unreality (derealization) or being detached from oneself (depersonalization)		
	12. Fear of losing control or going crazy		
	13. Fear of dying		

## WORKSHEET 4.2 My Panic Interpretation

Body reaction or thought?	Feeling in your body:	Your panic interpretation:
Body		
Body		
Body		
Thought		
Thought		
Thought		

## WORKSHEET 4.3ab Managing My Panic Attacks

What I feel before a panic attack:

What I feel during a panic attack:

Things I am avoiding because of anxiety:

My plan to reduce my avoidance:

My plan for practicing the Basic Anxiety Management Skills is...

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I will reward myself in the following way...

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List of exposures:

Ranked order	Sensation	Amount of anxiety it causes me
1		
2		
3		

My plan for exposure:

Exposure 1:

The symptom I am inducing is:

My anxiety ratings:

Date of practice	Pre-inducing anxiety (out of 10)	Post-inducing anxiety (out of 10)



**Exposure 2:**

The symptom I am inducing is:

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My anxiety ratings:

Date of practice	Pre-inducing anxiety (out of 10)	Post-inducing anxiety (out of 10)

**Exposure 3:**

The symptom I am inducing is:

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My anxiety ratings:

Date of practice	Pre-inducing anxiety (out of 10)	Post-inducing anxiety (out of 10)



Adapted Panic Thought Record			
Anxious/Negative Thoughts:	Thinking Errors:	Challenge Yourself:	Balanced/Realistic Alternative Thought:
<p>Anxious/Negative Thoughts:</p> <p>Write down Anxious/Negative Thoughts</p> <p>Circle your Hot Thought or group of related Hot Thoughts</p>	<p>Thinking Errors:</p> <p><u>Overestimating probability – of bad things happening</u></p> <p><u>Catastrophizing – focusing on the worst possible outcome</u></p>	<p>Challenge Yourself:</p> <p>Ask yourself:</p> <p><b>For overestimating:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How many times have I had this thought during a panic attack? How did it turn out?</li> <li>- How many times has this actually happened?</li> <li>- Realistically, what is the likelihood this will happen next time I have this thought?</li> </ul> <p><b>For catastrophizing:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What's the absolute WORST that could happen?</li> <li>- Will it make a difference in my life in a week from now? In a year from now?</li> <li>- What could I do to cope if this did happen?</li> <li>- Have I been embarrassed in the past? How did it turn out?</li> </ul>	<p>Balanced/Realistic Alternative Thought:</p> <p>Use the information from the previous column to rethink your original hot thought. Repeat this new, healthier thought next time the Hot Thought comes up.</p>

## WORKSHEET 5.1 Exam Anxiety: Before Exams

**1. Reflect on your strengths.** On the lines below write down two things that you have done in the past throughout the term that have helped you to reduce your exam anxiety:

1.

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2.

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**2. Review your Basic Skills.** Review the chapter on Basic Anxiety Management Skills. On the lines below write down three Basic Skills you will begin to practice regularly in your daily life:

1.

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2.

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3.

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**3. Try something new.** On the lines below write down two things you haven't tried before that you could begin doing early on in the term to help reduce your exam anxiety later on:

1.

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2.

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## WORKSHEET 5.2 Exam Anxiety: Additional Behavioural Strategies to Use During Exams

**1. Backburner other life concerns.** Write down one major personal concern or stressor that you could postpone dealing with until after exams. What action you would need to take in order to effectively postpone dealing with the stressor?

How I can put on e major life concern on t he back bu rn er...

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**2. Take some alone time.** When could you carve out some alone time in the days and hours leading up to an exam? What alone time would be most impactful in reducing your exam anxiety? Walking to your exam alone? Not hanging out with others the night before who are writing the same exam as you? How can you handle this in your relationships? Let others know that you need time to study? Or that you need to take a little alone time to get in the zone?

How ca n I t a ke some al on e t ime ... ..

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**3. Bring a present-minded focus while writing your exams.** On the lines below write down three things that you can do during your exams to maintain a present-minded focus:

1.

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2.

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3.

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## WORKSHEET 5.2 Exam Anxiety: Additional Behavioural Strategies to Use During Exams

**4. Have a plan in place that you follow prior to writing each exam.** What three things will you do the night before you write your exam?

1.

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2.

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3.

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**5. Practice radical acceptance of your anxiety.** What can you do to de-stress and reward yourself now that exams are over? Write down two things you could do that would help bring your stress levels down and enable you to relax?

Two things I can do to bring down my stress...

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## WORKSHEET 5.3 Exam Anxiety: Assessing Yourself

Academic areas I could improve:	How I will reduce stress in this area:

Personal areas I could improve:	How I will reduce stress in this area:

## WORKSHEET 6.1 Overwhelm: Overcommitting Yourself

On the lines below, list the top two ways in which you get pulled in to overcommit. For example, is it hard for you to say no? Are you a time optimist—always thinking you'll have more time available than you do? Is it hard for you to be assertive about your own life priorities? Do you feel as though you always need to be there for others or can't let others down? What specifically gets you emotionally "hooked in" to overcommit?

Two ways I overcommit are...

1.

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2.

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Next, write down two small steps you could take this term to let go of, or challenge, your "emotional hooks" and reduce your overwhelm down the road. For example, I will remind myself that it's not my job to meet everyone else's needs. I will say no to requests to cover other people's shifts from mid-October onwards this term. I will cut out one of my extracurricular activities that isn't aligned with the priorities I've set for myself this academic year.

Two ways I can let go of overcommitting...

1.

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2.

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WORKSHEET 6.2 Overwhelm: Avoiding

Avoidance Behaviour	Effect	How I will Resist the Urge to Avoid

## WORKSHEET 6.3 Overwhelm: Survival Mode

The Self Care strategies I can use right now include...

1.

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2.

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3.

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I can put the following in my schedule to maximize my effectiveness

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## WORKSHEET 6.4 Overwhelm: Taking Stock

How did I do with regards to overwhelm this year? Did I do better or worse than the term before?

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What academic strategies worked for me?

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What personal strategies worked for me?

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What do I want to commit to maintaining next term or academic year?

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What am I most proud of myself for handling, changing, or doing differently this term or year?

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What have I learned about myself by coming through a period of overwhelm?

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## WORKSHEET 7.1 Putting it All Together

Below is a list of Basic Anxiety Management Skills. In the first column below, select the strategies you've tried so far. In the second column, select the strategies that you are planning to try in the future. Use the space at the bottom to make note of strategies not mentioned in this workbook that you have or plan to try.

Tried so far	Planning to try	Strategies
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		Deep Breathing
		Mindfulness
		Progressive Muscle Relaxation
		Worry Time
		Time Management
		Decision Making
		The Thought Record
		Behavioural Experiments
		Other (specify):

*My game plan to practice my Basic Anxiety Management Skills moving forward...*

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