Stepping Out of Social Anxiety

Module 9

Strengthening New Core Beliefs

Introduction

In the previous module, we worked on discovering and challenging negative core beliefs, and developing more balanced, helpful beliefs. As you continue to work on challenging these beliefs, you may find that parts of the older core beliefs still ring true for you, while the more balanced core beliefs are still new and you might not believe in them as strongly. This is normal, as you are likely to pay more attention to things that confirm the old beliefs, and discount information that supports the new beliefs. This is a habit that your brain has been practising for a long time! You are also likely to act in ways that fit with the old beliefs, rather than acting against them.

Strengthening new beliefs will require repeated reminders of the new beliefs, and ongoing collection of evidence to support this new, more balanced, view of yourself or others. This means paying attention to information from past and present events, as well as looking out for appropriate evidence in the future. Another important means for strengthening our new beliefs is to act in ways that are consistent with the updated views about ourselves. In this Module, we will look at setting goals and taking action in various areas of our daily lives to follow through with our new core beliefs.

Strengthening New Beliefs through Action

The best way to build conviction in your new core beliefs is to live your life "as if" they are true, because changing our behaviour is the most powerful way to change our beliefs (behavioural experiments are a prime example of that). So if you start operating in a way that is consistent with your new positive core beliefs, you will strengthen them over time.

If you have previously avoided doing certain things because of your unhelpful core belief, now is the time to make a plan for approaching these things and trying them out, so that you are acting more in line with your new beliefs. Ask yourself, "If I really believed my balanced belief, what are the things I would do?" Then, go out and do them. You may not believe the balanced beliefs straightaway, and will most likely feel anxious about trying these things – remember, you have already started to loosen the grip of the old core beliefs, and taken steps to approach a range of different anxiety-provoking situations through your behavioural experiments. Over time, you will find that if you continue to apply these strategies consistently, your conviction in your old negative core beliefs will reduce and your conviction in your new balanced core beliefs will improve.

Core belief action plans are a tool for helping us to generate ideas for how we want to operate within our new core belief system. Take a look at the next section to get started on your personal action plan.

Core Belief Action Plans

The core belief action plan assists you in identifying areas of your life that you would like to work on in relation to your new core beliefs, such as relationships, family life, work/study/career, leisure/hobbies, and health/well-being. The action plan then prompts you to plan different tasks and actions to 'act out' these new beliefs in your daily life. You can treat each task that you set within your action plan as a behavioural experiment, and evaluate if the results are consistent with your new, more balanced core beliefs.

For Andrew, here is an example of how he would like to strengthen his new core beliefs:

- **New core beliefs to strengthen:** *Self as caring and capable, others as supportive.*
- **Life domain:** *Hobbies*
- **Target for change (i.e., Goals):** *Volunteer at the animal shelter*

Next, Andrew needs to identify a situation, or experiment, that he can take specific action in, and set a timeframe for taking action:

- **Specific action(s):** *Attend the volunteer information session, and submit the application form on the day. Ask some questions about available roles.*
- **Timeframe:** *Complete the volunteer application form this weekend, and submit it at the information session on Tuesday.*

As plans do not always work out on the first attempt, it helps to have some ideas for how to overcome potential obstacles to taking action. For Andrew,

- **Strategies to overcome potential obstacles:** *Use my thought challenging skills if I feel anxious about attending the information session. Tell a friend about my plan to sign up as a volunteer, so that I am less likely to procrastinate, and will be more motivated to attend the session.*

The next thing Andrew would need to do is to implement his plan and evaluate whether he was able to meet his goals, or see what strategies he would need to use if he encountered any roadblocks along the way. If Andrew was able to attend the volunteer session and sign up as a volunteer, he can then plan the next action (e.g., attending his first shift) to advance his progress on this goal.

Here is another example from Su-Lin, who has identified "relationships" as a life domain that she would like to work on as part of her core belief action plan. As you can see, we have taken the same prompts from Andrew's example above, and organised the goals and actions into a table so that you can create your plan step-by-step:

SU-LIN'S EXAMPLE:

New Core Beliefs (self, others, world)	Life domain	Target for change	Specific actions	Strategies to overcome potential obstacles	Timeframe
Self: likeable *Others: friendly* *World: safe*	*Relationships*	*Initiate more social outings*	*Contact friend who I haven't talked to in a few months to organise a catch-up*	*If friend does not answer the first time, call again the next day or send a text. Might need to give more notice.*	*Call friend tomorrow and ask if she wants to catch up for coffee next week*

Now you can have a go at developing your personal core belief action plan!

Creating my personal core belief action plan

Start by identifying the **core beliefs** that you want to strengthen about yourself, others, and/or the world:

My New Core Beliefs

Self:

Others:

World:

Next, have a think of which life domains could help you to target these core beliefs. Ask yourself, "If I really believed my new core beliefs, would I be doing things differently in these areas of my life?":

- ☐ Relationships
- ☐ Family Life
- ☐ Work/Study/Career
- ☐ Leisure/Hobbies
- ☐ Health/Well-being
- ☐ Other: _____

Now, choose one **specific life domain** from the list above, and let's get more specific – think about exactly what you could do to collect more evidence for your new core beliefs. Creating new opportunities for more experiences that will support your new core belief may involve:

- Approaching rather than avoiding situations that may, or that used to, provoke anxiety
- Sticking with challenges rather than escaping
- Dropping safety behaviours, and approaching activities and tasks without taking precautions
- Doing pleasant things for yourself (e.g., hobbies, self-care activities, giving yourself a treat)
- Being active and engaged in life
- Being assertive

Your ideas from this become "**targets for change**" and we can narrow this down further into "**specific actions**" that we plan to undertake to build new experiences and opportunities. Ask yourself: What new behaviours will you need to try out? How will you be behaving differently to before? Record your ideas into the 'Target for change' and 'Specific actions' columns of the "My Example" table below. Also remember to set a **realistic timeframe** for when you would like to implement these goals and actions.

MY EXAMPLE:

New Core Beliefs (self, others, world)	Life domain	Target for change	Specific actions	Strategies to overcome potential obstacles	Timeframe

Finally, identify potential obstacles that may come up. Based on what you have developed from the modules so far, what skills and strategies do you now have to manage these obstacles if they arise? Record them under the **"Strategies to overcome potential obstacles"** column.

On the following two pages is the Action Plan worksheet which gives you an opportunity to plan for different areas of your life. Once you have some ideas written down on your action plan, the next step is to go out and do it! You now have a toolbox of skills to draw upon when faced with anxiety-provoking social situations – in the final module, we will discuss how you can maintain the gains you have made, and how to enhance your well-being.

Action Plan Worksheet

New Core Beliefs that I would like to strengthen		
About myself…	**About others…**	**About the world/future…**

Life domain	Target for change	Specific actions	Strategies to overcome potential obstacles	Timeframe
My Relationships				
My Family Life				
Work/Study/Career				

(Continued on next page)

Life domain	Target for change	Specific actions	Strategies to overcome potential obstacles	Timeframe
My Leisure/Hobbies				
My Health/ Well-being				
Other Important Areas of My Life				

Taking Action!

Once you've written down some ideas on your action plan, the next step is to have a go at implementing these actions. You can treat each task or action as a behavioural experiment - are the results consistent with your new, more balanced core beliefs?

Remember that strengthening new core beliefs takes time, and can feel challenging at first – the more we act according to our new beliefs, the easier it will get over time!

Module Summary

- In addition to ongoing collection of evidence to support your new, more balanced core beliefs, it is also important to act in ways that are consistent with these updated core beliefs.

- Follow through on your balanced core beliefs by putting them into action with the Core Belief Action Plan.

- Strengthening new core beliefs takes time, and can feel challenging at first – the more we act according to our new beliefs, the easier it will get over time.

Coming Up...

In the final module we will discuss how you can maintain the gains you have made, and how to enhance your well-being.

About the Modules

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

McEvoy, P. & Saulsman, L. (2017). *Imagery-Based Cognitive Behaviour Group Therapy for Social Anxiety Disorder (IB-CBGT).* Perth, Western Australia: Centre for Clinical Interventions.

BACKGROUND

The concepts and strategies in the modules have been developed from evidence based psychological practice, primarily Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT). Examples of this are reported in:

McEvoy, P. M., Hyett, M. P., Bank, S. R., Erceg-Hurn, D. M., Johnson, A. R., Kyron, M. J., Saulsman, L. M., Moulds, M. L., Grisham, J. R., Holmes, E. A., Moscovitch, D. A., Lipp, O. V. Campbell, B. N. C., & Rapee, R. M. (in press). Imagery-enhanced versus verbally-based group cognitive behavior therapy for social anxiety disorder: a randomized clinical trial. *Psychological Medicine.* http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0033291720003001

Rapee, R. M., Gaston, J. E., & Abbott, M. J. (2009). Testing the efficacy of theoretically derived improvements in the treatment of social phobia. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 77,* 317–327.

REFERENCES

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

McEvoy, P. M., Saulsman, L. M., & Rapee, R. M. (2018). *Imagery-enhanced CBT for social anxiety disorder.* Guilford Press.

Hackmann, A., Bennett-Levy, J., & Holmes, E. A. (Eds., 2011). *Oxford Guide to Imagery in Cognitive Therapy.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kemp, N., Thompson, A., Gaston, J., & Rapee, R. (2003). Cognitive behavioural therapy-enhanced for social anxiety disorder: group treatment program. Centre for Emotional Health, Macquarie University.

Saulsman, L. M., Ji, J. L., & McEvoy, P. M. (2019). The essential role of mental imagery in cognitive behaviour therapy: what is old is new again. Invited review for *Australian Psychologist, 54,* 237-244. doi: 10.1111/ap.12406.

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