

# Anxiety 101

## Anxiety is normal.

Everyone experiences anxiety from time to time. It alerts us to threats, protects us from danger and helps us reach important goals. For example, it is normal to feel anxious when encountering a bear on a hike, or before taking an important exam.



## Anxiety shouldn't be avoided.

It's important to resist avoiding challenges or escape scary situations. You may feel better in the short-term when you stay home or opt out, but in the long-term it makes things worse as you never get to learn that you can handle the tough stuff.



## The Facts:

### Anxiety isn't dangerous.

Although anxiety feels uncomfortable, it is temporary and will eventually decrease. The body sensations we experience when we're anxious, are designed to keep us safe. They're normal and part of our body's natural survival response mechanism.



### Anxiety can take over.

Although anxiety is normal, harmless, and part of everyday life, for some people it can take over. Anxiety can flood you with unpleasant physical feelings, unwanted thoughts, and result in avoidance or opting out of important routines such as playing a sport, making friends, going to school, and more.



## F3: Fight, Flight, Freeze

The Fight-Flight-Freeze mechanism is the body's automatic, built-in response system designed to protect us from threat or danger. For example, when you hear the words, "look out!" you may be surprised to find how fast you can move to miss a baseball! Or when you see a bear on the trail up ahead, you stop and remain quiet and still until it moves on. In both scenarios your system is protecting you from danger. The F3 system is critical to our survival from true threat or danger, but what happens when there is no real danger?



Anxiety can also trigger the 3F system into action when we believe there is threat or danger even if there isn't.

For example, you may yell at your mum for bugging you about taking your driving test when you don't feel ready (fight). Or you may call a parent to pick you up early from a new activity because you don't feel comfortable around unfamiliar people (flight). Or, you may feel as though your mind goes blank when the teacher asks you a question (freeze).

# Turning Down The Volume On Anxiety

**The bad news:** There is nothing you can do that will instantly get rid of all of your anxiety.

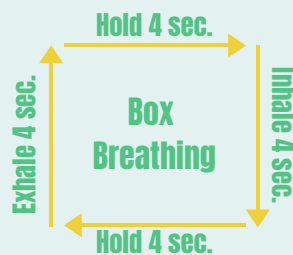
**The good news:** There are powerful tools you can use to dial down the volume of your anxiety.

## Box Breathing.

Box breathing, also known as Navy SEAL breathing technique, or tactical breathing, it's a simple and effective way to help regain calm and control of your thoughts when under stress.

Here's how:

1. Inhale for 4 seconds
2. Hold your lungs full for 4 seconds
3. Exhale for 4 seconds
4. Hold your lungs empty for 4 seconds



## Guided Meditation.

Guided meditation has been found to reduce stress, help you think more clearly, fall asleep more quickly, and strengthen the connection between the right and left hemispheres of the brain. In guided meditation, you don't need to know how to meditate, you just need to listen and let your subconscious take over.

Click [here](#) to go to the YouTube channel "Great Meditation" for a large selection of guided meditations and find the one that will best fit your needs.



## Tense and Release.

When we are holding onto worries and stress, it can cause muscle tension, headaches, stomach aches, and exhaustion. This exercise involves tensing and then relaxing all of the muscles in your body, one at a time.

How to Do it:

**Step 1: Tense** – Focusing on one muscle group at a time (for example, your left hand), squeeze those muscles (e.g., make a fist) until you feel warmth and some pressure (about 5 seconds).

**Step 2: Release**– Then, let the muscles become loose and limp as the tension flows out (about 10 seconds). Repeat these steps with various muscle groups.

**Quick Tense & Relax!** After you have had some time to practice the full version of this exercise, introduce the quick tense and relax strategy. This approach involves tensing all the muscle groups at the same time (for 5 seconds) and then relaxing them all (for 10 seconds).

Click [here](#) for an easy to follow tension release exercise on the Kids Help Phone website.



## Three Senses.

A simple mindfulness exercise involves simply noticing what you are experiencing right now through three senses – sound, sight, touch. Take a few slow breaths and ask yourself the following:

What are three things I can see? (e.g., the table, a picture on the wall, your cup)

What are three things I can hear? (e.g., clock on the wall, car going by, your breath)

What are three things I can feel? (e.g., the chair under you, the floor under your feet, the cold table)



# Anxious Thinking

*Anxious thoughts are not facts. They're just guesses. And guesses can be wrong. This means that you do not have to believe everything you think. It's also important to understand that anxious people often fall into what we call "thinking errors". These are unhelpful patterns of thinking that fuel anxiety.*

## Automatic Thoughts or Self-Talk.

Our minds are constantly thinking about all sorts of things – annoying siblings, funny memories, homework deadlines, etc. There's a lot going on in there, like a machine with a switch that is always turned on. This constant background stream of thoughts is called your automatic thoughts or self-talk.

It's important to be aware of what you think because what you think affects how you feel.

Does your self-talk cheer you on like a buddy or tear you down, like a bully?



## Think Back.

Think back to anxiety-provoking situations you've faced in the past and try to identify what you were thinking. For example, you might remember a time when you had to do a presentation in class or maybe think about the last time you had to try in new activity in gym class. If they can't remember, what you were thinking, try taking a to guess.



## Thoughts Are Not Facts.

Not all of our thoughts are facts – they're often just guesses that can be wrong. For example, if a friend doesn't text us back, we might think they are mad at us and as a result we feel worried or annoyed. But we might find out later that they were grounded off their phone. So what we thought wasn't actually true, but it definitely affected how we felt. Sometimes we're not even aware of our thoughts, but they're silently rolling around in our mind affecting how we feel. In order to better manage anxiety, it's important to start noticing what you think.



## Catching Your Anxious Thoughts.

Now that you know a little bit more about self-talk, it's time to start identify your own thoughts or "pop up" messages. After all, it will be a lot easier for you to become a more balanced thinker later on, if you're able to catch your anxious thoughts in the first place.

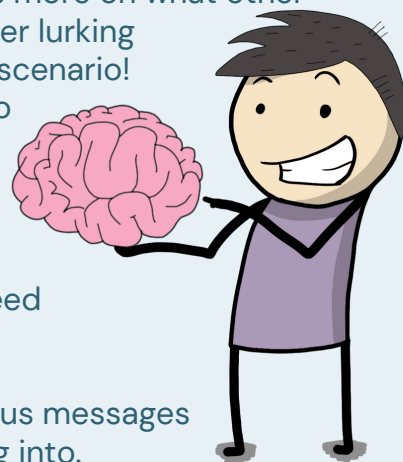
## Thinking Traps.

Certain types or patterns of thoughts tend to trap us in anxiety. These are called Thinking Traps. Some people have lots of anxious thoughts about the future. Some focus more on what other people are thinking. Some think about wanting to stay safe and see danger lurking around every corner. Others seem to always imagine the worst possible scenario! Whatever thinking traps you tend to fall into, the first important step is to recognize your personal traps. Below is a list of common thinking traps.

After going through the list, pick one thinking trap (e.g. mind-reading) and try and notice every time you get caught in that thinking trap (e.g., "I know she doesn't like me"). Then, ask yourself the question you need to avoid that trap (e.g., "What other explanations or possibilities exist?").

Do that for a week or so, and then pick another thinking trap to focus on.

In addition, whenever you are feeling anxious stop to recognize the anxious messages you're getting and try to figure out what thinking trap you might be falling into.




# Thinking Traps

1

HOW DO THE POSITIVES OUTWEIGH THE NEGATIVES IN THIS INSTANCE?

## MENTAL FILTERING



THE TENDENCY TO FOCUS ON NEGATIVE EVENTS WHILE NEGLECTING THE POSITIVES.

## Mental Filtering.

Focusing only on the negative without seeing any of the positive or what is going well.

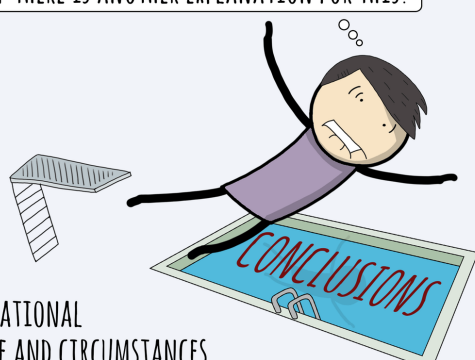
To avoid this thinking trap get into the habit of continually looking for the good within every situation.

*Example: Thinking about the one person you didn't have a smooth conversation with, rather than the three people you had great conversations with.*

2

WHAT IF THERE IS ANOTHER EXPLANATION FOR THIS?

## JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS



THE TENDENCY TO MAKE IRRATIONAL ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT PEOPLE AND CIRCUMSTANCES.

## Jumping to Conclusions.

Making irrational guesses about people and situations by either:


- 1) **Fortune Telling**– Assuming that something will happen in the future.
- 2) **Mind Reading**– Assuming that you know what others are thinking (and believing it's negative).

Usually these guesses are not based on facts or concrete evidence, but rather based on personal feelings and opinions. To avoid this trap question whether other explanations or possibilities exist.

3

WHO OR WHAT ELSE COULD HAVE PLAYED A PART IN THIS?

## PERSONALIZATION



THE TENDENCY TO TAKE THE BLAME FOR ABSOLUTELY EVERYTHING THAT GOES WRONG IN YOUR LIFE.

## Personalization.

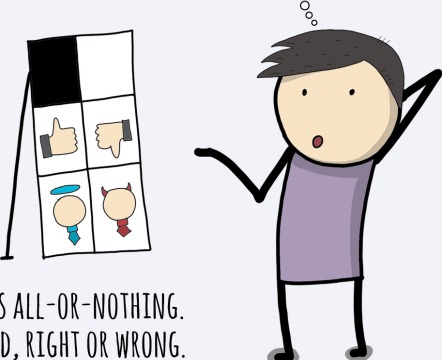
Consistently taking the blame for absolutely everything that goes wrong around us and believing that everything others do or say is a direct, personal reaction to us. This leads to feeling hurt easily or feeling unnecessarily guilty. To avoid this trap, question what part you played in the outcome and how you might not be entirely to blame.

*Example: Assuming that you're to blame whenever someone is in a bad mood.*

4

HOW MANY DIFFERENT WAYS COULD OTHER PEOPLE INTERPRET THIS?

## BLACK AND WHITE THINKING



THE TENDENCY TO SEE THINGS AS ALL-OR-NOTHING. THINGS ARE EITHER GOOD OR BAD, RIGHT OR WRONG.

## Black and White Thinking.

Seeing things as all-or-nothing. Things are either good or bad, right or wrong. In other words, we only see one extreme or another — there is no middle ground, no shades of gray. This is an unhelpful because it means that we never truly see circumstances in an unbiased and neutral way. To avoid this trap, challenge yourself to think about other viewpoints and interpretations of the situation.



WHAT IF THINGS AREN'T AS  
BAD AS I MAKE THEM OUT TO BE?

5

## CATASTROPHIZING

THE TENDENCY TO BLOW CIRCUMSTANCES  
OUT OF PROPORTION BY MAKING PROBLEMS LARGER THAN LIFE.

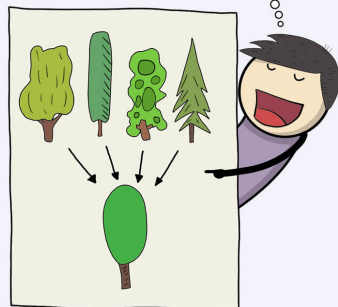


WHAT EVIDENCE SUGGESTS THAT THINGS COULD NOW BE DIFFERENT?

6

## OVERGENERALIZING

THE TENDENCY TO MAKE BROAD  
GENERALIZATIONS BASED UPON A SINGLE EVENT AND MINIMAL EVIDENCE.

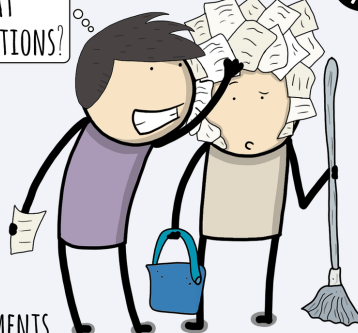


WHERE'S THE EVIDENCE THAT  
THIS IS TRUE IN ALL SITUATIONS?

7

## LABELING

THE TENDENCY TO MAKE GLOBAL STATEMENTS  
ABOUT YOURSELF OR OTHERS BASED UPON SITUATION SPECIFIC BEHAVIOR.



MUST THINGS BE THIS WAY?  
IS THERE ANOTHER WAY TO DO THIS?

8

## SHOULDING AND MUSTING

THE TENDENCY TO MAKE  
UNREALISTIC AND UNREASONABLE DEMANDS ON YOURSELF OR OTHERS.



### Catastrophizing.

Imagining the worst-case scenario, no matter how unlikely in reality. We always make problems larger than life, which of course makes them very difficult to overcome. To avoid this trap, question whether things are truly as bad as you make them out to be.

### Overgeneralizing.

Making sweeping judgments about ourselves (or others) based on only one or two experiences. These thoughts typically contain the words "always" and "never." The problem: you can never be summed up in one word or base your value as a person on only one single experience! To avoid this trap, question whether evidence exists that suggests things could be different.

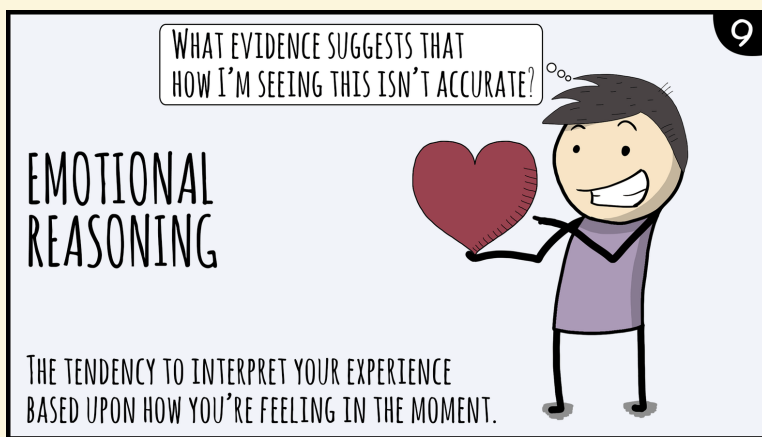
### Labeling.

Taking one characteristic of a person or one behavior in a specific situation and applying it to the whole person. To avoid this trap, challenge yourself to find the evidence that disproves the label you're making.

*For example: Because I failed a test, I am a failure. Because she is often late, she is irresponsible. If someone responded once in a harsh tone, he is a jerk*

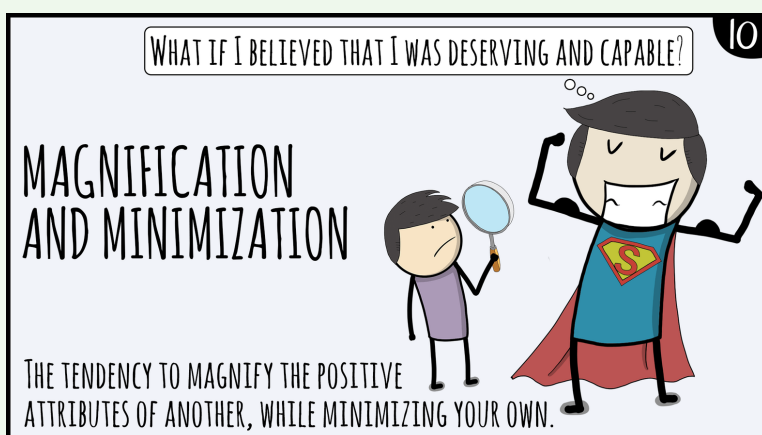
### Mental Filtering.

Make unrealistic and unfair demands on ourselves, and on others. You might for instance say, "I must... I should... You must... You should...". This puts pressure on you, and on other people to meet your high personal standards. This sets people up for failure. To avoid this trap, question whether things must be done a certain way. Possibly there is another way that you hadn't yet considered.



## Emotional Reasoning.

Interpreting our experience of reality based upon how we are feeling in the moment. As a result, how we feel about something shapes how we view and interpret the situation we find ourselves in. For example, let's say you wake up feeling anxious, you might be more likely to interpret the situations you encounter as unsafe. To avoid this trap, question whether your emotional state-of-mind is preventing you from seeing things clearly.



## Magnification and Minimization.

magnify the positive attributes of another person, while minimizing our own positive attributes. You talk-down all your positive attributes and accomplishments in order to lower people's expectations. In other words, you are effectively devaluing yourself, while at the same time putting the other person on a pedestal. To avoid this trap, challenge yourself to find reasons why you are deserving and capable.

## Challenge Worries Head on

When a worry thought comes up, you use some of these questions to evaluate the fear message:

- Has this ever happened before? If so, what happened and how did I cope?
- What would a friend say to me?
- What would I say to a friend?
- What would (insert name of someone you to) say?
- What is the worst thing that would happen? How would I handle it?
- What is the best thing that can happen?
- Think of 5 possibilities. Which is most probable (likely)?

*Until now, you may have believed all your anxious thoughts or messages. It's time to start challenging these thoughts rather than accepting them as facts. The previous exercises are designed to help you manage symptoms of anxiety, evaluate your worry thoughts, and practice talking back to anxiety. You may find some of these activities will be more helpful than others. Read them over and experiment with them, to see which ones will be most helpful for you. You may find there are one or two that work the best, so stick to those. This package is just a small example of the many ways to cope with anxiety, for more information and to access a complete anxiety program at no cost please visit*

[maps.anxietycanada.com/](https://maps.anxietycanada.com/)