

Information handout

US English

What Is Worry?

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What Is Worry?

Description

“Worry is a chain of thoughts and images, negatively affect-laden and relatively uncontrollable. It represents an attempt to engage in mental problem-solving on an issue whose outcome is uncertain but contains the possibility of one or more negative outcomes. Consequently, worry relates closely to the fear process.”

Borkovec, Robinson, Pruzinsky and DePree (1983)

Human beings have the amazing ability to mentally simulate future events: ‘thinking ahead’ means that we can anticipate obstacles or problems, and affords us the opportunity to plan effective compensatory actions. To the extent that it helps us to achieve our goals, ‘thinking ahead’ can be adaptive. Worrying is one form of thinking about the future. It has been defined as thinking about future events in a way that leaves you feeling anxious or apprehensive.

Clinically, excessive worry is the primary symptom of generalized anxiety disorder (GAD). Evidence seems to indicate that the content of worry in people with GAD concerns similar topics to ‘everyday’ worry, but that it is often concerned with more unlikely or remote events. The terms ‘hypothetical worry’ and ‘real event worry’ are often used to describe this distinction. Other important differences are that people with GAD often experience their worries as uncontrollable, and will worry habitually instead of in response to particular triggers.

The *What Is Worry?* information handout succinctly describes worry. It defines worry, draws a distinction between ‘real event’ and ‘hypothetical event’ worry, and describes a continuum of ‘normal’ to ‘excessive’ worry. It also briefly describes the Laval perspective of generalized anxiety disorder in which intolerance of uncertainty is viewed as a prominent feature. It is helpful as both as a client handout and as a therapist primer.

Instructions

This is a Psychology Tools information handout. Suggested uses include:

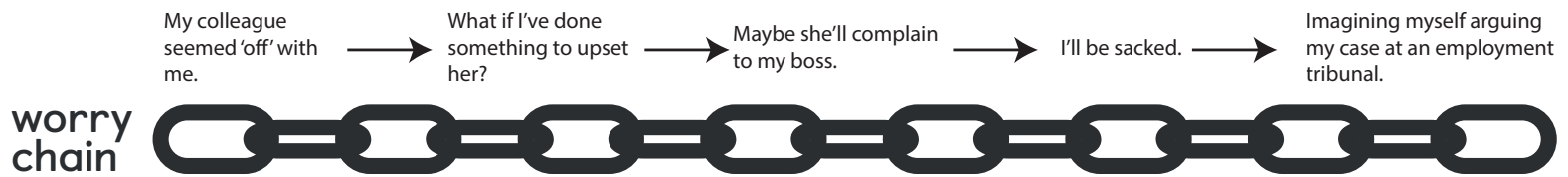
- Client handout – a psychoeducation resource.
- Discussion point – to provoke a discussion and explore your client's beliefs.
- Therapist learning tool – to improve your familiarity with a psychological construct.
- Supervision tool – to develop formulations and knowledge.
- Teaching resource – a learning tool during training.

References

- Borkovec, T. D., Robinson, E., Pruzinsky, T., & DePree, J. A. (1983). Preliminary exploration of worry: Some characteristics and processes. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 21(1), 9-16.
- Dugas, M. J., Robichaud, M. (2007). *Cognitive behavioral treatment for generalized anxiety disorder*. Routledge.
- Sibrava, N. J., & Borkovec, T. D. (2006). The cognitive avoidance theory of worry. *Worry and its psychological disorders: Theory, assessment and treatment*, 239-256.
- Wilkinson A., Meares, K., Freeston, M. (2017). *CBT for worry & generalised anxiety disorder*. Sage.

What Is Worry?

To worry means to think about problems that *might* happen in a way that leaves you feeling anxious or apprehensive. Worry is experienced as a chain of thoughts and images which can progress in increasingly catastrophic and unlikely directions. It is often experienced as uncontrollable and seems to take on a life of its own.



Why do people worry?

Most of us can foresee problems that might happen in our lives and spend at least *some* time thinking about what we could do to manage them. To the extent that this helps us to solve future problems worry is normal and useful. Psychologists think that worry is an attempt to manage and reduce *uncertainty*. Some people are more sensitive to (bothered by) uncertainty and they tend to do more worrying.

Real vs Hypothetical worry

Psychologists often distinguish between two types of worry:

Real event worries

are about *actual* problems that are affecting you *right now*.



Hypothetical worries

are about things that do not currently exist, but which *might* happen in the future.



How do I know if my worry is a problem?

Everyone worries to some degree. Worry can become a problem when it stops you from living the life you want to live, or if it leaves you feeling demoralised and exhausted.



Relationships, health, work, finances, family, school	Content	Relationships, health, work, finances family, school
Usually about more likely and relatively here-and-now events (real event worry).	Likelihood & timescale	Usually more about unlikely or remote future events (hypothetical event worry).
Worry often starts in response to a specific trigger.	Timing	Worry may be more habitual.
Feels like there is some control over the worry process.	Control	Feels like the worry is not controllable.
Spend less time worrying	Duration	Spend more time worrying.

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