REALISTIC THINKING

We can all be bogged down by negative thinking from time to time, such as calling ourselves mean names (e.g., "idiot", "loser"), thinking no one likes us, expecting something, terrible will happen, or believing that we can't overcome something no matter how hard we try. *This is normal.* No one thinks positively all of the time, particularly when feeling anxious.

When we are anxious, we tend to see the world as a **threatening** and **dangerous place**. This reaction makes sense, because imagining the worst can help you to prepare for real danger, enabling you to protect yourself. For example, if you are home alone and you hear a strange scratching sound at the window, you might think it's a burglar. If you believe that it's a burglar, you will become very anxious and prepare yourself to either run out of the house, fight off an attack, or run to the phone and call for help. Although this anxious response is helpful if there actually is a burglar at the window, it is not so helpful if your thought was wrong: for example, it might be a tree branch scratching the window. In this case, your thoughts were wrong because there was no real danger.

The problem with thinking and acting as if there is danger when there is *no real* danger is that you feel unnecessarily anxious. Therefore, one effective strategy to manage your anxiety is to replace anxious, negative thinking with **realistic thinking**.
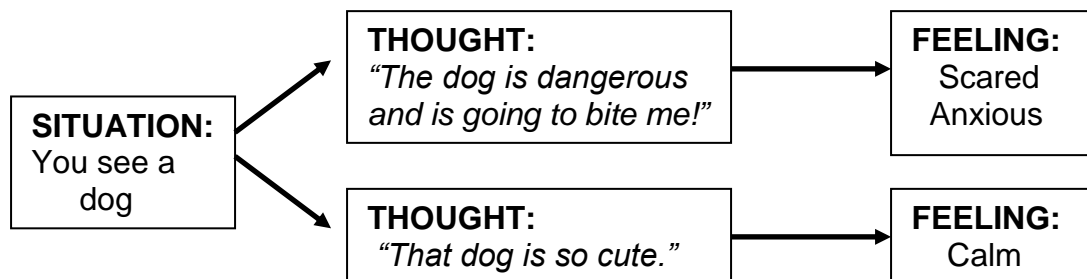
> **Realistic thinking** means looking at all aspects of a situation (the positive, the negative, and the neutral) before making conclusions. In other words, realistic thinking means looking at yourself, others, and the world in a *balanced* and *fair* way.

How to Do It

Step 1: Pay attention to your *self-talk*

Thoughts are the things that we say to ourselves without speaking out loud (*self-talk*). We can have many thoughts every hour of the day. We all have our own way of thinking about things, and how we think has a big effect on how we feel. When we think that something bad will happen – such as being bitten by a dog – we feel anxious.

For example, imagine that you are out for a walk and you see a dog. If you think the dog is dangerous and will bite, you will feel scared. But, if you think the dog is cute, you will feel calm.

| SITUATION: You see a dog | → | THOUGHT: *"The dog is dangerous and is going to bite me!"* | → | FEELING: Scared Anxious |
| | → | THOUGHT: *"That dog is so cute."* | → | FEELING: Calm |

Often, we are unaware of our thoughts, but because they have such a big impact on how we feel, it is important to start paying attention to what we are saying to ourselves.

Step 2: Identify thoughts that lead to feelings of anxiety

It can take some time and practice to identify the specific thoughts that make you anxious, so here are some helpful tips:

Pay attention to your shifts in anxiety, no matter how small. When you notice yourself getting more anxious, that is the time to ask yourself:

- *"What am I thinking right now?"*
- *"What is making me feel anxious?"*
- *"What am I worried will happen?"*
- *"What bad thing do I expect to happen?"*

Some examples of "anxious" thoughts:

- *"What if I can't do it?"*
- *"I'm going to die of a heart attack!"*
- *"People are going to laugh at me if I mess up during the presentation."*
- *"I'm going to go crazy if I can't stop feeling so anxious."*
- *"Things are not going to work out."*
- *"I'm an idiot."*
- *"What if something bad happens to my child?"*

Step 3: Challenge your "anxious" thinking

Thinking about something does not mean that the thought is true or that it will happen. For example, thinking that a dog will bite you does not mean that it will. Often, our thoughts are just **guesses** and not actual facts. Therefore, it is helpful to challenge your anxious thoughts, because they can make you feel like something bad will definitely happen, even when it is highly unlikely.

Sometimes, our anxiety is the result of falling into **thinking traps**. Thinking traps are unfair or overly negative ways of seeing things. Use the **Thinking Traps Form** to help you identify the traps into which you might have fallen.

Here are some questions to help you challenge your anxious thoughts:

1. *Am I falling into a thinking trap (e.g., catastrophizing or overestimating danger)?*
2. *What is the evidence that this thought is true? What is the evidence that this thought is not true?*
3. *Have I confused a thought with a fact?*
4. *What would I tell a friend if he/she had the same thought?*
5. *What would a friend say about my thought?*
6. *Am I 100% sure that _____ will happen?*
7. *How many times has _____ happened before?*
8. *Is _____ so important that my future depends on it?*
9. *What is the worst that could happen?*
10. *If it did happen, what can I do to cope with or handle it?*
11. *Is my judgment based on the way I feel instead of facts?*
12. *Am I confusing "possibility" with "certainty"? It may be possible, but is it likely?*
13. *Is this a hassle or a horror?*

Here's an example to help you challenging your negative thinking:

    If you have an important interview tomorrow and have been feeling quite anxious about it, you may think: *"I'm going to mess up on the interview tomorrow."*

To challenge this thought, you can ask yourself the following questions:

♦ *Am falling into a thinking trap?*

Yes, I have fallen into the trap of <u>fortune-telling</u>, predicting that things will turn out badly before the event even takes place. But I still feel like I'll definitely mess up.

♦ *Am I basing my judgment on the way I "feel" instead of the "facts"?*

I might <u>feel</u> like I'm going to mess up, but there is no evidence to support it. I'm very qualified for the position. I have had interviews in the past and generally they have gone well.

♦ *Am I 100% sure that I will mess up?*

No, but, what if I mess up this time?

♦ *Well, what's the worst that could happen? If the worst did happen, what could I do to cope with it?*

The worst that could happen is that I don't get a job that I really wanted. It'll be disappointing, but it won't be the end of the world. I can always ask for feedback to see whether there is anything I can do to improve my chances of getting another position similar to this one.

Use copies of the **Realistic Thinking Form** to regularly write down thoughts that make you anxious, and use the **Challenging Negative Thinking** handout to help you replace your anxious thoughts with more realistic ones.

Step 4: More on helpful and realistic ways of thinking

More tips on helpful thinking:

Tip #1: Coping statements. Try coming up with statements that remind you how you can cope with a situation. For example, "If I get anxious, I will try some calm breathing", "I just need to do my best", "People cannot tell when I am feeling anxious", "This has happened before and I know how to handle it", or "My anxiety won't last forever".

Tip #2: Positive self-statements. Regularly practise being "kind" to yourself (say positive things about yourself), rather than being overly self-critical. For example, instead of saying, "I will fail", say something like, "I can do it". Or, "I am not weak for having anxiety. Everyone experiences anxiety", "I'm not a loser if someone doesn't like me. No one is liked by everyone!", or "I'm strong for challenging myself to face the things that scare me".

Tip #3: Alternative balanced statements based on challenging negative thoughts. Once you've looked at the evidence or recognized that you've fallen into a thinking trap, come up with a more balanced thought.

Going back to the job interview example, a more balanced thought could be:
"There is a chance that I might not do well in tomorrow's interview, but not performing perfectly on a job interview doesn't mean I won't get the job. Even if I don't get this job, it doesn't mean I will never get a job. I have always been able to find work."

Hint: It can be tough to remember helpful thoughts or realistic coping statements when you are anxious. Try making up coping cards that include helpful statements. To make a coping card, write down your realistic thoughts on an index card or a piece of paper, and keep it with you (i.e., in your purse, wallet, or pocket). It can be helpful to read this card daily, just as a reminder.