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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 than 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...

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...

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
<p><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>	<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...

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.

Anxiety Thought Record: Curtis

WORKSHEET 2.5 Thought Record

<p>1. Anxious/Negative Thoughts:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 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. 	<p>2. Identify Thought Distortions: (Select from list in box below)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Underestimating ability to cope, focusing only on the negative 	<p>3. Balanced/Realistic Self-Talk: (Use the questions below)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 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.
<p>1. Anxious/Negative Thoughts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write down Anxious/Negative Thoughts • Circle your Hot Thought or group of related Hot Thoughts 	<p>2. Identify Thought Distortions:</p> <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>3. Balanced/Realistic Self-Talk: (Ask Yourself...)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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? • If you are catastrophizing, what is the probability of this thought actually happening? If your feared outcome does happen, how terrible would it be?

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...

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.