



What? Me Worry!?!

Module I

Overview of Generalised Anxiety

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Introduction

“What? Me worry?” Well, everybody experiences general feelings of nervousness or a sense of being worried about something. In fact, a study has shown that almost 2 in every 5 people worry at least once everyday. For some people though, worrying and feeling anxious is chronic and can seem to take over. Chronic worrying is a part of generalised anxiety, which can affect any kind of person at any stage of their life. It is estimated that about 1 in every 20 people experience significant generalised anxiety at some point in their lives. So remember, you are not alone.

The aim of this module is to provide you with some general information about anxiety and generalised anxiety disorder, to describe the types of symptoms common to generalised anxiety, and to discuss what causes generalised anxiety.

Understanding Anxiety

Lets begin this section by talking about what we mean by **anxiety**...

Feeling afraid is very much a part of the experience of being human. Fear is actually a survival instinct when it occurs in response to a realistically dangerous situation. Think about how you might react if a dangerous animal approached you. Most likely you would respond with fear. In fact, it is often helpful to respond with fear at times like this because when we become afraid, our body goes through a whole series of changes that ultimately serve to protect us. This fear response would probably lead us to either run for our lives or become sufficiently ‘pumped up’ to physically defend ourselves. As you can see from this example, the experience of fear is part of the process of survival.



Anxiety can also be experienced in less threatening situations. For example, athletes before a big game or race will feel some degree of anxiety. This is a good thing, as some anxiety in this situation will pump them up and get them ready to compete.

Anxiety only becomes a problem when it is out of proportion to the situation, that is, when it often occurs in situations where there is no actual threat or danger. Some anxiety might be anticipated in certain situations (e.g., a job interview, making a sales pitch), but if the anxiety is so extreme that it stops you from doing what needs to be done, then it becomes a problem. When anxiety occurs at this extreme level, it interferes with your quality of life.

Different Types of Anxiety

Anxiety can be experienced in different ways, and you may find it helpful to be able to differentiate between different levels of anxiety...

Fear describes a very intense type of anxiety and tends to be a reaction to an immediate and specific situation. Sometimes this fear occurs in social situations or at the thought of an up and coming social event. We would call this type of fear “social anxiety”. Other people experience intense fear in response to very specific things, for example spiders, heights, water. These fears are known as phobias. While others experience fear that feels like “sheer terror” that come out of the blue. These are known as panic attacks.



This information package addresses a level of anxiety that is described as **generalised anxiety, nervousness** or **chronic worrying**. This type of anxiety has similar physical and emotional characteristics to those of fear, but may be experienced at a different level of intensity. Instead of going straight to sheer terror, this anxiety builds up more gradually, has a high level of tension and gives you little peace of mind. The anxiety is often long-lasting and may appear when actually experiencing a negative event, or anticipating a future event.

Understanding Generalised Anxiety

While worrying and feeling nervous is something that all human beings experience, as with anything, too much of something can be bad for you. Normal anxiety can become a problem when it is:

- **excessive**,
- feels **uncontrollable**,
- is experienced as **intrusive** in your life,
- is **persistent** – seeming to always be around,
- and causes you significant **distress**, or **impairs** your ability to go about your day-to-day life.

This is when normal anxiety becomes *generalised anxiety*.

Some common things people have told us they experience when they have generalised anxiety are:

- **Chronic worries** running through their head. They occur over and over again like a broken record
- **Uncontrollable anxiety**. Having a strong desire to be in control of their emotions, yet feeling as if the anxiety and worry has taken control over them and there is nothing they can do to stop it
- **Intrusive thoughts**. No matter how much they try not to worry, not to think about things that make them nervous, these thoughts keep popping back into their mind against their will
- **Hating uncertainty**. Wanting to know what is going to happen in the future and finding the experience of ‘not knowing’ very difficult indeed
- **Feeling restless**, keyed up, on edge and unable to relax
- **Being physically tense**. Feeling nervy or uptight, and having tightness or stiffness in the muscles of their body
- **Sleep disturbance**. Having trouble falling asleep, maintaining sleep, or experiencing unsettled sleep, because their mind is constantly ticking over with worry
- **Problems concentrating** and focusing on a task
- **Procrastinating** about getting things done. Putting things off because it all feels too much and too overwhelming
- **Avoiding** situations in which they worry or get anxious and nervous.

Take a moment to write down what it is that you experience when you have generalised anxiety.

One of the important features of generalised anxiety is that the anxiety is spread across a number of different areas such as health, work, interpersonal relationships, finances, and so on. This makes it different from other anxiety problems, such as social anxiety or phobias, where nervousness and worrying are more specific to particular situations.

What Causes Generalised Anxiety?

So, how does one become a chronic worrier? There's no simple answer, of course, as everyone is different. However, there are some important factors that have been identified. These factors can generally be divided into biological and psychological causes.

Biological Factors

No single gene has been associated with generalised anxiety. Based on twin and family studies, it does seem that individuals may inherit a vulnerability to develop an anxiety disorder. These studies have reported a general vulnerability to develop an anxiety disorder, and interestingly, also a mood disorder. Notice that the researchers tell us that this is a general vulnerability, rather than a specific vulnerability for a specific type of disorder. In addition, it has been found that people born with a particular 'anxious' type of temperament, may be more likely to develop an anxiety disorder later in life.

Psychological Factors

However, it is important to remember that while our biology may make us vulnerable to developing an anxiety disorder, not all people with this vulnerability go on to develop problematic anxiety. A great deal depends on the lifestyle of that person, the types of life stressors they have encountered, and how they cope with such stressors.

Stressful, traumatic, and often uncontrollable life events may contribute to the development of generalised anxiety. When such events occur, some people may come to believe that life is dangerous and unpredictable, and that worrying about possible future negative events is a way of coping with the uncertainty of life. They may think that worrying helps them achieve a greater sense of certainty and control, because they would be better prepared for anything.

Anxiety may also develop when the people around you give you information about what is threatening and how to cope with those threats. For example, a child may have seen a parent constantly worrying about current circumstances and potentially negative future events, and may learn to follow the parent's behaviour. Alternatively, you may have been told that "Worrying is good and shows that you are a conscientious and prepared person". These sorts of indirect and direct messages may increase your chances of developing generalised anxiety.

Finally, anxiety is made worse when one begins avoiding things they have some concern about. Avoidance will quickly make something that is initially a slight concern for a person, become a source of anxiety. If the people in your life (i.e., parents, siblings, peers, spouses/partners) support your avoidance of various things, this may make your anxiety worse in the long run. People usually support a person's avoidance because they don't want the person to feel any distress. However, experiencing a small amount of distress and learning how to solve or cope with the problem is likely to stop more severe anxiety in the long run.



Module Summary

- Anxiety and worrying are common experiences for most human beings
- Anxiety can be helpful to us and only becomes unhelpful when it is out of proportion to the situation
- There are different types of anxiety, such as intense fear, and less intense but longer-lasting anxiety like worry or nervousness
- This information package focuses on generalised anxiety, addressing the worrying or the nervous type of anxiety
- Problematic generalised anxiety is **excessive** worrying about a **variety of things**, is experienced as **uncontrollable** and **intrusive**, and causes great **distress** and **difficulty** for the individual
- The exact causes of generalised anxiety are unclear, but it is likely to be a combination of biological vulnerability and environmental influences that contribute to its development.



Coming up next ...

In the next module you will learn more about worrying, such as, what triggers your worrying, why it is that you keep worrying, and how to effectively treat your worrying.

About The Modules

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BACKGROUND

The concepts and strategies in the modules have been developed from evidence based psychological practice, primarily Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy (CBT). CBT for generalised anxiety is a type of psychotherapy that is based on the theory that generalised anxiety and worry is a result of problematic cognitions (thoughts) and behaviours. There is strong scientific evidence to support that cognitions and behaviours can play an important role in generalised anxiety, and that targeting cognitions and behaviours in therapy can help many people to overcome generalised anxiety. Examples of this evidence are reported in:

Barlow, D.H., Raffa, S.D., Cohen, E.M. (2002) Psychosocial treatments for panic disorders, phobias, and generalized anxiety disorder. In P.E. Nathan & J.M. Gorman (Eds.), *A Guide to Treatments that Work* (2nd ed., pp. 301-335). New York: Oxford University Press.

Gould, R.A., Safren, S.A., O'Neill Washington, D., & Otto, M.W. (2004). A meta-analytic review of cognitive-behavioural treatments. In R.G. Heimberg, C.L. Turk & D.S. Mennin (Eds.), *Generalized Anxiety Disorder: Advances in Research and Practice* (pp. 248-264). New York: Guilford Press.

REFERENCES

These are some of the professional references used to create the modules in this information package.

Barlow, D.H. (2002). *Anxiety and Its Disorders: The Nature and Treatment of Anxiety and Panic* (2nd ed.). London: Guilford Press.

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Wells, A. (1997). *Cognitive Therapy of Anxiety Disorders: A Practice Manual and Conceptual Guide*. Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

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