

When Panic Attacks

Module 7

Maintaining Your Gains

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Introduction

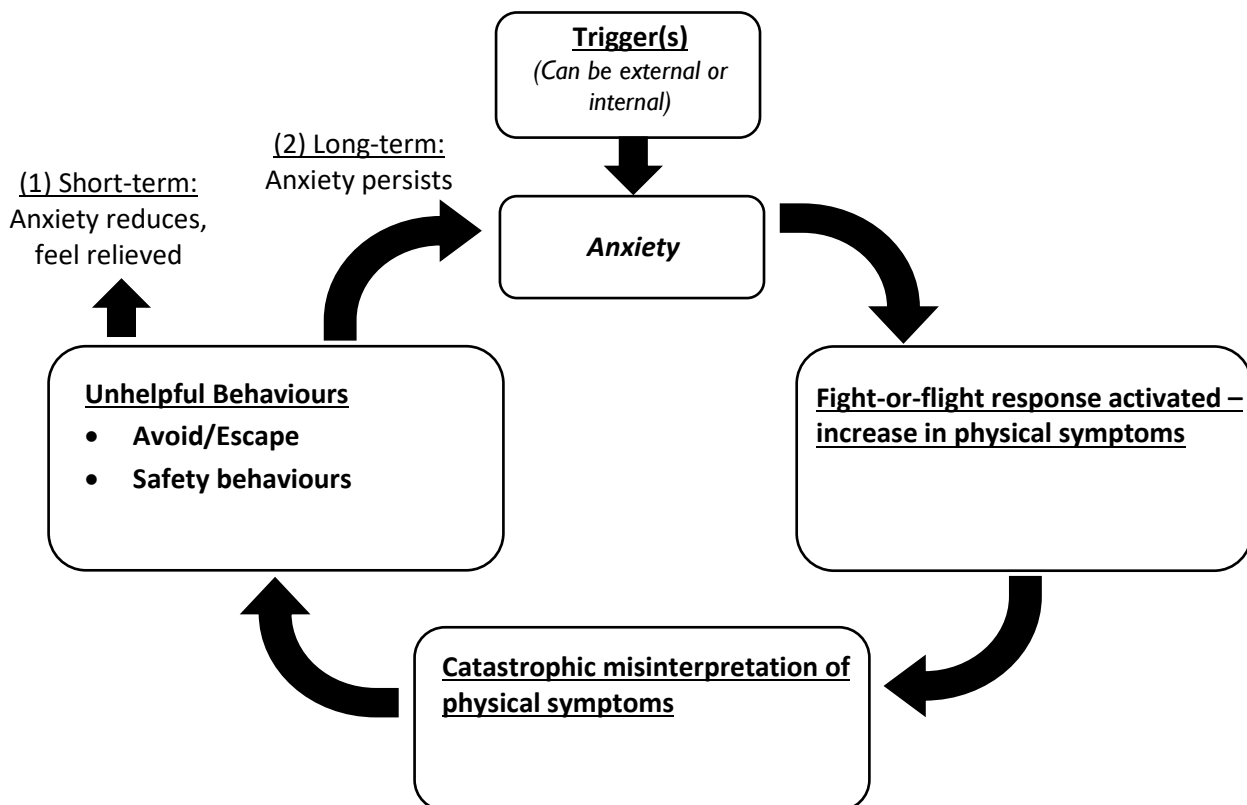
Congratulations on making it to the end of this workbook! We're glad you stayed with us. If you haven't read all the modules, it might be good to go to the ones you missed. However, the most important thing for you now is to keep practising the strategies you have learned through reading the modules in this workbook. If you continue practising the concepts and skills you have learned, they will become like habits integrated into your lifestyle.

There are two things to keep in mind now: one is about how to maintain the gains that you have made, and the other is to think about how to minimise setbacks that might occur.

In this final module, you will find a summary of all the important strategies covered in this workbook. We will also discuss how to manage any future setbacks that might occur with your panic attacks. But before we explore these things, let's take some time to consider the changes you have made since you first began working on these modules.

The panic disorder model revisited

Remember the model of how panic disorder is maintained from Module 2? Here it is again to refresh your memory. The model showed how we may interpret normal anxiety symptoms in a catastrophic way, which leads us to escape or avoid the initial trigger altogether, or to use safety behaviours to 'protect' us from the feared consequences. As you may now be more aware of, these behaviours might bring us relief in the short term, but they can backfire in the longer term, keeping us stuck in the vicious cycle of panic.

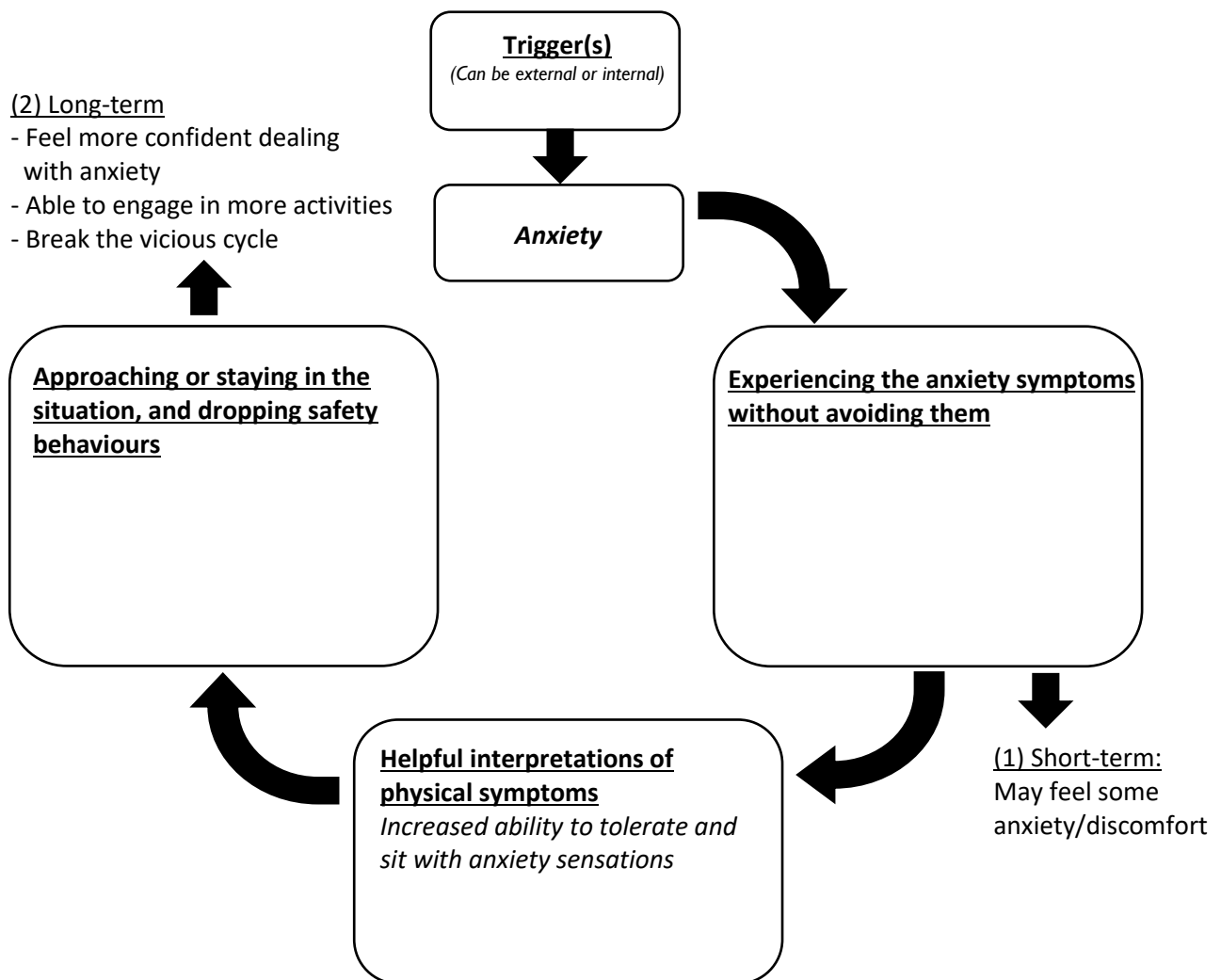


A new way of responding to anxiety symptoms

In **Module 3** we looked at the impact of unhelpful interpretations of physical symptoms of anxiety, and practised thought challenging to develop more helpful and balanced thinking about these sensations.

In **Module 4** we worked on experiencing physical sensations through exposure exercises. And in **Modules 5 and 6**, we introduced behavioural experiments to test our negative predictions of dropping avoidance and safety behaviours, and to face these feared situations.

If you have been practising the strategies that we have covered in the earlier modules, the model below summarises this new way that you are now responding to your anxiety symptoms.



Take a moment to reflect on the hard work you have put in to challenging yourself and trying these strategies. If you completed the additional panic attack monitoring form at the end of Module 6, you can compare the frequency of your panic attacks from when you started these modules up until now. Have there been any changes throughout the workbook? Has there been a change in the severity of your daily anxiety from the beginning to now? You may have experienced some ups and downs as you worked through these modules, and that's completely normal! The following questions invite you to summarise some of the important changes you have made that allow you to respond to your anxiety symptoms in new and more helpful ways.

What are some more helpful and balanced thoughts that you now have when you experience anxiety symptoms? *E.g., These symptoms may be unpleasant but they are not dangerous and will eventually pass.*

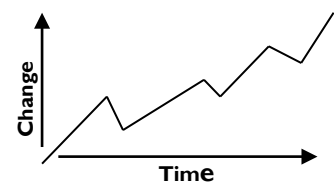
What situations do you no longer avoid? What safety behaviours do you no longer use? What new things have you been able to try since learning to manage your panic attacks?

Are there any other key 'take-home messages' you gained from working through the modules?

If you have noticed improvements in these areas, then that's great! You may have made progress in multiple aspects of your life, or maybe in one or two significant ways. If there are still areas you would like to work on, that's okay! This highlights particular areas for us to focus our practice on moving forward. It is also important that we have a plan for how to cope with potential hiccups that occur along the way that may affect our progress – dealing with these setbacks effectively can help us to feel more confident in maintaining the gains we have made.

Dealing with setbacks

As we keep practising, it is important to recognise that setbacks or slip-ups in progress can happen at any time and are completely normal. It is normal to experience setbacks with panic attacks from time to time, for example, if you experience a particularly difficult situation or if your life circumstances change so that you are not getting as much exposure to these physical sensations.



The important thing is not whether we have setbacks, but how we respond to them. Don't fall into the trap of believing that you are 'back to square one' as that is not true – you have learnt so many skills. Change is not a steady process; it's more like the old saying: "Two steps forward, one step back" from time to time.

Think about how you might learn to ride a bike. It often takes a few unsteady attempts and falls before you regain your balance. Even when you get your balance, you might still be unsteady when travelling over new ground, or on different surfaces. In the same way, different situations may be more challenging, requiring extra effort and persistence, more thought challenging, or more behavioural experiments. Even after much practice, there may be times when you think you've slipped back and feel a little off balance. Developing new skills is never a smooth process, you're always being faced with new challenges and different situations to apply those skills.

REASONS FOR SETBACKS

There are several reasons for setbacks occurring. There may be an increase in physical or mental stress. Also, when we are physically unwell, we are less likely to have the necessary mental and physical energy to do the detective work and challenge unhelpful thoughts.

It may help to remind yourself that most people have 'down days' or days when life's hassles are harder to deal with – it's part of being human! Use your thought challenging skills to help when this occurs. Also, you can use setbacks to learn something new about yourself to help reduce similar problems in the future.

PREVENTING MAJOR SETBACKS

As you progress through your goals, try not to focus too much on small setbacks. If you are experiencing several small setbacks, there are some ways to prevent a major setback.

1. Identify early warning signs

The first step is to look at your own early warning signs. Some common examples are:

- Spending increased time worrying about situations or physical sensations, or having more unhelpful thoughts.
- An increase in the amount of time avoiding particular situations or activities.
- An increase in physical symptoms of anxiety when you are in previously feared situations.

2. Revise skills

Think about the skills you have learned and what has been helpful in reducing your anxiety (thought challenging, interoceptive exposure, behavioural experiments, dropping safety behaviours). Have you stopped practising these skills consistently? You may wish to revise the modules and the techniques you have learned and perhaps increase practising those skills.

3. Social Support

It is wise to find someone with whom you can sit down and have a good talk. This doesn't mean a therapy session where you pour your heart out, but rather just a chance to talk through what's going on in your life, what your goals are, and generally just to ventilate with someone you trust. Often, problems seem bigger than they really are when a person tries to deal with them on their own. Hearing yourself talk through something can help to put it into perspective.

On the next page is a self-management plan for you to complete. Make a note of the early warning signs that might signal a setback then write down the strategies and tools you have learnt about that can help you to deal with a setback.

Self-Management Plan

What are the early warning signs that tell that I might be heading for a setback and need to do something about it myself? *E.g., I am avoiding more situations. OR I have more unhelpful thoughts than usual.*

What situations are potential problems for me? *E.g., times of stress with work/study/family; include common triggers (e.g., external situations or stresses; or internal triggers such as thoughts, memories, or bodily sensations).*

What strategies/techniques have I learned that I could apply when I notice some early warning signs, or to prevent a setback? *(e.g., do some interoceptive exposure exercises, behavioural experiments, etc.)*



What are some coping statements or helpful phrases (e.g., from previous thought diaries) that I can use to get me through a setback or a stressful situation? *(e.g., "These feelings are unpleasant but not dangerous.")*

What are my other support options? *E.g., family, friends, general practitioner, other...*

Looking forward

It is important to recognise the progress that you've made, to 'pat yourself on the back', and celebrate any milestones you have achieved. This will hopefully encourage you to keep going, to keep practising, to keep applying the new skills you have learnt. Maintaining the gains you have made occurs by continuing to confront situations you may have felt anxious in and continuing to practise the skills. Remember that developing new skills that are designed to challenge what may be years worth of old habits takes time and persistence. Setting goals for yourself can support you to strengthen the changes you have made, and to create new opportunities in your life. It often helps to specify a time period for working on these goals, e.g., over the next 3-6 months.

My goals for maintaining my gains:

Goals I want to work on now that I have made some progress with managing my panic attacks:



Congratulations making it to the end of this workbook!

You have done so well to progress through all the modules, and to persist with learning and practising the skills. We trust you will now be more prepared... when panic attacks!

Module Summary

- To maintain and build on the gains you have made, it is important that you continue applying and practising the strategies you learned through reading these modules:
 - Thought challenging
 - Exposure to physical sensations
 - Behavioural experiments
 - Dropping safety behaviours
- Consistent and continuous practice will enable you to integrate the strategies into your new way of responding to anxiety symptoms.
- Setbacks are expected when we make changes to the way we think and act. Rather than focussing on the setback or judging yourself, use your Self-Management Plan to recognise setbacks early and get back on track. You can also repeat the modules to remind you of the skills you have learnt.
- Setting future goals can be a useful way to strengthen the changes you have made, and to create new opportunities in your life.

About the Modules

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

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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).

Craske, M.G., & Barlow, D.H. (2014). Panic disorder and agoraphobia. In D.H. Barlow (Ed.), *Clinical Handbook Of Psychological Disorders, Fifth Edition*. New York: Guilford Press.

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