



# **Panic Stations**

## **Module 8**

### **Core beliefs**

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## Core Beliefs

By now you are probably becoming used to the process of challenging your thinking in a range of situations. You know how to identify the thoughts that are causing you distress and how to challenge them and replace them with more balanced thoughts. However, you might notice that there are times when it is harder to believe the new balanced thought and the old unhelpful thoughts seem to be very powerful. You might notice that this happens in certain kinds of situations.

A possible explanation for this 'difficulty in letting go' of an unhelpful thought is that there may be a strong core belief at the root of that unhelpful thought. The aim of this InfoPax is to give you some information about underlying unhelpful core beliefs and what strategies might help you to challenge them.

Core beliefs are the very essence of how we see ourselves, other people, the world, and the future. Sometimes, these core beliefs become 'activated' in certain situations. These core beliefs might specifically be about the panic symptoms, but they can also be related to a person's self-concept, or their family, or any part of their lives that is important to them. Here's an example:

John is generally able to challenge his unhelpful thinking about his physical sensations but he has noticed that he has great difficulty challenging his thinking when he is with his family. He even experiences symptoms of panic when he just *thinks about* these situations. Even after working through his thought diary, he has a tendency to believe the negative statements and continue to feel bad. In these situations, he has recognised that he is very worried about his children's impression about him. In fact, when he really looks hard at his thinking, he can see that often the underlying self-statement is, "I must be a good father and always be strong for mu children" and "I am weak and a bad father".

Core beliefs, such as the one from the above example, develop over time, usually from childhood and through the experience of significant life events or particular life circumstances. Core beliefs are strongly-held, rigid, and inflexible beliefs that are maintained by the tendency to focus on information that supports the belief and ignoring evidence that contradicts it. For example, when John is with his children, he focuses intensely on his internal sensations, monitoring every change to try to avoid increasing his physical symptoms. Even neutral sensations are often interpreted as negative. Over the years, this narrow focus gives strength to the belief and John no longer thinks to question it. It is just totally and absolutely accepted. It is not surprising, then, that these types of beliefs are the hardest to shake.

### IDENTIFYING THEMES FROM THOUGHT DIARIES

So, how can you start identifying your core beliefs? The first step is to look over your Thought Diaries to see if your 'hot' thoughts have any common themes. You might notice that there are certain patterns to your thoughts – similar themes that occur in the B columns. Look closely at these to identify the patterns. You may become aware of one or two common themes found in the things you say about yourself and other people. The columns below might help you to find common types of themes.

About myself...	About the world...	About the future...	Other themes..
Eg "I'm out of control"	Eg "The world is a dangerous place"	Eg "I'm going to go crazy"	

**IDENTIFYING A CORE BELIEF**

The process of identifying a schema is not a great deal different from what you have already been doing. Essentially, the idea is to extend the B column out to reveal the bottom-line of what you might be thinking. This is illustrated using an example from John’s thought diary below:

*Thought Diary (example)*

<b>A Activating Event</b>	<b>B Beliefs</b>
<p>This may be either: An actual event or a situation, a thought, a mental picture or recollection.</p>	<p>I. List all statements that link A to C. Ask yourself: “What was I thinking?” “What was I saying to myself?” “What was going through my head at the time?”</p>
<p><i>Playing with my children in the park and notice my heart beating faster</i></p>	<p><i>NO - this can't happen here!</i></p> <p><u>“because...”</u> <i>I’ll lose control and go crazy right in front of my kids</i></p>
<b>C Consequences</b>	<p><u>“What does that mean?”</u> <i>They’ll think I’m weak</i></p>
<p>I. Write down words describing how you feel. Rate the intensity of those feelings and underline the one that is most associated with the activating event.</p>	<p><u>“What does that mean?”</u> <i>That I’m not a good father</i></p>
<p><u><i>Panicky (80)</i></u></p>	<p><u>“What does that say about me?”</u> <i>“I’m weak and pathetic as a father” (core belief)</i></p>
<p><i>Worried</i></p>	

As you can see it takes a bit of work to get down to the actual core of what you believe. Use questions similar to the Thought Discovery Questions discussed in Module 4, such as:

- “If that’s true, what does that mean?”
- “What’s bad about that?”
- “What does that say about me?”

This process is like sifting through the layers of self-talk to get at what is at the bottom layer. Now, you are ready to challenge your core beliefs. Even though these beliefs are strongly held, it is important that they are challenged, just like any unhelpful thoughts. Once you have fully identified what you are telling yourself, you can begin to see if your core beliefs hold up against all that you have experienced. This process of challenging your core beliefs may not be an easy one. If you find the process too difficult or distressing, do consider seeing a mental health professional and discussing this with them.

*Turn to the next page for a discussion on how to challenge your core beliefs.*

## CHALLENGING YOUR CORE BELIEFS

To evaluate and challenge your core beliefs, ask yourself “What experiences do I have that show that this belief is not completely true all the time?” Use the space below to list as many experiences, and be as specific, as possible. Remember to write down everything even when you’re not sure if they are relevant.

**Core belief to be challenged**

**Experiences that show that this belief is not COMPLETELY true ALL the time:**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_
10. \_\_\_\_\_

When you have considered all the experiences you have written down, develop an alternative, balanced core belief. Remember that these experiences show that your unhelpful core belief is not completely true all the time. What would be an appropriate balanced and helpful core belief? Write this down.

**Balanced core belief:**

In the example of John, some of the experiences that go against his core belief (“I’m weak and pathetic as a father”) might be:

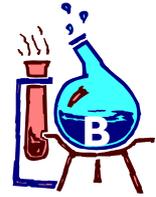
1. My daughter has made me a card saying that she thinks that I’m the best dad in the world
2. I help the kids with their homework and help out with my son’s soccer team. I’ve received a gift from him and his team mates to say thank you for helping out.
3. The kids have been with me when I’ve had a panic attack and afterwards they came up and gave me a hug and said how much they loved me

John’s balanced core belief might be: “Just because I get anxious, it doesn’t mean I that I’m a weak and pathetic father. I do a lot for my kids and they often show how much they love and appreciate me.”

**BEHAVIOURAL EXPERIMENTS**

You could also try doing a behavioural experiment to challenge those hard-to-budge unhelpful core beliefs. The purpose of doing an experiment is to find out how true your core beliefs are. Here's how you could conduct an experiment.

1. Write down the core belief you want to test
2. Think of a few tasks you could do to test your core belief
3. Write down what you would expect would happen if your core belief were true.
4. Carry out the tasks
5. Record what actually happened when you carried out the tasks
6. Compare the actual results with your prediction and write down what you might have learned from the experiment. Then, write down a new balanced belief that fits with your conclusion.



Let's use the example of John to illustrate this for you. Use the blank behavioural experiment record provided below, and a Core Beliefs Worksheet on the next page, to challenge your unhelpful core beliefs.

<b>Core belief to be tested:</b> <i>"I'm weak and pathetic as a father"</i>		
<b>Tasks:</b> <i>* Go to my son's soccer training 3 times this week and help out as the coach has asked me before</i>  <i>* Take my daughter shopping for shoes</i>	<b>Prediction:</b> <i>* I will have a panic attack and be so anxious I'll have to leave and he'll be angry with me</i>  <i>* I'll get anxious and she'll ask to go home because I'm not helping</i>	<b>What actually happened:</b> <i>* I was anxious at one session, but waited a while and then helped with training. My son thanked me for coming along.</i>  <i>* I had a good time and my daughter asked if I could help her shop for school materials</i>
<b>Conclusion:</b> <i>From this experiment I realised that I am not a weak and pathetic father. I can still do things with my kids to help them and enjoy time with them</i>		
<b>Balanced core belief:</b> <i>Just because I get anxious, it doesn't mean I that I'm a weak and pathetic father. I do a lot for my kids and they show how much they love and appreciate me</i>		

<b>Core belief to be tested:</b>		
<b>Tasks:</b>	<b>Prediction:</b>	<b>What actually happened:</b>
<b>Conclusion:</b>		
<b>Balanced core belief:</b>		

## **Core Beliefs Worksheet**

**Core belief to be challenged**

**Experiences that show that this belief is not COMPLETELY true ALL the time:**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_
10. \_\_\_\_\_

**Balanced core belief:**

**Core belief to be tested:**

**Tasks:**

**Prediction:**

**What actually happened:**

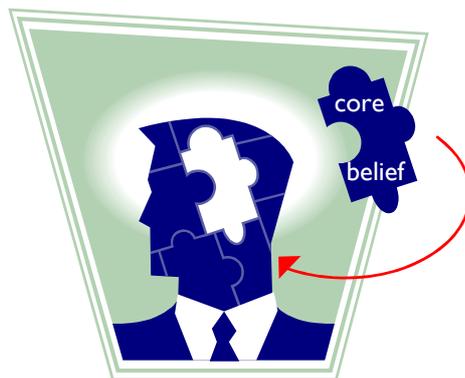
**Conclusion:**

**Balanced core belief:**

## Following Through

You might find it useful to write your balanced core beliefs onto cards that you can carry around with you as a reminder when this type of thinking is triggered. Remember, unhelpful core beliefs are approached just the same as any other type of unhelpful thinking – they just take some extra work on your part. Once you've gathered evidence against your unhelpful core beliefs, conducted a behavioural experiment to test them, and have developed balanced core beliefs, follow through on them.

Balanced core beliefs require careful nurturing and 'tender loving care.' Affirm yourself by using positive self-statements, remind yourself of all the evidence against the unhelpful core belief. Also, **act against** your unhelpful core belief. If you have previously avoided doing certain things because of your unhelpful core belief, now is the time to act against it, and stop avoiding those things. Ask yourself, "If I really believed my balanced belief, what are the things I would do?" Then, go out and do them. The more you do these things, the more you will come to believe your balanced beliefs. Over time, these new core beliefs will be integrated into your belief system.



Note: In your own reading about core beliefs, you might come across the term 'self-schemas.' This term and core beliefs mean the same thing.

## **Module Summary**

- Sometimes, it may be difficult to believe balanced thoughts in certain situations because there may be a strong core belief operating in that particular situation
- Core beliefs are the very essence of how we see ourselves, other people, the world, and the future. They are strongly-held, rigid, and inflexible beliefs that are maintained by the tendency to focus on information that supports the belief and ignoring evidence that contradicts it. Such beliefs are often unquestioned – they are just totally and absolutely accepted
- Core beliefs can be identified by looking over your thought diaries to see if your ‘hot’ thoughts have any common themes
- You can get to the core of what you believe by asking yourself “What does that mean?” after an unhelpful thought or a ‘hot’ thought
- To evaluate and challenge your unhelpful core beliefs, ask yourself, “What experiences do I have that show that this belief is not completely true all the time?”
- Core beliefs can also be challenged by conducting a behavioural experiment, which aims to find how true your core beliefs really are
- Plan a few tasks to test your belief, write down what you expect will happen, carry out the tasks, record what actually happened and compare this with your prediction
- Develop an alternative, balanced core belief to replace the unhelpful core belief
- Remind yourself of your balanced core belief by writing it on a card and carry it around with you and affirm yourself with positive self-statements
- Follow through on your balanced core belief by putting it into action

In the next module we will start to look at how to cope specifically with physical sensations.

**Coming Up...**

## About This Module

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### Some of the material in this module was taken from

Nathan, P.R., Rees, C.S., Lim, L., & Smith, L.M. (2001). *Mood Management – Anxiety: A Cognitive Behavioural Treatment Programme for Individual Therapy*. Perth: Rioby Publishing.

### BACKGROUND

The concepts and strategies in this module have been developed from evidence based psychological practice, primarily Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy (CBT). CBT for panic disorder is a type of psychotherapy that is based on the theory that panic disorder 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 panic disorder, and that targeting cognitions and behaviours in therapy can help many people to overcome panic disorder. Examples of this evidence have been reported in the following:

Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists Clinical Practice Guidelines Team for Panic Disorder and Agoraphobia. (2003). Australian and New Zealand clinical practice guidelines for the treatment of panic disorder and agoraphobia. *Aust N Z J Psychiatry*, 37(6), 641-56.

### REFERENCES

These are some of the professional references used to create this module.

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

Craske, M.G., & Barlow, D.H. (2001). Panic disorder and agoraphobia. In D.H. Barlow (Ed.), *Clinical Handbook Of Psychological Disorders, Third Edition*. New York: Guilford Press.

### FURTHER READING

There have been many other information resources written for people with panic attacks and panic disorder.

Barlow, D. H., & Craske, M. G. (2000). *Mastery of your anxiety and panic (3rd edition)*. San Antonio, TX: The Psychological Corporation. (ISBN: 0127850783)

Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists. (2003). *Panic Disorder and Agoraphobia: Treatment Guide for Consumers and Carers*. Available: <http://www.ranzcp.org/publicarea/cpg.asp> (click on "Panic Disorder and Agoraphobia"). Accessed Feb. 2004.

Zuercher-White, E. (1998). *An End To Panic: Breakthrough Techniques For Overcoming Panic Disorder (2nd Edition)*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications. (ISBN: 1567313760)

### "PANIC STATIONS"

We would like to thank Uta Juniper for the title of the InfoPax that this module forms part of:

Nathan, P., Correia, H., & Lim, L. (2004). *Panic Stations! Coping with Panic Attacks*. Perth: Centre for Clinical Interventions.

**ISBN: 0-9751985-8-0 Created: June, 2004.**