WHAT IS ANXIETY?
WHAT IS ANXIETY?

I: An Overview

Produced by Ballarat Health Services,
Psychiatric Services

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Fear and Anxiety

Fear is the normal response to dangerous situations. When we are facing a threat to our physical safety a series of changes automatically occur as our body prepares for vigorous activity to enable us either to protect themselves or to escape from the dangerous situation. This reaction, is called the “fight or flight” response. Our heart may beat faster than usual, we may feel tense or begin to breathe quickly. We may start sweating, or have a dry mouth. We will also feel more alert and on guard.

WHAT CHANGES HAVE WE NOTICED WHEN WE FEEL VERY FRIGHTENED?

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FEAR IS A NATURAL REACTION TO DANGEROUS SITUATIONS

Some of us have a very sensitive nervous system. A full-blown reaction to fear may be set off by situations that are not really dangerous, such as being in a closed space, a spider or insect, darkness, a crowded street or supermarket, eating in a restaurant or concern about dust and possible germs. At times, merely a thought about dying or getting an illness, or thoughts about problems with work or friends, may trigger off a full scale attack of fear. This heightened reaction to minor fears is what we call anxiety.

WHAT SITUATIONS MAKE US FEEL FRIGHTENED?

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What Causes Some of Us to have Anxiety Problems

The reasons why some of us have extra-sensitive nervous systems are not clear. This often runs in families and may be inherited. If our thyroid or adrenal glands produce too much hormone we may become over-stimulated and develop anxiety problems. Some medicines that are used for asthma and other health problems may have a similar stimulant effect. Of course stimulant drugs, such as those young people take so they can dance the night away, may also cause anxiety.

Anxiety occurs in men and women, and in physically strong and weak people. It is not a sign of a weak character or of a person who is not able to cope with stress. Anxiety attacks may first occur at times when we are very stressed, and may be worse if stress continues to be high.

Anxiety is a disorder of the body. It is similar to many disorders where the body reacts excessively in relatively normal circumstances. People who have extra-sensitive nervous systems may develop reactions such as asthma, stomach ulcers, bowel disorders or migraine attacks. For this reason it is very important to have regular health checks from our doctor to
see that we do not have any straightforward medical problems that might be making our nervous system extra-sensitive, and lead to anxiety or other disorders.

PEOPLE WITH EXTRA-SENSITIVE NERVOUS SYSTEMS HAVE FEAR REACTIONS IN EVERYDAY UNPLEASANT SITUATIONS

What are the Usual Situations that Trigger Anxiety Attacks

a) Unpleasant Situations

We have noted that some unpleasant situations or things may trigger full-blown fear reactions in some people. Enclosed spaces, crowds, heights, flying in aeroplanes, injections and blood, spiders, aggressive animals or insects, dirty hands or kitchens are often considered unpleasant by most of us. However, the person who is prone to anxiety attacks may find that one or more of these things almost always triggers a full anxiety attack for them.

b) Distressing Memories

Some people have anxiety attacks in situations that remind them of extremely frightening events that they have experienced in the past. These may be such as being in a combat zone in a war, or being physically or sexually assaulted. Often the reminders of such events may seem very trivial -- a noise, a comment, or a gesture.

c) Odd Bodily Sensations

Other people may notice every little change in the way their body works, such as a missed heart-beat or a feeling of light-headedness. These changes may set off worrying thoughts of having a heart attack or a serious illness. The fact that their doctor tells them that there is nothing seriously wrong may not reassure them, particularly if the unpleasant sensation continues.

In almost all cases some situations or thoughts can be found to trigger off full-blown attacks of fear or panic. Once it occurs the feeling is so terrifying that most of us want to escape from the situation as quickly as possible, and to avoid any possible chance of it happening again. The reactions of the body and mind cause us to think that we are about to die of a heart attack, or that we will lose control and go berserk. Neither is likely to occur. In almost every case the anxiety gradually goes away in a short while.

MOST PEOPLE TRY TO ESCAPE FROM FRIGHTENING SITUATIONS & TO AVOID THEM IN FUTURE
What is a Panic Attack?

A severe attack of anxiety is called a "panic attack". It may help to know a little bit about the sensations that we may experience during a panic attack, so that we can see that they are directly caused by our anxiety and not the other way around. It is usual that these feelings will pass quite quickly, depending on how frightened we feel, and as soon as we can get our body to react normally again. The main features of a panic attack are:

a) the unusual bodily sensations
b) frightening thoughts about these sensations.

Unusual Bodily Sensations

Here is a list of some of the things we might feel:

- light-headed
- dizzy
- confused
- breathless
- tightness or pains in our chest
- fuzzy sight
- feeling that things are not real
- fast heart beat or skipping beats
- numb or tingly feeling
- cold hands and feet
- sweating
- stiff muscles
- headaches
- twitching muscles
Most of these unpleasant sensations seem to result from breathing too strongly. Even though we are taking in more air, changes in our body chemistry means that less oxygen is gets to many parts of our body. We may recall that breathing rapidly was one feature of the normal “fight or flight” response to fear. Breathing more rapidly or more deeply than we need upsets our body chemistry and we get these unpleasant effects.

The feelings of dizziness and light-headedness, unreality, shortness of breath and tingling fingers or feet are a direct result of the oxygen shortage that we produce. Other symptoms produced during a panic attack result from the ‘fight or flight’ response itself or from the exertion of breathing too strongly (feeling hot and sweaty, tiredness or exhaustion, sore chest muscles).

\textit{Frightening Thoughts}

As well as sometimes setting off panic attacks frightening thoughts make us feel worse when we are experiencing an attack. Some of the most common thoughts people have when they are having a panic attack are, “Am I going mad?” or “I’m going to lose control or do something to embarrass myself” or even “I’m having a heart attack and am going to die”.

\textbf{WHAT FRIGHTENING THOUGHTS DO WE HAVE WHEN WE HAVE A PANIC ATTACK?}

All of these fears are also quite normal if we experience a very bad attack of anxiety with many unusual and unpleasant bodily sensations. Unfortunately these frightening thoughts also add to our anxiety reaction, making it worse and last longer.

\textit{I am going mad!}

A panic attack is a very frightening experience and the unpleasant thoughts we have may convince us that we are losing our mind. It may be a relief to know that as many as 20% of all adults have a panic attack at some time in their life. Because we have a panic attack it does not mean that there is anything else wrong with us, or that the fearful feelings are going to last forever. Most people feel very frightened but the feelings do pass and don’t do us any permanent harm.

\textit{I am losing control!}

Another common fear is that we might lose control and do something crazy or embarrass ourselves by screaming or collapsing. These fears may in fact make us feel even more frightened and make the panicky feelings last for longer. What is important to remember is the way we have coped with the fear in the past. Even though we may not have felt in total control we probably behaved in a very controlled way, perhaps by simply leaving the situation quickly, or sitting down when we started to fell dizzy and afraid. We are likely to act in exactly the same way again if we have another panic attack and are very unlikely to lose control and act in a bizarre way.
Anxiety disorders are classified according to those situations that each person tends to associate with the triggers to their attacks. People with agoraphobia (in Greek, means "fear of the market place") will tend to avoid situations outside their homes, such as supermarkets, shops, buses and trains, from which there is no easy escape or help available if a panic attack occurs. Those with social phobia will tend to avoid any situation where they think their social behaviour may be criticised by others, and they may feel embarrassed. A person with a spider phobia will avoid anywhere they think that a spider may be lurking. A person with post-traumatic stress disorder will try to avoid anything that reminds him or her of the frightening event they experienced. And some people will not have any specific triggers to their panic attacks or may feel high levels of anxiety throughout the day (generalised anxiety disorder).

**WHAT SITUATIONS OR THOUGHTS DO WE TRY TO AVOID?**

Avoiding those situations that set off attacks of anxiety will prevent those attacks, at least for a while. However, in the long run we usually find that we need to avoid more and more situations and our lives become more and more restricted. In order to avoid things that might make us anxious we may need to change our entire lifestyles. Even our families and friends may need to adjustments to help us to cope in this way, often reducing the quality of their lives as well. As a result, sometimes our efforts to cope with anxiety may be a bigger handicap than the anxiety itself.

**OUR EFFORTS TO COPE BY AVOIDING THINGS MAY RESTRICT OUR LIFESTYLES AS WELL AS THOSE OF OUR FRIENDS AND FAMILIES**

**WHAT STRATEGIES HAVE WE USED TO COPE WITH ANXIETY SYMPTOMS?**
Anxiety and Stress

Stresses in our lives may trigger off anxiety attacks, or make them worse. There are two kinds of stress that effect us. First, the stress of everyday living -- our homes, our friends, our work, and the community in which we live may produce difficulties. Some of these difficulties may be clearly very stressful, such as not having a place to live or any money or worthwhile things to do. But the many little problems that we may have may all add up to a very stressful life situation. Unpleasant events, such as a death in the family, or loss of a job, or break up with a close friendship, are usually very stressful. But even some pleasant things, like getting married, starting a new job, having a baby, or even going on a vacation, can be very stressful for some people, particularly if they do not plan to deal with any difficulties that might arise.

Sometimes it is difficult to tell the difference between our reactions to stress and the symptoms of anxiety, especially of the more general kind. Stress produces many similar difficulties with muscle tension, rapid heart beat, shakiness, and sometimes over-breathing. The problems of getting off to sleep, restlessness and irritability may all occur in anxiety as well as stress.

Problem Analysis

In order to get a better idea about the things that make these problems better or worse, our Instructor will ask X________ some questions about it using the Problem Analysis Worksheet. This will take 15-20 minutes. We can all stay and listen, but we may have other things that we would rather be doing at this time.

Feedback to all group members
(after the Problem Analysis worksheet has been filled in and key points noted on the list below)

We have had a good discussion about the problem that X________ has been having. Some of the points that we felt might be helpful in finding new ways to solve this problem were:

_______________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________

Are there any other points that anybody would like to add to these?

_______________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________
Keeping a record of times when we feel anxious

One of the first things we need to do is find out more about what might trigger our anxious feelings. Let’s look at the Anxiety Record worksheet below. This record allows us to note exactly when we have felt anxious and what things might be linked to our feelings of anxiety, and what we did to cope with our anxiety.

Of course there may be times when we feel anxious more than once in each hour, or where we are unsure of the exact time or length of time when we started to feel anxious. We do not need to worry too much about this, just write down what we can in the spaces. Our family and friends can help us with any problems. They may also be able to help to identify things that seem to set off our anxiety.

It is usually easiest to keep a record as we go each day. So it is useful to carry the sheet around and note down how we are feeling right away.

Practice filling in the Anxiety Record sheet

We can start by filling in any times when we have felt anxious today, from the time when we woke up until now. This should help us to get an idea of how the sheet works and we can help to sort out any confusion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TIME</th>
<th>LOCATION Where was I when the anxiety started?</th>
<th>ACTIVITY What was I doing?</th>
<th>FEELINGS What were my feelings?</th>
<th>THOUGHTS What was I thinking?</th>
<th>WHAT ANXIETY SIGNS DID I HAVE? How strong were they? (0-10)</th>
<th>WHAT DID I DO? Note all my reactions to the anxiety, “good” as well as “bad”.</th>
<th>WHAT WAS THE OUTCOME? Severity? (0-10) Time it took to get better?</th>
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Do we have any questions about making a record of our anxious feelings?

Review of Anxiety Record sheet

At the start of our next teaching session we will look over the records that we have made and see what we can learn more about our anxiety problems and find other ways to help us cope with them.
DEVELOPING STRATEGIES TO COPE WITH ANXIETY?

II: REDUCING THE SENSITIVITY OF OUR NERVOUS SYSTEM

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In our last session we talked about the nature of anxiety. We discussed how it is an exaggerated fear reaction set off by situations and things that are not really dangerous. People who develop anxiety problems seem to have an extra-sensitive nervous system. Once their nervous system begins to react excessively to some unpleasant situation this may become worse if they breathe too fast and begin to think frightening thoughts about what might be happening to them.

**ANXIETY IS AN EXCESSIVE FEAR RESPONSE THAT IS MADE WORSE BY BREATHING TOO STRONGLY, FRIGHTENING THOUGHTS AND BY AVOIDING SITUATIONS THAT SEEM TO TRIGGER OUR FEARS**

**DO WE HAVE ANY QUESTIONS ABOUT THE NATURE OF ANXIETY?**

**Review of Daily Anxiety Record**

Let us review the records that we have made on the *Anxiety Record* worksheets this week. Now that we have this record we may be able to see more clearly the pattern of our anxiety as well as things that may make it better or worse.

**WHAT CAN WE NOTICE ABOUT OUR ANXIETY FROM THE WORKSHEET?**

**CAN WE SEE ANY THINGS THAT MIGHT TRIGGER OFF OUR ANXIETY?**

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**WHICH REACTIONS SEEMED TO MAKE THE ANXIETY BETTER OR WORSE?**

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________________________________________________________________________

**The Treatment Strategies for Anxiety Disorders**

We will now consider some of the treatment strategies for anxiety help us to deal with each of the factors that we discussed earlier.

1. First, we can try to correct any bodily abnormalities that may make our nervous system extra-sensitive. This includes finding ways to relax our bodies, and to breathe naturally.

2. If we have frightening thoughts, we look for ways to think more realistically.

3. If specific situations set off our fear responses, we try to get used to these situations so that they become less likely to set off fear reactions.
4. If worrying thoughts and stress make us anxious in many everyday situations, we look at ways to solve the problems in a way that reduces stress and worry.

Reducing the Sensitivity of the Nervous System and Controlling Physical Sensations of Anxiety

a) Treatment for Medical Problems

Often a medical problem makes our nervous systems extra-sensitive. This can be corrected by specific treatments, such as correction of an overactive thyroid state, or change of medication for asthma. It is important to have a thorough medical check-up from a doctor to make sure these conditions are corrected.

HAVE WE HAD A CHECK UP FROM OUR DOCTOR TO BE SURE OUR ANXIETY IS NOT CAUSED BY GENERAL MEDICAL PROBLEMS?

IF WE HAVE NOT HAD A CHECK UP, WHEN DO WE PLAN TO ARRANGE ONE?

_____________________________________________________________________

b) Reduce Stimulant Intake

A slight excess of caffeine intake in the form of coffee, tea or drinks containing caffeine, such as cola drinks, may make anxiety attacks more frequent. It is a good idea to cut down on these drinks for a week or two to see if we notice any difference. To notice any benefits we will need to reduce this to less than 5 small drinks per day, probably only 1 or 2.

Stronger stimulant drugs like ecstasy, cocaine or amphetamines often provoke anxiety reactions in people who risk their use. They should not be taken by anyone who has anxiety or any other mental or physical symptoms.

DO WE DRINK MORE THAN 5 SMALL CUPS/GLASSES OF TEA, COFFEE OR COCA COLA EACH DAY? HOW COULD WE REDUCE THIS?

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_____________________________________________________________________

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c) Muscle Relaxation

Twice daily muscle relaxation exercises help lower general levels of tension, and reduce our risk of attacks of panic and anxiety. Regular relaxation will also relieve muscle tension that may cause headaches, backaches, joint and chest pains, as well as general tiredness and lethargy. Here is a way to relax by gradually tensing then relaxing the various groups of muscles in a simple way:
1. Sit or lie comfortably. Loosen tight clothing. Close our eyes and breathe slowly.

2. Begin a series of tensing and then relaxing exercises starting with our feet. Gradually tense each muscle group in turn, counting to 5. Then release the tension slowly. Each exercise is repeated before moving on to the next group.

- Feet: Curl our feet and toes up
- Calf muscles: Point our feet and toes down
- Thighs: Straighten our legs and lift them off the ground
- Stomach: Suck in our stomach muscles under our rib cage
- Chest/back: Take a deep breath, hold it, then force our chest to expand
- Shoulders: Push our shoulders forward; then push our shoulders back
- Neck: Push our chin down onto our chest; push our head backwards
- Face: Clench our teeth and stretch our mouth in an exaggerated smile
- Eyes: Screw our eyes up tightly
- Forehead: Raise our eyebrows; frown, wrinkling our forehead
- Upper arms: Push our knuckles back onto our shoulders
- Forearms: Bend our hands back at right angles to our arms
- Hands: Clench our fists tightly; then, spread our fingers apart

3. Once all the muscle groups have been relaxed in this manner, focus on how our body feels. Try to detect any part of our body that still feels tense. Repeat the tensing/relaxing routine for these parts until all our muscles feel heavy and relaxed.

4. Now our muscles are relaxed, take slow, shallow breaths in and then out, counting to 3 as we breathe in, then to 3 as we breathe out. Instead of counting when we breathe out whisper the words "relax" or "calm".

5. The whole process usually takes 20 minutes, after which we can stretch, open our eyes and slowly get up.
HAVE WE TRIED ANY RELAXATION STRATEGIES LIKE THESE BEFORE?
WERE THEY HELPFUL?
WERE THERE ANY REASONS WHY THEY MIGHT NOT HAVE HELPED VERY MUCH?

____________________________________________________________________________

Practice in the Session:
Let’s practise Muscle Relaxation. First we will practise using the relaxation strategy while sitting comfortably. Our Instructor will read the instructions and we will try to follow them.

Feedback after the Practice:
WHAT DID WE LIKE ABOUT PRACTISING MUSCLE RELAXATION?

WHAT PROBLEMS DID WE HAVE TRYING TO USE IT?

WHAT COULD WE DO DIFFERENTLY IN FUTURE THAT MIGHT MAKE IT WORK BETTER?

Real Life Practice
It is important for us to realise that muscle relaxation is a skill that can be learnt only with much practice. It is unusual to notice much benefit until we have practised it for at least a week or two. The coaching from our Instructor, as well as daily encouragement from a close friend or family member is usually crucial in the initial stages of learning this skill.

d) Slow Controlled Breathing
Most people breathe too fast and too strongly when they are anxious, particularly when a panic attack is developing. Learning to breathe more naturally when we are tense will help to reduce the sensations that often seem to trigger off our panic attacks and anxiety.

Other people have a habit of always breathing too strongly. This makes their nervous systems extra-sensitive much of the time. Learning to control our breathing may help reduce the sensitivity of our nervous systems as well as helping calm us when we begin to feel anxious.

HAVE WE NOTICED THAT WE BREATHE MORE QUICKLY AND MORE DEEPLY WHEN WE ARE TENSE AND ANXIOUS?
If we have a tendency to over-breathe here is a simple strategy that may help. It should be practised at least twice every day, as well as at the first signs of panic or anxiety.

**Controlled Breathing**

1. Whenever we recognise the first signs of over-breathing (light-headedness, being out of breath, heart racing, cold hands and feet) stop what we are doing and sit down or lean against something. If we are driving, pull over and park in a safe place.

2. Without taking a deep breath, hold our breath for 5 seconds -- counting slowly to five.

3. When we get to 5, breathe out and say the words "relax" or "calm" to ourselves in a soothing way.

4. Breathe in and out smoothly in a six-second rhythm. Breathe in for about 3 seconds and then out for about 3 seconds. This will produce a breathing rate of about 10 breaths per minute. Say the words "relax" or "calm" every time we breathe out.

5. Continue to breathe in this way for at least 5 minutes or until all of our signs of over-breathing have gone.

**Practice in the Session:**

Let's practise Controlled Breathing now. We will start by breathing in an exaggerated way for 30 seconds. As soon as we begin to feel any unusual sensations or feelings of anxiety, we can try to follow the steps on the Controlled Breathing worksheet.

**Feedback after the Practice:**

WHAT DID WE LIKE ABOUT PRACTISING CONTROLLED BREATHING?

_________________________________________________________________

WHAT PROBLEMS DID WE HAVE TRYING TO USE IT?

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WHAT COULD WE DO DIFFERENTLY IN FUTURE TO MAKE IT WORK BETTER?

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_________________________________________________________________
**Real Life Practice**

It is important for us to realise that controlled breathing may seem simple, but requires a lot of practice. It is unusual to notice much benefit until we have practised it for at least a week or two. The coaching from our Instructor, as well as daily encouragement from a close friend or family member is usually crucial in the initial stages of learning this skill.

e) **Anti-Anxiety Medications**

A simple way to reduce the sensitivity of our nervous system is to take a tranquillising medicine. There are several kinds to choose from that may be especially helpful if we have very severe anxiety that continues throughout the day and is not reduced much by our best efforts to relax or to use the other self-help strategies.

Unfortunately, while some of the medicines work very well at reducing the sensitivity of our nervous system, they do not merely reduce attacks of anxiety, but tend to make us tranquillised at all times. This may reduce our ability to feel excited and happy, to react quickly to emergencies, to think clearly and solve problems. So it is usually best to save these medicines for emergency use, when we have periods when our anxiety is out of control, when we cannot sleep and feel in a constant state of panic.

- **Benzodiazepines** (diazepam, temazepam, alprazolam), are useful for severe anxiety attacks. However, these drugs tend to suppress our natural responses and seldom assist in overcoming the problems in the long term. If relied on too much, these medicines may delay the natural reduction of our anxiety levels and slow our progress. If we take this medicine for more than a few weeks at a time we may develop some unpleasant reactions when we try to stop taking it. Doctors usually recommend that we take these medicines for no more than 4 weeks in any course of treatment.

- **Tricyclics** (imipramine, chlorpromazine), **MAOIs** (phenelzine, meclobamide) and **SSRIs** (fluoxetine, fluvoxamine, sertraline, paroxetine) have similar anti-anxiety benefits to benzodiazepines, but with different side effects. Once again, short courses of carefully supervised treatment that minimise the side effects are most effective.

These medicines have the additional advantage of having antidepressant effects. Many people who have disabling anxiety disorders will have periods when they feel depressed. This depression may be helped by these medicines.

- **Alcohol or marijuana** have similar effects to benzodiazepine medicines. Many people with anxiety problems use these drugs to cope with their difficulties. As a result they may become dependent on these drugs and need special treatment to deal with this. Depending on such drugs to cope with anxiety is a type of avoidance, and is not usually the best long-term solution.
WHAT MEDICATIONS OR OTHER DRUGS HAVE WE FOUND HELPFUL IN REDUCING THE SENSITIVITY OF OUR NERVOUS SYSTEMS?

Developing a Plan for Reducing the Sensitivity of our Nervous Systems

Now that we have explored some of the strategies that people have found useful in reducing the sensitivity of their nervous systems we can make a plan to apply one of them in the next week. We can use the Structured Problem Solving method to help us work out the best plan at this point. We must not forget that as well as the strategies that we have discussed today, that we may have been using other strategies that seem to work well for us. So we should look back over the Problem Analysis and Anxiety Record to see if there are any of our own ideas that we should try and develop first.

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<th>Plan For Reducing the Sensitivity of My Nervous System</th>
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Keeping a record of times when we feel anxious

Throughout this week we will continue to make notes about our anxiety feelings. The Anxiety Record will show us when we have felt anxious. It will also help us to see how much the strategies we have tried have made a difference to the severity of our anxiety problems, as well as any problems that we may have trying to use them. Do not expect too much for this first week as it will usually take much longer before we notice any big benefits from these strategies.
**progressive muscle relaxation**

1. Sit or lie comfortably. Loosen tight clothing. Close our eyes and breathe slowly.

2. Begin a series of tensing and then relaxing exercises starting with our feet.
   Gradually tense each muscle group in turn, counting to 5.
   Then release the tension slowly.
   Each exercise is repeated before moving on to the next group.

   - **Feet:** Curl our feet and toes up
   - **Calf muscles:** Point our feet and toes down
   - **Thighs:** Straighten our legs and lift them off the ground
   - **Stomach:** Suck in our stomach muscles under our rib cage
   - **Chest/back:** Take a deep breath, hold it, force our chest to expand
   - **Shoulders:** Push our shoulders forward; then push our shoulders back
   - **Neck:** Push our chin down onto our chest; push our head backwards
   - **Face:** Clench our teeth and stretch our mouth in an exaggerated smile
   - **Eyes:** Screw our eyes up tightly
   - **Forehead:** Raise our eyebrows; frown, wrinkling our forehead
   - **Upper arms:** Push our knuckles back onto our shoulders
   - **Forearms:** Bend our hands back at right angles to our arms
   - **Hands:** Clench our fists tightly; then, spread our fingers apart

3. Once all the muscle groups have been relaxed in this manner focus on how our body feels.
   Try to detect any part of our body that is still feeling tense.
   Repeat the tensing/relaxing routine for these parts until all our muscles feel heavy and relaxed.

4. Now our muscles are relaxed, take slow, shallow breaths in and then out,
   counting to 3 as we breathe in, then to 3 as we breathe out.
   Instead of counting as we breathe out, we can whisper the word "relax" or "calm".

5. The whole process usually takes 20 minutes, after which we can stretch, open our eyes and slowly get up.
### slow controlled breathing

1. Whenever we recognise the first signs of over-breathing (light-headedness, being out of breath, heart racing, cold hands and feet) stop what we are doing and sit down or lean against something. If we are driving, pull over and park in a safe place.

2. Without taking a deep breath, hold our breath for 5 seconds -- count slowly to five.

3. When we get to 5, breathe out and say the word "relax" or "calm" in a soothing way.

4. Breathe in and out smoothly in a six-second rhythm. Breathe in for about 3 seconds and out for about 3 seconds. This will produce a breathing rate of about 10 breaths per minute. Say the word "relax" or "calm" every time we breathe out.

5. Continue to breathe in this way for at least 5 minutes or until all of our signs of over-breathing have gone.
DEVELOPING STRATEGIES TO COPE WITH ANXIETY?

III: REDUCING FRIGHTENING THOUGHTS

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In our last session we talked about the ways to reduce the sensitivity of our nervous systems so that we are less prone to become anxious in situations that are not really dangerous. Once our nervous system begins to react to some unpleasant situation this may become worse if we breathe too fast and begin to think frightening thoughts about what might be happening to us.

**Anxiety is an excessive fear response that is made worse by over-breathing, frightening thoughts and coping by avoiding situations that seem to trigger the fear**

**Review of Daily Anxiety Record**

Let's review the *Anxiety Records* we completed this week. Now that we have this record we may be able to see more clearly the pattern of our anxiety as well as things that may have made it better or worse. This past week we were applying a plan to try to reduce the sensitivity of our nervous system.

**WHAT SMALL CHANGES HAVE WE NOTED AS A RESULT OF USING THE PLAN?**

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**WHAT CHANGES MIGHT WE NEED TO MAKE IN THE PLAN OR OUR EFFORTS TO GET MORE BENEFITS?**

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________________________________________________________________

**Coping with Frightening Thoughts**

Worrying and upsetting thoughts about certain events or situations may trigger anxiety attacks. They also make the attacks worse. The way in which we think about any particular thing will affect the way we feel about it. For example, if we think that the sensations created by a panic attack mean that we are about to die or go berserk, then it is not surprising that we will feel even more anxious. However, if we view the sensations as "very unpleasant, but relatively normal bodily responses" rather than "terrifying and probably fatal", then we may not feel so anxious and distressed.

We can set off anxiety by thinking that we may have a panic attack in a situation where it would be extremely embarrassing, or where it would be difficult to escape (such as in a crowded supermarket or on a bus), or where no help is near (such as alone at home or on a lonely road).
We may worry that we will appear stupid when we are speaking or doing something in front of other people, even people who don’t know us and are not important. We may convince ourselves that people will think badly of us, and they will never want to be our friends. We may feel this way even when our friends and family tell us that we are doing fine.

Most of us notice aches and pains and occasional odd sensations in our bodies, but think little of them, unless the problem continues, or is one that we have been told to report to our doctor as soon as possible. But some anxious people may be sure that the occasional irregularities of their hearts, lungs or bowels mean that they have a fatal disease that must be treated immediately, even after their doctor tells them it is nothing to worry about.

These worrying thoughts are not usually a realistic view of things, and reassurance from friends and professionals seldom makes them go away. In this session we will look at some other strategies that may help reduce these frightening thoughts.

**ANXIOUS FEELINGS MAY BE MADE WORSE BY THE WAY WE THINK**

**Thinking More Realistically**

This strategy aims to change the things we say to ourselves before, during and after we get anxious. We will learn to recognise and challenge our unrealistic, frightening thoughts.

**a) Recognising frightening thoughts**

Let us look at the notes on our *Anxiety Records*. Can anybody see any frightening thoughts in the column where we have written down the thoughts we had when we were anxious?

**Frightening Thoughts**

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<th>how realistic? 0 - 10</th>
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How realistic do we all think these thoughts are? We can try to rate them from 0 to 10. A score of 0 means that the thought is absolutely realistic, and 10 means that we think that it is completely unrealistic.

Our *Anxiety Records* may show that very frightening thoughts seem to happen when our anxiety levels are highest. Of course it is possible that high levels of anxiety lead us to have more frightening thoughts. But it is also possible that it happens the other way round too --
the more frightening our thoughts, the worse our anxiety becomes. The combination of anxious feelings and frightening thoughts makes our anxiety spiral out of control.

Reducing our Frightening Thoughts?

In any situation where we feel anxious, we can ask ourselves the following questions to help us to make a less frightening judgement of the real danger that we are facing:

- what do I really fear may happen?
- what am I thinking about the people who are looking at me?
- what am I saying to myself?

Practice in the Session:

Let us practice this. We can pick a situation from the Anxiety Record that we remember well. Pick one that did not make us too anxious. Show us exactly what the situation was like. Try to set this up so that it as realistic as possible.

Now try to answer these questions:

WHAT DO I REALLY FEAR MAY HAPPEN TO ME?

WHAT AM I THINKING ABOUT THE PEOPLE WHO ARE LOOKING AT ME?

WHAT AM I SAYING TO MYSELF?

Feedback from other Participants

WHAT DID WE LIKE ABOUT THE WAY X ____________ WAS THINKING IN THAT FRIGHTENING SITUATION?

WHAT THOUGHTS MIGHT WE HAVE HAD IF WE WERE IN THE SAME SITUATION?

Now replay the situation and answer a second set of questions:
AM I THINKING REALISTICALLY ABOUT THE SITUATION?

_______________________________________________________________

AM I CONSIDERING ALL THE REASONS FOR MY FRIGHTENING THOUGHTS?
WHAT IS THE REAL EVIDENCE FOR MY CONCLUSIONS?

_______________________________________________________________

AM I THINKING ONLY ABOUT POSSIBLE DISASTERS?

_______________________________________________________________

Feedback from other Participants

WHAT DID WE LIKE ABOUT THE WAY X__________WAS THINKING THIS TIME?

_________________________________________________________________

WHAT OTHER THOUGHTS OCCURRED TO US ABOUT THAT SITUATION?

_________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________

Restructuring our Unrealistic Thoughts:

Now we can answer two final questions about the situation.

WHAT IS A MORE TRUE AND ACCURATE VIEW OF THE SITUATION?

_______________________________________________________________

WHAT REALLY IS THE WORST THING THAT IS LIKELY TO HAPPEN?

_______________________________________________________________

We may need to repeat these procedures several times before we can begin to change our thinking about those situations that we find frightening.

Thought stopping

A strategy that we may find helpful to reduce their frightening thoughts is called thought stopping. If we are overwhelmed by frightening thoughts and just cannot begin to think clearly and realistically this strategy may be used. We simply say “stop” very firmly to ourselves. If this is not helpful we may find that snapping an elastic band against our wrist to gives us a sharp momentary pain stops our frightening thoughts for a second. As soon as we managed to stop our frightening thoughts for a second, we try immediately to think about something completely different, such as a favourite meal or TV programme we are having that night, or a planned outing. Even better, if we can read through our list of questions about the situation that we are experiencing.
Unfortunately this strategy takes much practice before it is useful, and only has temporary benefits. But it is good to use when we are first getting used to recognising frightening thoughts and want to try and stop them from making us feel too anxious.

**Practice:**

Let’s look again at our *Anxiety Records* and imagine that we are in a situation where we were moderately anxious. Try and remember the kind of frightening thoughts we had at that time.

When we are having those thoughts again say “stop” firmly to ourselves. Then read through the *Fighting Fear* questions and try to answer them.

**WHAT DID WE NOTICE ABOUT OUR FRIGHTENING THOUGHTS WHEN WE TRIED TO STOP THEM IN THIS WAY?**

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
**Thought exhaustion**

Sometimes the harder we try to make a thought stop, the more it seems to keep coming back. This can be very frustrating. Fortunately the opposite is sometimes true: the more we try to keep a thought in our mind, without being distracted in any way the quicker it seems to disappear. It is as if our brain gets exhausted of keeping that thought going. So we can sometimes stop unpleasant thoughts by thinking about that thought really hard. This may seem quite worrying because our natural inclination is to rid ourselves of frightening thoughts. But it may be worth a try.

**Practice:**

1. Try to think of the worst thing that we can imagine could happen to us when we are very anxious.
2. Now try to keep thinking about this thought and NOTHING ELSE. It may be easiest to close our eyes and concentrate.
3. If the thought goes away raise our hand.
4. If we begin to get very anxious be sure to practice our controlled breathing and relaxation.

**WHAT DID WE NOTICE HAPPENING TO OUR FRIGHTENING THOUGHT WHEN WE TRIED TO THINK ONLY ABOUT THAT THOUGHT?**


**Reassuring Thoughts**

There are times we may feel rather frustrated that our progress is slow or we feel overwhelmed by a particular problem. It is helpful if we learn to talk positively and realistically to ourselves about our efforts and our achievements, no matter how much further we need to go to cope with all our anxiety problems.

**WHAT STATEMENTS CAN WE USE TO ENCOURAGE OURSELVES?**


We can note one or two statements that we like to use to praise ourselves for the efforts we have made so far in beginning to cope with anxiety. Some people find it useful write these statements on a card that they keep with them so that they can use it at anytime they feel they need encouragement. Whenever we find it difficult to go on, read it several times, until we feel that we are able to carry on with our efforts.

**Reassuring and Encouraging Others**

The skill of giving helpful reassurance to people fighting hard to cope with anxiety is very important. There is a tendency for friends and family members to tell us that we will be alright, or the situation is not as bad as they think, that there is nothing really wrong with us,
so we should not worry. This sort of reassurance seldom provides the support we seek. A more effective method is to take the time to discuss our progress realistically. All our efforts, as well as our difficulties. Any real problems can be discussed using the **Structured Problem Solving** framework that deals fully with all the issues. This provides the opportunity for clear action plans, that when implemented, may lead to worthwhile benefits.

Friends and family can be an enormous support to the person who is learning to cope with anxiety, particularly when they begin to understand more about the nature of anxiety and its treatment. Then they can see more clearly the efforts that need to be made to live with this disorder. This makes it much easier to give genuine praise and encouragement, not merely warm, but rather empty reassuring comments.

**Developing a Plan for Coping with Frightening Thoughts**

Now that we have explored some of the strategies that people have found useful in coping with frightening thoughts. We can make a plan to apply one or more of these strategies in the next week. We can use the **Structured Problem Solving** method to help us work out the best plan at this point. We must not forget that as well as the strategies that we have discussed today, that we may already have been using other strategies that seem to work well for us. So we should look back over the **Problem Analysis** and **Anxiety Record** to see if there are any of our own ideas that we should try and develop first.

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**Plan For Coping with Frightening Thoughts**

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Keeping a record of times when we feel anxious

We will continue to make a note of our anxiety feelings this week. The Anxiety Record will show us when we have felt anxious. It will also help us to see how much the strategies we have planned reduce the anxiety problems, as well as any problems that we may have trying to use them.
## fighting fear

what do I think about the situation?

what do I really fear may happen?

what am I saying to myself?

am I being realistic about the situation?

am I considering all the reasons for my frightening thoughts?
  what is the real evidence for my conclusions?

am I thinking only about possible disasters?

what is a more true and accurate view of the situation?

what really is the worst thing that is likely to happen?
DEVELOPING STRATEGIES TO COPE WITH ANXIETY?

IV: GETTING USED TO THE SITUATIONS THAT SET OFF OUR ANXIETY

Produced by Ballarat Health Services, Psychiatric Services

First Published 1988, Revised 1997:
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In our last sessions we have planned ways to reduce the sensitivity of our nervous systems so that we are less prone to become anxious, and to control our frightening thoughts. This session may help us to learn to get used to those situations that seem to set off our anxiety, so that we can do the things that we would like to do in our lives.

**ANXIETY IS AN EXCESSIVE FEAR RESPONSE THAT IS MADE WORSE BY OVER-BREATHING, FRIGHTENING THOUGHTS AND COPING BY AVOIDING SITUATIONS THAT SEEM TO TRIGGER THE FEAR**

DO WE HAVE ANY QUESTIONS ABOUT THE NATURE OF ANXIETY?

**Review of Daily Anxiety Record**

Let’s look at our Anxiety Records. Can we see how our efforts to 1) reduce the sensitivity of our nervous system and 2) cope with our frightening thoughts may have changed our anxiety problems.

WHAT HAS CHANGED AS A RESULT OF USING THESE PLANS?

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

WHAT CHANGES DO WE NEED TO MAKE IN THE PLANS TO GET MORE BENEFITS?

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

**Avoiding Situations that Make Us Anxious**

We quickly learn to avoid those situations and things that are extremely distressing. This tends to include situations in which we have had a panic attack or those places or things that cause us to think frightening thoughts that might set off a panic attack.

Avoiding those situations or thoughts that set off attacks of anxiety will prevent those attacks, at least for a while. However, in the long run we usually find that we need to avoid more and more situations and our lives become more and more restricted. In order to avoid things that might make us anxious we may need to change our entire lifestyles and sometimes the lives of our friends and families.

**TRYING TO COPE BY AVOIDING OUR FEARS MAY RESTRICT OUR LIFESTYLES AND THOSE OF OUR FRIENDS AND FAMILIES**
Most people can learn to get used to situations that make them anxious if they stay in those situations until their anxiety comes to a peak, and then begins to decrease. This may sound very frightening and a little ridiculous until we try it. Of course, it is much easier to cope with these situations once we have mastered some of the skills of relaxation, controlled breathing and coping with frightening thoughts.

**WHAT THINGS OR SITUATIONS DO WE AVOID BECAUSE WE THINK THAT THEY ARE LIKELY TO SET OFF OUR ANXIETY?**

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<th>Importance in our lives 0 - 10</th>
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**WHAT DIFFICULTIES DO WE TRY NOT TO THINK ABOUT BECAUSE THEY TEND TO SET OFF OUR ANXIETY?**

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<th>Importance in our lives 0 - 10</th>
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**Deciding Which Situations Are Most Important To Get Used To First**

Avoiding doing some of these things may not be very important. For example, a person who has a fear of heights only when he is a tourist standing on the top of the Eiffel Tower or a similar high building, may not have much of a problem. But if that person is a construction worker on skyscrapers this may be a big problem.

So we can look at the lists we have made and tick off those situations that are important to us, because they make it difficult to have the kind of life that we would like to have.

Next we can put a number next to each from 0-10 (*0 = not important at all to 10 = extremely important to us*) to indicate how important it would be for us to be able to cope in that situation, or with that thought.

Now that we have decided which situations will make our lives better if we can get used to them, we can decide which ones are best to learn to cope with first. Some of us like to start with the easiest then gradually work up to the more difficult. Others prefer to start with the most important issues, even if they are likely to make them very anxious.

We can look at the lists again and write then write down the first 3 situations that we would like to start getting used to.
THE SITUATIONS WE WOULD LIKE TO GET USED TO

1. __________________________________________________________________________
2. __________________________________________________________________________
3. __________________________________________________________________________

Graded Practice

This strategy helps us learn to cope with those situations that we have avoided because of our past experiences of panic and anxiety. The goal is to break down the connections between each situation and the anxiety reactions it sets off by staying in that situation until the anxiety reaction subsides naturally. If this is done, the next time we go into the situation the anxiety is less. The process called desensitisation has begun.

We can do this in small steps, at the pace we are comfortable with. If we prefer to tackle our most frightening situations or thoughts from the beginning that is great. This will usually mean that our fears will decrease more quickly.

Some points to consider in making a plan to for graded practice are:

* get a close friend or family member to help us
* tackle one of our feared situations every day
* do not avoid any new situations that set off anxiety
* begin with steps that are mild to moderately difficult, repeat these steps until we have mastered them before moving on to more difficult steps
* only undertake activities in which we think will be successful
* go over each of our steps in our mind before our real-life practice
* record of our efforts on our Anxiety Record
* praise ourselves for all our efforts
* added encouragement from our helper is invaluable
When practising the steps:

* use relaxation and get ourselves as calm as possible before we go out.
* give ourselves plenty of time, don't rush
* regularly check our breathing rate (keep around 10-12 per minute) and practice breathing control exercises
* relax our muscles: slowly put tension into our muscle and then release, do this several times and notice the difference
* think about the situation realistically
* if we feel overwhelmed, try to distract ourselves by looking carefully at things around us, use thought stopping and try to think of something pleasant, or even leave the situation. THEN AS SOON AS WE feel more in control, return to the situation and face our fear fully again.
* remain in the situation as long as possible
* do not leave the situation until the anxiety begins to subside -- it will always pass eventually, but in some situations this may take up till one hour. The less time we spend distracting ourselves, the less time it will take for the anxiety to subside.

DO WE HAVE ANY QUESTIONS ABOUT GRADED PRACTICE?

Common Concerns People have about Graded Practice

1. I am always going into situations that make me anxious. Why has my graded practice not worked?
This is difficult to answer. But it is most likely that we have not stayed in the situation long enough for our anxiety to reach a peak and then to decrease. In addition, sometimes people go into situations, but are so expert at distracting themselves from their anxiety that they are not experiencing it in a way that they can learn to cope with it. The person who is fearful in groups of people, so never looks or talks to any one in the group is not avoiding being in a group, but is avoiding the things that set off his/her anxiety about being in a group. A person who flies in an aeroplane, but only after drinking so much alcohol that they fall asleep before the plane takes off, and wake only after it lands is not experiencing the anxiety that flying produces.

2. What will happen if I become too distressed and have to escape from the situation?
Nothing bad is likely to happen. This is a minor setback. Setbacks like this are usual. When this happens, sit down, relax and give ourselves a reward for our courageous efforts to tackle a very unpleasant situation.

Then, arrange to review our plan with our friends or family helpers. Decide what we have learned from this experience. It is likely that we have tried to tackle a situation that is too difficult at this time. Or maybe we didn't use all our coping strategies as well as we can. Or maybe it was just a bad day.

Then revise our plan and keep practising.
3. I would feel safer if I took some tranquillising pills with me, just in case.
Tranquillising pills take at least 30 minutes to have any effect. Controlled breathing, muscle relaxation, and coping with frightening thoughts all have much quicker benefits. Make sure to take them along, and leave the pills behind. They are only helpful if we take them regularly to reduce the sensitivity of our nervous system (as we discussed in session II).

It is a good idea to make some plans for what we will do if our worst fears come true. This is an important step in successful planning.

*Make a Plan for Graded Practice*

Now that we have discussed many aspects of Graded Practice we may be able to make a plan to begin to get used to the first situation that we find fearful.

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<th>A PLAN FOR GRADED PRACTICE</th>
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*Practice in the Session:*

Let us practice the plan to get used to the frightening situation or thought. We will try to help to make it as realistic as possible.

We can decide which frightening situation we will practice now. We may be able to set up the actual frightening situation right here. If this is not practical we can close our eyes and try to imagine that we are in the situation. Once we have set up the situation we can answer the following questions:

**ARE WE FACING THE FRIGHTENING SITUATION HEAD-ON,**
**OR ARE WE DISTRACTING OURSELVES?**

**WHAT COPING STRATEGIES ARE WE USING?**
RELAXATION? CONTROLLED BREATHING? THINKING REALISTICALLY?
Feedback from all group members

WHAT DID WE LIKE ABOUT THE WAY THAT X______________ PRACTISED THE GRADED PRACTICE PLAN?
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________

DO WE HAVE ANY SUGGESTIONS ABOUT WAYS THAT WE COULD DO THIS DIFFERENTLY?
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________

Keeping a record of times when we feel anxious

We will continue to make a note of our anxiety feelings this week. The Anxiety Record will show us when we have felt anxious. If we organise to do some Graded Practice each day we will be able to see how this progresses. It will also help us to see any problems that we have trying to use this strategy.

DO WE HAVE ANY QUESTIONS ABOUT USING GRADED PRACTICE?
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<th>WHAT ANXIETY SYMPTOMS DID I HAVE?</th>
<th>WHAT DID I DO?</th>
<th>WHAT WAS THE OUTCOME?</th>
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**Severity of Anxiety:** 0 = none 1 = almost none 2 = v.mild 3 = mild 4 = mild-moderate 5 = moderate 6 = mod-severe 7 = severe 8 = v.severe 9 = v.v.severe 10 = extreme
# Anxiety Record

**Severity of Anxiety:** 0 = none 1 = almost none 2 = v.mild 3 = mild 4 = mild-moderate 5 = moderate 6 = mod-severe 7 = severe 8 = v.severe 9 = v.v.severe 10 = extreme

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<td>How strong were they? (0-10)</td>
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# Anxiety Record

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PROBLEM ANALYSIS

PROBLEM: What is the problem? How often does it happen? How long does it last? How distressing? (Use chart)
__________________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________________

BRIEF BACKGROUND:
_____________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________________

ANTECEDENTS: What happens in the moments just before the problem occurs? Do you find yourself in certain places, situations, or with certain types of people? Do you have any special thoughts or feelings? What exactly are you doing at that moment?
__________________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________________

CONSEQUENCES: What happens immediately after the problem starts? What thoughts and feelings do you have? What things do you do? What do other people do? How do other people react?
__________________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________________

MODIFYING FACTORS:
a) What seems to make the problem better? What makes it less likely to occur? (List all without discussion)

1________________________________ 2_______________________________ 3_______________________________

4________________________________ 5_______________________________ 6_______________________________

b) What seems to make the problem worse? What makes it more likely to occur?

1________________________________ 2_______________________________ 3_______________________________

4________________________________ 5_______________________________ 6_______________________________

BENEFITS AND DIFFICULTIES WHEN THIS PROBLEM IS SOLVED:
a) What benefits will you get when this problem is solved?
__________________________________________________________________________________________________

b) What possible disadvantages might there be for you when the problem is solved? e.g. loss of attention, pressure to work or to become more active, and to be expected to immediately do all those things you used to do?
__________________________________________________________________________________________________

CURRENT PROBLEM SOLVING STRATEGIES:
List all efforts to solve the problem, both effective and ineffective, including self, friends, professional treatment, etc
__________________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________________
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__________________________________________________________________________________________________

SUPPORTIVE PEOPLE: Who could help you to work on this problem? ___________________________
SOLVING PROBLEMS AND ACHIEVING GOALS

Step 1. What exactly is the problem or goal?
Talk about the problem or goal until we can write down exactly what it is. Ask questions to make the issue clearer. Break a big problem or goal into smaller parts.

__________________________________________________________________________________
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Step 2. List all possible solutions -- brain storming
Make a list of all ideas, even “bad” or “silly” suggestions. Get everyone to suggest something. Do NOT talk about whether ideas are good or bad at this stage.

1. __________________________________________________________________________
2. __________________________________________________________________________
3. __________________________________________________________________________
4. __________________________________________________________________________
5. __________________________________________________________________________
6. __________________________________________________________________________

Step 3. Briefly highlight the main advantages & disadvantages
Get our group to say quickly what we think are the main advantages and disadvantages of each suggestion. Do NOT write anything. Do NOT compare the possible solutions at this point.

Step 4. Choose the most practical suggestion
Choose the solution that can be carried out most easily with the resources (time, skills, materials, money) that we have at present.

Step 5. Plan exactly how to carry out the solution
Organise the resources we need. Consider how to cope with likely hitches. Practise all difficult steps -- rehearse or role play.

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Date and time to review progress with plan
__________________________________________________________________________________

Step 6. Review progress in carrying out plan
Praise all the efforts we have made. Review progress on each step. Change the plan. Try another solution. Continue problem solving until our problem is resolved or our goal is achieved.

__________________________________________________________________________________
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fighting fear

what do I think about the situation?

what do I really fear may happen?

what am I saying to myself?

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what is a more true and accurate view of the situation?

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