Module 1

Overview of Generalised Anxiety

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Introduction

“What? Me worry?” Well, everybody experiences general feelings of nervousness or a sense of being worried about something. In fact, a study has shown that almost 2 in every 5 people worry at least once everyday. For some people though, worrying and feeling anxious is chronic and can seem to take over. Chronic worrying is a central feature of generalised anxiety disorder, which can affect any kind of person at any stage of their life. It is estimated that about 1 in every 20 people experience significant generalised anxiety at some point in their lives. So remember, you are not alone.

The aim of this module is to provide you with some general information about anxiety and generalised anxiety disorder, to describe the types of symptoms common to generalised anxiety, and to discuss what causes generalised anxiety.

Understanding Anxiety

Let’s begin this section by talking about what we mean by anxiety…

Feeling afraid is very much a part of the experience of being human. Fear is actually a survival instinct when it occurs in response to a realistically dangerous situation. Think about how you might react if a dangerous animal approached you. Most likely you would respond with fear. In fact, it is often helpful to respond with fear at times like this because when we become afraid, our body goes through a whole series of changes that ultimately serve to protect us. This fear response would probably lead us to either run for our lives or become sufficiently ‘pumped up’ to physically defend ourselves. As you can see from this example, the experience of fear is part of the process of survival.

Anxiety can also be experienced in less threatening situations. For example, athletes before a big game or race will feel some degree of anxiety. This is a good thing, as some anxiety in this situation will pump them up and get them ready to compete.

Anxiety only becomes a problem when it is out of proportion to the situation, that is, when it often occurs in situations where there is no actual threat or danger. Some anxiety might be anticipated in certain situations (e.g., a job interview, making a sales pitch), but if the anxiety is so extreme that it stops you from doing what needs to be done, then it becomes a problem. When anxiety occurs at this extreme level, it interferes with your quality of life.

Different Types of Anxiety

Anxiety is an emotion that can be experienced in different ways, and you may find it helpful to be able to differentiate between different levels of anxiety…

Fear describes a very intense type of anxiety and tends to be a reaction to an immediate and specific situation. Sometimes this fear occurs in social situations or at the thought of an up and coming social event. We would call this type of fear “social anxiety”. Other people experience intense fear in response to very specific things, for example spiders, heights, water. These fears are known as phobias. While others experience fear that feels like “sheer terror” that come out of the blue. These are known as panic attacks.

This information package addresses a level of anxiety that is described as generalised anxiety or constant nervousness. This type of anxiety has similar physical and emotional characteristics to those of fear, but may be experienced at a different level of intensity. Instead of going straight to sheer terror, this anxiety builds up more gradually, has a high level of tension and gives you little peace of mind. The anxiety is often long-lasting and may appear when actually experiencing a negative event, or anticipating a future event.
Understanding Generalised Anxiety

While worrying and feeling nervous is something that all human beings experience, as with many things in life, too much of something may not be good for you. Normal anxiety can become a problem when it is:

- excessive,
- feels uncontrollable,
- is experienced as intrusive in your life,
- is persistent – seeming to always be around,
- and causes you significant distress, or impairs your ability to go about your day-to-day life.

This is when normal anxiety becomes generalised anxiety disorder.

Some common things people have told us they experience when they have generalised anxiety are:

- **Chronic worries** running through their head. They occur over and over again like a broken record
- **Uncontrollable anxiety.** Having a strong desire to be in control of their emotions, yet feeling as if the anxiety and worry has taken control over them and there is nothing they can do to stop it
- **Intrusive thoughts.** No matter how much they try not to worry, not to think about things that make them nervous, these unwanted thoughts keep popping back into their mind
- **Hating uncertainty.** Wanting to know what is going to happen in the future and finding the experience of 'not knowing' very difficult indeed
- **Feeling restless,** keyed up, on edge and unable to relax
- **Being physically tense.** Feeling nervy or uptight, and having tightness or stiffness in the muscles of their body
- **Sleep disturbance.** Having trouble falling asleep, maintaining sleep, or experiencing unsettled sleep, because their mind is constantly ticking over with worry
- **Problems concentrating** and focusing on a task
- **Procrastinating** about getting things done. Putting things off because it all feels too much and too overwhelming
- **Avoiding** situations in which they worry or get anxious and nervous.

Take a moment to write down what it is that you experience as part of your generalised anxiety.

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One of the important features of generalised anxiety is that the worry and anxiety is spread across a number of different areas such as health, work, interpersonal relationships, finances, and so on. This makes it different from other anxiety problems, such as social anxiety or phobias, where nervousness and worrying are more specific to particular situations.
Think about what areas of your life you tend to worry about? (Make a list of the different things you worry about).

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You may think that generalised anxiety is not as serious as other problems, such as social anxiety, phobias or panic, where the anxiety may appear to be more intense. However, generalised anxiety, nervousness, or worrying can significantly interfere in a person’s life because it is long-term and chronic. In this way, it can be likened to having a condition like asthma or diabetes.

Unfortunately, people who have problems with generalised anxiety often do not seek treatment, as they might feel embarrassed to be seen as someone who cannot control their nerves. They may also believe that because they “have always been like this”, they just have to live with it. Having these views may mean that they don’t seek help for their worrying and nervousness, but it is important to remember that there are ways to break the worry habit.

It is also not uncommon for people experiencing generalised anxiety to also experience other types of anxiety disorders, or to experience mood disorders, such as depression, at the same time. Often when people do seek treatment it is for these other problems, rather than for their tendency to worry excessively.

Now that you know a bit more about generalised anxiety, take a moment to think about how serious your general anxiousness, nervousness, and worrying are to you. Tell us how serious the problem is by rating the two questions below. You will be asked to make these ratings again at the end of the “What? Me Worry!!?” information package, so you can see the impact the information contained in these modules has on your generalised anxiety.

**Overall, how distressing is your generalised anxiety?**
(Circle the number that best describes you)

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**Overall, how much of a problem is your generalised anxiety?**
(Circle the number that best describes you)

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What Causes Generalised Anxiety?

So, how does one become a chronic worrier? There’s no simple answer, of course, as everyone is different. However, there are some important factors that have been identified. These factors can generally be divided into biological and psychological causes.

Biological Factors
No single gene has been associated with generalised anxiety. Based on twin and family studies, it does seem that individuals may inherit a vulnerability to develop an anxiety disorder. These studies have reported a general vulnerability to develop an anxiety disorder, and interestingly, also a mood disorder. Notice that the research tells us that this is a general vulnerability, rather than a specific vulnerability for a specific type of disorder. In addition, it has been found that people born with a particular ‘anxious’ type of temperament, may be more likely to develop an anxiety disorder later in life.

Psychological Factors
However, it is important to remember that while our biology may make us vulnerable to developing an anxiety disorder, not all people with this vulnerability go on to develop problematic anxiety. A great deal depends on the lifestyle of that person, the types of life stressors they have encountered, and how they cope with such stressors.

Stressful, traumatic, and often uncontrollable life events may contribute to the development of generalised anxiety. When such events occur, some people may come to believe that life is dangerous and unpredictable, and that worrying about possible future negative events is a way of coping with the uncertainty of life. They may think that worrying helps them achieve a greater sense of certainty and control, by making them better prepared for anything.

Anxiety may also develop when the people around you give you information about what is threatening and how to cope with those threats. For example, a child may have seen a parent constantly worrying about current circumstances and potentially negative future events, and may learn to follow the parent’s behaviour. Alternatively, you may have been told that “Worrying is good and shows that you are a conscientious and prepared person”. These sorts of indirect and direct messages may increase your chances of developing generalised anxiety.

Finally, anxiety is made worse when one begins avoiding things they have some concern about. Avoidance will quickly make something that is initially a slight concern for a person, become a source of anxiety. If the people in your life (i.e., parents, siblings, peers, spouses/partners) support your avoidance of various things, this may make your anxiety worse in the long run. People usually support a person’s avoidance because they don’t want the person to feel any distress. However, experiencing a small amount of distress and learning how to solve or cope with the problem is likely to stop more severe anxiety in the long run.
Module Summary

- Anxiety and worrying are common experiences for most human beings
- Anxiety can be helpful to us and only becomes unhelpful when it is out of proportion to the situation
- There are different types of anxiety, such as intense fear, and less intense but longer-lasting anxiety like generalised anxiety or nervousness
- This information package focuses on generalised anxiety, addressing the worrying or nervous type of anxiety
- Problematic generalised anxiety is excessive worrying about a variety of things, is experienced as uncontrollable and intrusive, and causes great distress and difficulty for the individual
- The exact causes of generalised anxiety are unclear, but it is likely to be a combination of biological vulnerability and environmental influences that contribute to its development.

Coming up next …

In the next module you will learn more about worrying, such as, what triggers your worrying, why it is that you keep worrying, and how to effectively treat your worrying.
About The Modules

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


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 Well’s 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:


REFERENCES

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


“WHAT? ME WORRY!?!!”

This module forms part of:


We would like to thank Mandy Nathan, Psychologist, Oxfordshire, England, for the suggestion of a "worry puss" for the theme character of this Information Package