



# What? Me Worry!?!

## Module 2

### **Overview of Worrying**

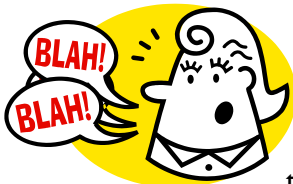
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## Introduction

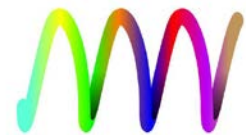
As we discussed in Module 1, worrying is a central feature of generalised anxiety disorder. The aim of this module is to provide an overview of what worrying is, what triggers worrying, what keeps it going, and most importantly, how to treat it effectively.

## Understanding Worrying



You can think of worrying as a **self-talk activity**, where we ‘talk to ourselves’ repetitively about possible future negative events that might happen, and of which we are afraid. We mentally discuss the event with ourselves over and over again and think about what would happen should the event occur. As such, worrying is a type of vigilance for threat, and an ‘attempt’ at mentally ‘solving problems’ that haven’t yet happened. We say ‘attempt’ because often a solution doesn’t arise, and people are left thinking they will not be able to cope should their worst fears happen. We say ‘solving problems’ because people often think that worrying is problem-solving, when in fact effective problem-solving is a very different type of activity (which you will see in Module 7).

So, worrying is essentially a type of repetitive negative thinking, where we get stuck, caught, locked or trapped in our negative thoughts about future bad things. This negative thinking has a circular, spiral or snowball-like quality to it, because the same negative stuff keeps getting rehashed over and over in our mind, and we have trouble disengaging from these repetitive negative thoughts. This thinking process fuels our anxious feelings and the topic we are worrying about seems to get bigger and bigger in our mind.



### “What If...” Worries

People with generalised anxiety are often having an internal conversation about things they fear might happen. In this way, worrying often starts as “What if...” questions like:

- “What if I can’t get to my appointment on time?”
- “What if I fail my exam?”
- “What if I can’t do the job?”
- “What if I can’t provide for my family?”
- “What if something happens to my child?”
- “What if my husband/wife/partner has an accident?”
- “What if I get anxious during my interview?”
- “What if my face turns red?”
- “What if I get sick?”

As you will have noticed, the above examples of worrisome thoughts are about external things (e.g., work, family, etc) or internal physical things (e.g., illness).

**What are the “What if...” questions you often ask yourself? (What external things or internal physical things do you tend to worry about?).**

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One “What if...” question will often play in your mind like a song stuck on repeat, and the words may sound something like this:

- “What if I lose my job?”
- “I won’t be able to support my family”
- “My family will be so disappointed in me”
- “They won’t be able to stand having me around”
- “They may leave me”
- “I’ll have no one”
- “I’ll have nothing”
- “I can’t lose my job”
- “But there are so many cut backs going on”
- “What if I am next?”

Can you see how this worry chain just takes you in circles, leading nowhere particularly productive?

**See if you can take an issue that you were once worried about (but is no longer a bother to you), and use it to write out one of your typical worry chains. What was the first “what if” thought that came to mind about this issue, and then what did you think next, and next and so on...**

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### Normal or Problem Worry

Research shows we all worry, and we all worry about the same sorts of things. It is how much time we spend worrying and our difficulty disengaging from worry, which determines whether our worry is problematic or not. While most people worry and think about negative things from time to time, for the most part these worrisome thoughts are short-lived, either giving way to a different thought topic popping into mind or being put to rest by positive problem-solving action. Worry only becomes unhelpful when it is very frequent and becomes difficult for us to control or disengage from. When this happens we feel trapped in our own negative thoughts.

## What Triggers Worrying?

Worrying can be triggered by various things. Some triggers may be more obvious and linked to external things, for example:

- Seeing a certain image (e.g., in the newspaper or on the T.V. news)
- Hearing certain information (e.g., on the radio or in a conversation)
- Being put in a certain situation (e.g., having to make decisions, perform a task, lead others)

Some triggers may be less obvious. These may be thoughts or images that seem to just pop into your head out of the blue. An initial “What if...” question that comes to mind for no apparent reason, can even be a trigger for worrying. For example, the thought “What if I left the iron on?” might pop into my head. If I then think “I probably didn’t” and decide not to worry about it, chances are I will forget about it, and the thought will slip my mind. However, if instead I start to ‘chase’ the thought further (e.g., “the ironing board might catch fire and that will spread to the whole house”; “the house might burn down and then I will lose everything!”), then the original “What if...” question has now triggered a worry episode.

**Write down any external images, information, and situations, or any internal images or “What if...” thoughts, that have triggered worrying for you.**

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## What Maintains Worrying?

People who describe themselves as chronic worriers are often disturbed that they seem to spend much of their waking hours worrying excessively about a number of different things. They do not understand why this mental activity continues. They often ask, “Why do I keep worrying?” Well, there are three things that keep our worrying going.

### **1) Unhelpful Beliefs About Worrying**

There are two types of beliefs which work to keep us stuck in the vicious cycle of worry. These are *positive* and *negative* beliefs about worrying itself.

#### **Positive Beliefs About Worrying**

Whilst worriers usually dislike the fact that they worry so much, they also often hold positive beliefs that worrying is beneficial and helpful. It is these positive beliefs about the usefulness of worrying that can get us worrying in the first place. Some positive beliefs may be:



- Worrying helps me find **solutions** to problems
- Worrying helps me **understand** problems
- Worrying **motivates** me to do things
- Worrying **prepares** me for the worst
- Worrying helps me **avoid** bad things
- Worrying **prevents** bad things
- Worrying is **doing** something
- Worrying shows I **care**

Because of these positive beliefs about worrying, when an issue we are concerned about pops into our mind, we will **pull** the negative thoughts closer, listen intently to them, and spend time doing a lot more negative thinking, because we believe this is a helpful thing to do.

**What positive beliefs do you hold about worrying? (What are the advantages of repetitively thinking about negative things?)**

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## Negative Beliefs About Worrying



In addition to the specific things worriers worry about, they may also **worry about the fact that they are worrying**. In this case, worriers are often concerned that worrying is “bad” and they hold negative beliefs about the activity of worrying. For example, they may believe that:

- Worrying is **dangerous**, and will cause either physical or mental harm (e.g., “If I keep worrying like this I will go crazy/have a breakdown/become ill”), and that
- Worrying is **uncontrollable**, and will take over and result in a loss of control (e.g., “I can’t control my worrying, and it will never stop”).

Holding these negative beliefs about worrying makes the process of worrying very distressing, creating even more concerns and hence keeping this thinking process going. Plus holding these beliefs makes us want to **push** the worrisome thoughts away, which as we will see in a moment, only makes the thoughts push back more strongly, and hence we end up worrying even more.

**What negative beliefs do you hold about worrying? (What worries-about-worrying do you have? What are the disadvantages of worrying?)**

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## 2) Unhelpful Attention

People who worry often have difficulty drawing their attention away from their bothersome thoughts to focus on the present task at hand, partly because they are unaware they are doing it and partly because they think it is helpful to think more about things. Focusing attention on the negative thoughts, plus trouble disengaging attention from these thoughts, keeps people stuck in their worry, and further fuels the belief that they are unable to control their worry.

## 3) Unhelpful Strategies

People who worry will often attempt unsuccessfully to stop their bothersome thoughts in a number of unhelpful ways, some of which are mental strategies and others are behavioural.

Mental strategies may include:

- suppressing worries (i.e., telling themselves to “stop worrying”);
- trying to reason with their worrisome thoughts (i.e., “the likelihood of these things happening is so small”);
- frantically distracting themselves (i.e., trying very hard to focus on something else); or
- thinking positively (i.e., “everything will be OK”).

Behavioural strategies may include:

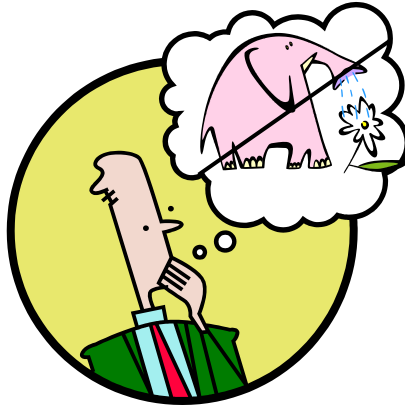
- excessive reassurance seeking from others to ease their concerns (e.g., constantly contacting a loved one to check they are ok or to discuss the things that worry them);
- excessive information seeking (e.g., using the internet to check everything they are worried about);
- excessive list making to stop worries;
- using drugs/alcohol/food to dull their worry; or

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- avoiding situations that trigger episodes of worry (e.g., passing up a new job project because they know all they will do is worry about it, or not watching the TV news because it is usually a source of worry).

Mental and behavioural thought-control strategies rarely work, as ultimately they are all forms of **thought suppression**. Research shows that trying to suppress a thought usually has the opposite effect of making that thought occur more, meaning that we worry more, which also in turn fuels the belief that our worry is uncontrollable.

For example, **try not to think of a pink elephant for the next 60 seconds and see how well you do.**



Instead of not thinking about pink elephants, chances are you have noticed pink elephants a plenty!

**In what ways (either mentally or behaviourally) do you try to stop your worries?**

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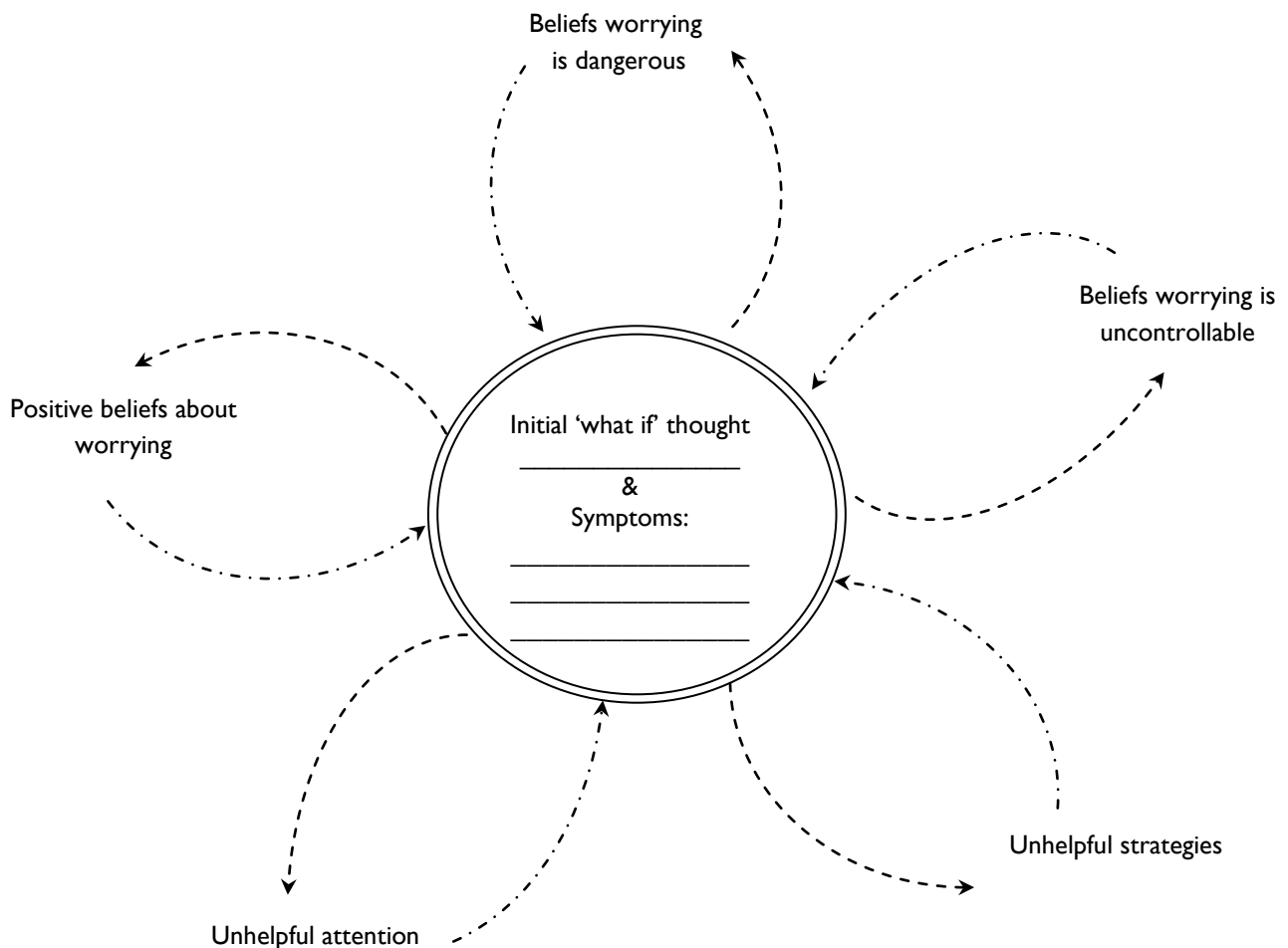
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Unfortunately, these negative and positive beliefs about worrying, how we tend to focus our attention on our thinking, and some of the things we do to try to stop worrying, can actually increase the amount of worrying we do. In the end we get caught in a vicious cycle of worry.

## The Vicious Cycle of Worry



Let's recap and put all the information we now know about worry together. You can use this worry 'flower' to summarise some of the responses you have written on the previous pages.

Regardless of whether your worry is triggered by something external or internal, an **initial 'what if' thought** will pop into to your mind, and likely be accompanied by some uncomfortable physical and emotional **symptoms** (e.g., tension, butterflies, anxious feelings, etc). So far this is all normal and happens to everyone. How much time we spend stuck on more "what if" thoughts and how intense our symptoms get, will be determined by the following things which can turn normal worry into more problematic and distressing worry...

- Your **positive beliefs about worrying** will mean that you respond to the initial "what if" thought with more worry and negative thinking because you believe it is a helpful thing to do. So you give the negative thoughts more time and attention, snowballing them into more worrisome thinking.
- As such, your attention gets locked in on those worrisome thoughts. Your **unhelpful attention** is either unaware that is caught in worry, or unable to shift to a more helpful focus, such as the present task at hand, which just fuels your preoccupation with your worries.
- Now, if you keep on worrying, your worries may start to focus more on worries-about-worrying and how uncontrollable and harmful your worrying is. This is because you also hold some **negative beliefs about worrying** being both **dangerous** and **uncontrollable**.
- And because you think worrying is bad and you hate not being in control of it, you then engage in **unhelpful strategies** to try to stop your worrying. But unfortunately by trying so hard to stop the worrying, it actually backfires and makes you worry even more.

## What Can Be Done About My Worrying?

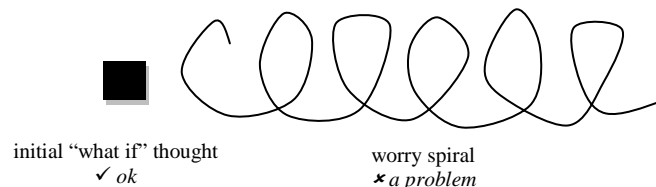
The vicious cycle of worry (or worry flower) demonstrates something that is very important to remember as you work through these modules.

***Our initial “what if” negative thoughts are not the problem.  
How we respond to our negative thoughts is the problem.***

Our initial “what if” negative thought(s) are not the problem because:

- 1) **Negative thoughts are completely normal.** Research shows we all have the same negative thoughts pop up. From an evolutionary perspective our mind is meant to find bad and negative things in our environment. Our mind was built to be a ‘threat detector’, and this is why we survived and thrived as a species. So when our mind brings up negative thoughts, it is just doing what it was built to do.
- 2) **Our minds are very busy.** Research shows we have 4000 thoughts a day. It makes sense that some of those will be negative. We simply can’t control what pops into our busy mind.
- 3) **Many of us will be facing some real problems in our lives.** It is reasonable that these problems will be on our mind.

So those initial negative “what if” thoughts that pop into our mind are perfectly *ok*. They are not a problem and not something we can control. They only become *a problem* when we respond to them in a way that gives the thoughts lots of importance, time, energy, and attention, and hence they snowball or spiral into more negative thoughts that don’t go anywhere particularly productive.



We tend to respond to our negative thoughts in one of two ways. We either **pull** the thoughts closer and listen to them intently (because of our positive beliefs about worrying), which obviously leads to more worrying. Or we **push** them away and try to get rid of them (because of our negative beliefs about worrying), which also inadvertently leads to more worrying.

So this tendency to respond to our worrisome thoughts by either pulling them close or pushing them away is the real problem, getting us stuck in our thinking, and creating more worry.

With this in mind, it then makes sense that to overcome worrying and generalised anxiety, you need to do three things: 1) address your positive and negative beliefs about worrying; 2) focus your attention on the present rather than on your worrisome thoughts; and 3) develop more helpful ways of actively dealing with worrisome thoughts. The modules within this information package will address these in the following order.





Module 3	Negative Beliefs About Worrying: “Worrying Is Uncontrollable”
Module 4	Attention Training
Module 5	Negative Beliefs About Worrying: “Worrying Is Dangerous”
Module 6	Positive Beliefs About Worrying
Module 7	Problem Solving
Module 8	Helpful Thinking
Module 9	Accepting Uncertainty
Module 10	Self-Management

Each module will ‘pluck a petal’ from our worry flower. You will notice that the next four modules (3-6) will target your negative and positive beliefs about worrying, and help retrain your attentional focus to the present moment. Module 7 & 8 will teach you more helpful strategies for dealing with worries. Module 9 will teach you how to become more tolerant and accepting of uncertainty. Although this was not a specific petal in our worry flower, your worries will often relate to this issue, and hence it may be helpful to address. Finally, Module 10 will put all the helpful strategies you learn throughout this information package together in a self-management plan, which will help you maintain and improve on the gains you make.

It is important to realise that the approach taken throughout these modules is that you are not going to look at each individual worry you have. Generally, we have a lot of negative thoughts on our mind, so if we took that approach, it would take you a very long time to overcome your problems with worry. Also, what can tend to happen with chronic worriers is as soon as they resolve one worry, another one just takes its place. So you will not be focusing on the content of your worries in these modules.

Instead these modules will teach you more about the worry process, about your pattern of getting mentally stuck on negative thoughts and your trouble disengaging from these thoughts. This is the problem. The problem is not what you worry about, but the way your mind gets trapped in those worrisome thoughts. These modules will help you become aware of when you are worrying, challenge your beliefs about worrying that get you stuck, and learn how to respond differently so as not to get caught in worry.

The beliefs people hold about worrying are often what distinguishes someone with normal levels of worrying, from someone with more problematic generalised anxiety. Therefore, changing these beliefs is very important in overcoming your generalised anxiety.

It is also important to remember that your worries and other bothersome thoughts will still occur from time to time as these are completely normal. The goal of these modules is to help you respond in a more helpful way when these negative thoughts arise, so as not to get stuck in worry.

### **Additional points to consider...**

It is common for people using self-help materials, like this information package, to jump between sections and complete things in whatever order they like. However, the series of modules in this information package have been specifically designed to be completed in the order they appear. **It is recommended that you finish the modules in the order they appear in this information package, finishing each module before moving on to the next one in the series.** Doing this will maximise the benefits you may receive from completing the “What? Me Worry!?!” information package.

It is important for you to know that the techniques you will learn throughout the modules in this information package come from a type of treatment commonly called ‘**metacognitive therapy**’. This type of psychological treatment has been evaluated scientifically and shown to be effective in treating a number of psychological problems, including problematic generalised anxiety. Metacognitive therapy is aimed at changing your beliefs about thinking itself (i.e., metacognition), as well as your style of behaving

and the things you do. This will bring about a change in how you feel and decrease your worrying and generalised anxiety.

Finally, worrying is repetitive negative thinking about the **future**. But we can also repetitively think in a negative way about the **past**. This is often called rumination, and the strategies we will cover throughout these modules will be equally applicable to this thinking style too, as the strategies are applicable to any repetitive negative thinking.

## Module Summary

- Worrying is a primary feature of generalised anxiety
- Worrying is repetitive negative thinking dwelling on possible negative occurrences that might happen in the future. Worrying often takes the form of “**What if...**” questions
- The triggers of worrying can be external (images, thoughts, situations) or internal (images, thoughts)
- Worrying keeps going because of:
  - **Positive beliefs about worrying** – solves, motivates, prevents, prepares, etc.
  - **Negative beliefs about worrying** –uncontrollable and dangerous
  - **Unhelpful attention** –being focused on the future rather than the present task at hand
  - **Unhelpful strategies** – suppression via various methods.
- Your initial “what if” negative thoughts are not the problem. How you respond to your negative thoughts, by either pulling them close (due to positive beliefs about worrying), or pushing them away (due to negative beliefs about worrying) is the problem.
- Suppressing or trying to stop worrisome thoughts in various ways doesn’t work and just leads to more worrying.
- The modules you will be completing to overcome your generalised anxiety will cover:
  - Negative Beliefs About Worrying (“Worrying Is Uncontrollable & Dangerous”)
  - Attention Training
  - Positive Beliefs About Worrying
  - Problem-Solving & Action
  - Helpful Thinking
  - Accepting Uncertainty
  - Self-Management



Coming up next ...

In the next module, you will learn how to change one of your negative beliefs about worrying – that “Worrying is uncontrollable”.

## About The Modules

### CONTRIBUTORS

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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.

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

Heimberg, R.G., Turk, C.L., & Mennin, D.S. (2004). *Generalized Anxiety Disorder: Advances in Research and Practice*. New York: Guilford Press.

Wells, A. (1997). *Cognitive Therapy of Anxiety Disorders: A Practice Manual and Conceptual Guide*. Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

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.

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

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