



What? Me Worry!?!

Module 3

Negative Beliefs About Worrying: “Worrying Is Uncontrollable”

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Introduction

Ask yourself this question: *if you believed you had control over your worrying, how much would your worrying bother you?* Chances are you wouldn't feel as bad if you thought you have a choice about whether you worried, as opposed to thinking that your worry controls you. So in this module we will look at changing your beliefs that:

“I have no control over my worrying”
“Once I start worrying I can't stop”
“My worrying is uncontrollable”
“My worrying will never end”
“My worrying controls me”
“I can't do anything to stop my worrying”

Changing Your Belief

Before we start changing your belief that worrying is uncontrollable, we need to know how much you believe it. How convinced are you that your worrying is beyond your control? Do you believe it fully and whole-heartedly? Do you mostly believe it? Half the time? Occasionally? Or maybe this is not a belief you even hold? Even if you think you do not hold this belief, we encourage you to still work through this module to be sure it is not a belief that is lurking at the back of your mind without you realising. Chances are, you can move on quickly from this module to the next.

How much do you believe that your worrying is uncontrollable?

(Circle the percentage that best describes the strength of your belief)

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

To change your belief that your worrying is uncontrollable, you need to do two things.



Firstly, you need to **challenge** or dispute your belief. That means taking apart the belief that you can't control your worrying, by evaluating if it really is accurate and true, and examining what evidence you base your belief on. In this way you will be like a detective, trying to get to the facts of whether worrying really is uncontrollable.

Secondly, you need to **experiment** with your belief. That means doing things to see if worrying really is uncontrollable. If you are able to do things that show your belief isn't true – that in fact you can control your worrying – it is going to be hard to hold on to your belief. In this way you will be like a scientist with a prediction that worrying is uncontrollable, which needs to be tested.

Challenging Your Belief

Below is a list of questions you can ask yourself to challenge whether your belief that worrying is uncontrollable is really true. By using these questions you will become a detective, examining the evidence for and against your belief. An example is given below of how to use these questions to challenge your belief, and on page 4 you will find a worksheet to help you do this for yourself.

Evidence For

- What makes you think worrying is uncontrollable?
- What's the evidence for your belief?
- Is the evidence for your belief good/solid/reliable?
- Is there another way you could view the evidence for your belief?



Evidence Against

- Is there any evidence that goes against your belief?
- Has your worrying ever been disrupted/interrupted? Can distraction work in the short term? What does this tell you about uncontrollability?
- Does your worrying stop eventually? How can this be if it is uncontrollable? Shouldn't it just go on forever if it can't be controlled?
- Can you manipulate your worrying (i.e., increase or decrease it)? Would this be possible if it was completely uncontrollable?
- Does taking action ever work to stop your worrying? What does this tell you about whether it is controllable?
- What strategies have you tried to control your worrying? Are they mostly forms of suppression, which only increase worrying?
- Have you ever tried to properly postpone your worrying (that is, not suppress it, but instead allow yourself to have a worrisome thought, and decide not to worry about it at that particular moment)? If you have done this, what does this tell you about your worrying being uncontrollable? If you haven't done this, how do you truly know your worrying is uncontrollable?
- Is it possible that it is controllable, you just don't know how yet?

EXAMPLE:

Belief: "My worrying is uncontrollable"	
Evidence For	Evidence Against
<p><i>When I tell myself not to think about something, I still keep worrying, so it must be uncontrollable.</i> [I guess what I am really doing is suppressing my thoughts, which just makes them come back worse. It is possible that the strategy I am using is wrong, rather than my worrying actually being uncontrollable.]</p> <p><i>It just feels uncontrollable, therefore it must be.</i> [This isn't very solid evidence that my worrying is beyond my control. Just because I feel it is true, isn't really evidence that it actually is true.]</p>	<p><i>Things do happen during my day that naturally interrupt my worrying.</i> [My worrying can't be uncontrollable if something can interrupt it. If it were uncontrollable it would keep going regardless.]</p> <p><i>There have been times when I haven't worried, because I have been too busy doing something else.</i> [My worrying can't be uncontrollable if being busy can stop it from happening.]</p> <p><i>I have only ever tried to suppress my worrying, but never tried to postpone it.</i> [I don't truly know if it is uncontrollable if I haven't used the right strategy to try and control it.]</p> <p><i>My worrying does eventually stop, either when I have run out of steam, or feel I have worried all I can and I am prepared.</i> [My worrying can't be uncontrollable if it doesn't actually go on forever.]</p>

Challenging Your Belief

Belief: <i>My worrying is uncontrollable</i>	
Evidence For	Evidence Against

Experimenting With Your Belief

Now it's time to do a bit of experimenting with your belief that worrying is uncontrollable. Like any good scientist, if you have a prediction about something, the best thing to do is to conduct an experiment to see if it is true.



You will have noticed in the previous example for challenging your belief that a distinction was made between suppressing thoughts, and **postponing worrying**.

As mentioned in Module 2, we tend to do one of two things when a “what if” thought pops into our head. We either **pull** it closer, meaning we listen to it, and spend lots of time and attention thinking about it. Or we **push** it away, try to suppress it, get rid of it, stop thinking about it. As we know, suppression just does not work, and the thought we are trying to push away tends to pop back with even more fury. So, both pushing away and pulling close our negative thoughts just leads to more negative thinking, making it seem like our worrying is uncontrollable.

Now, perhaps worrying is controllable, but you just haven't been using the right strategies yet!! One way to test this out is to postpone your worries until later. Postponement involves neither pushing nor pulling. Postponing is “putting to the side” or “parking” the negative thought for now.



Postponing negative thoughts means that it is **perfectly OK** and natural for an initial “what if” negative thought to pop into your mind (e.g., “What if I fail my exam?”), but you make a decision not to **‘chase’** the thought any further at that particular time.

Not chasing the negative thought further means that you don't try to anticipate the worst or run scenarios and solutions related to your initial thought through your head over and over again (e.g., “It will be a disaster, I will be a failure, I will get kicked out of uni, I won't be able to find a job, maybe I should pull out of my course,” etc).

Instead, you postpone thinking about your worry until a later time. This will help contain your worrying to one part of the day, rather than carrying it with you 24/7.

Most importantly postponing allows us to experiment with our worrying to see if it really is uncontrollable. After all, if we can interrupt and postpone our worries until later, then they can't be beyond our control.

How to postpone

1. Set a thinking time

- Nominate a set time, length of time, and place, to do all your thinking about worrisome things.
- Try and keep your thinking time the same everyday (e.g., 6pm, 15mins, dining room). If it does need to be changed on a certain day, just make sure you have a clear idea when it will be rescheduled.
- Try not to set your thinking time before bed.

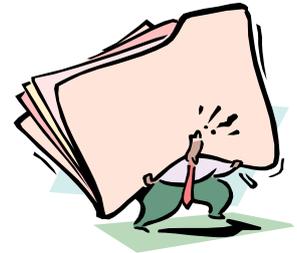
2. Postpone

- When you notice yourself worrying about something during the day, say something to yourself like “it's OK to have that thought, but I don't need to chase it any further right now”. Notice these words are all about being very **accepting** of the initial thought.
- List the topic of your worrisome thought **briefly** (in a couple of words only). This will mean initially carrying a small notebook with you to do this. Later when you are good at the skill you could mentally note it down.
- Decide to think about it later and save your thoughts for your thinking time.
- Bring your attention back to the **present task at hand** and reassure yourself that you will deal with the negative thoughts later (Note., regularly practicing attention training exercises from Module 4 will help you with being able to do this).

- If the thought pops back again (which it likely will), this is not a sign that postponement hasn't worked, after all we can't control what pops into our head. What we are postponing is the further thinking, spiralling, chasing or snowballing of those thoughts, otherwise known as worrying. So when a thought pops back, write it down or put a tick next to it if it is already in your notebook, and repeat the above postponement steps.

3. When you get to your thinking time

- Only think about the things you've listed if you feel you **must**.
- You don't have to think about them if they no longer bother you, or if they no longer seem relevant to you. You could just cross them off your list to signify that they are no longer important.
- If you do need to spend time thinking about them, only do this for the set amount of time specified and try to do this in a productive way on paper.
- If the issue that is bothering you is something solvable, then do some problem solving on paper (e.g., what is the problem, what are my options for dealing with this, what plan could I put in place to take some action – you will find out more about this in Module 7).
- If the issue is something you recognise you may be overreacting to, try to think about it in a more helpful, balanced, realistic way (e.g., *what would be a more helpful way to think about this?*, *what would I say to a friend who was thinking the same way?*, etc – you will find out more about this in Module 8)
- If the issue is not something you can take action with or think about differently, either think about it on paper, or use your mindfulness meditation practice (from Module 4) to help with accepting and letting go of these thoughts, or continue to postpone it for now.
- Finally, it is often good to follow your thinking time with some activity that you know lifts your mood (e.g., certain music, book or TV show, a walk, time with pets, chatting to a friend, etc).



Common postponement pitfalls

It is important to do postponement properly, formally and thoroughly initially to be able to really test if your worrying is controllable. As with any experiment, if it isn't done properly, we can't really make any new discoveries. The following are the most common ways that postponement is not done properly. Watch out for these so that they don't contaminate your experiment.

Suppressing or non-accepting attitude. Make sure the things you say to yourself in your mind when you decide to postpone are very accepting of those initial negative thoughts (e.g., “postpone”, “catch you later”, “see you at 4pm”, “park it for now”, etc). Getting angry with yourself or saying things like “stop it” or “push it away”, are signs that you are trying to suppress the thoughts, rather than accept them and postpone further thinking for now.

Giving up when the thoughts pop back. A thought may only pop up once, but it could pop up 10 times or 100 times. It doesn't matter. Having to repeatedly postpone the same thought doesn't mean postponement hasn't worked. Remember we aren't changing what pops into our head, but we are changing how we respond. **Expect and accept** that thoughts will pop back.

No Rationalising. Rationalising or thinking logically when a negative thought pops up may seem like a helpful thing to do, but if it truly was helpful, this strategy would have put your worries to rest a long time ago. Rationalising in the moment when a thought pops up, is ultimately a way of pulling it close, giving the thoughts time, energy, and attention. It could also be a covert form of suppression, trying to ‘logic the worry away’. Any rational thinking is fine in your designated thinking time, but avoid using it in the moment to respond to a negative thought that has popped up. Instead acknowledge and accept the thought, and immediately disengage from further thinking till your thinking time.

Avoiding thinking time. Some people avoid thinking time because they anticipate it will be unpleasant. This is likely because of “danger beliefs” which we will address later. Try to commit to thinking time and stick to the time limit. And remember you don't have to think about things that are no longer important. For those that do still seem important, try to engage in helpful and constructive thinking.

Before you start the experiment, complete the worksheet on page 8 in as much detail as you can and then continue filling it out as you go along.

Instructions for completing the worksheet:

First, write down the details of your thinking time (start time, time limit, and place). Then, write down what you think will happen when you try to postpone your worrying. Particularly, how controllable do you think your worrying will be? After that, rate how confident you are of your ability to postpone your worrying (between 0 and 10).

Now just give the experiment a go and see what happens.

For each of the next 7 days, fill in the day and the date, and record what actually happened during the day (e.g., did you manage to stop chasing worrisome thoughts and to postpone worrying? and what happened at thinking time?). Rate how controllable worrying seemed.

Then, compare what you predicted would happen with what actually happened on those 7 days. Typically people predict that they won't be able to postpone their worrying, and that their worrying will be out of control when they try this new strategy. Often people are surprised that they are actually able to postpone their worrying, and experience a greater sense of control. Also, people often find that when they come to their thinking time they don't feel the need to worry, because most of their worries no longer seem that important. This begs the question of how important they were in the first place.

What did you find?

While postponing worrying is used here as an experiment to tackle your belief about worrying being uncontrollable, it is also just a really good strategy for dealing with worries so they don't interfere with your day-to-day life. So, try to continue with the postponing worrying activity indefinitely. A later experiment recommended in this information package may require that you stop the postponing worrying experiment for a certain period of time. But unless another experiment gets in the way of you postponing your worrying, treat this technique as your new way of dealing with worrying generally, and use it for as long as worrying is still a problem for you.

Now that you have challenged and experimented with your belief that worrying is uncontrollable:

Rate again how much you believe your worrying is uncontrollable?

(Circle the percentage that best describes the strength of your belief)

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

If there is some weakening (however small) of your belief that your worrying is uncontrollable compared to what it was at the start of this module, congratulate yourself. If there's no change yet, that's okay. Remember, changing your beliefs takes time and persistence. Just going over the evidence for and against your belief once or experimenting with your belief once may not be enough. These are ongoing strategies you can practice until the evidence for your belief is weak, the evidence against your belief is strong, and you are successfully able to postpone worrying. We would aim for a 0% belief that worrying is uncontrollable, so keep using the strategies in this module to help you get there.

Postponement Experiment

My Thinking Time:

Start Time:	Time Limit:	Place:
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Prediction (What do you think will happen if you postpone worrying? Particularly, how controllable will worrying be?)

How confident are you of your ability to postpone worrying?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
I cannot postpone worrying at all				I am moderately confident I can postpone worrying					I am extremely confident I can postpone worrying	

Day:	___ day						
Date:							
What happened? Did you postpone worrying?							
What happened at thinking time? Did the thoughts still seem important?							
How controllable did worrying seem? (0% to 100%)							

Compare prediction with what happened. What did you learn about worrying and how controllable it is?

Module Summary

- Negative beliefs regarding worrying being uncontrollable make your worrying worse
- To change these beliefs you can:
 - Challenge them – look at the evidence for and against the beliefs
 - Experiment with them – set up a **postpone worrying** experiment to see if worrying really is uncontrollable
- In order to change your belief that worrying is beyond your control, you need to persist with both techniques until:
 - The evidence for your belief is weak
 - The evidence against your belief is strong
 - You are successfully able to postpone worrying
- Once you have achieved these three things ask yourself:
 - **What does all this say about my worrying?**
 - It should show you that your worrying is in fact **controllable**.
- This doesn't mean we can control what thoughts enter your mind and capture our attention in the first place, but we can control how we respond once we realise worrisome thoughts have entered our mind. We have a choice whether we engage with the thoughts, and how we engage with them. Postponement allows us to put our worries 'to the side' for later, rather than pushing them away or pulling them close.



Coming up next ...

In the next module you will learn how to retrain your attention, to be able to notice when it is caught in worrying and refocus it on the present task at hand.

About The Modules

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Some of the materials in the modules of this information package were taken from:

Saulsman, L., Anderson, R., Campbell, B., & Swan, A. (2015). *Working with Worry and Rumination: A Metacognitive Group Treatment Programme for Repetitive Negative Thinking*. Perth, Western Australia: Centre for Clinical Interventions.

BACKGROUND

The concepts and strategies in the modules have been developed from evidence based psychological practice, primarily Metacognitive Therapy (MCT). MCT is a type of psychotherapy developed by Professor Adrian Wells at the University of Manchester. MCT is an extension of Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy (CBT) and is based on the theory that repetitive negative thinking, such as chronic worry in generalised anxiety, is a result of problematic metacognitions (i.e., beliefs about thinking) and behaviours. There is good scientific evidence to support that targeting metacognitions and behaviours in therapy can help many people to overcome generalised anxiety. Examples of this evidence are reported in:

McEvoy, P. M., Erceg-Hurn, D. M., Anderson, R. A., Campbell, B. N. C., Swan, A., Saulsman, L. M., Summers, M., & Nathan, P. R. (2015). Group metacognitive therapy for repetitive negative thinking in primary and non-primary generalized anxiety disorder: an effectiveness trial. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 175, 124-132.

REFERENCES

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

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Wells, A. (2008). *Metacognitive Therapy for Anxiety and Depression*. New York: Guilford Press.

“WHAT? ME WORRY!?!”

This module forms part of:

Saulsman, L., Nathan, P., Lim, L., Correia, H., Anderson, R., & Campbell, B. (2015). *What? Me Worry!?! Mastering Your Worries*. Perth, Western Australia: Centre for Clinical Interventions.

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