

Challenging worrying thoughts

Dr Annie Hickox
Consultant Clinical Neuropsychologist
Friarage Hospital, Northallerton.

MS can play havoc with your emotions, and anxiety can become a barrier to the things we enjoy and derive satisfaction from. Everyone experiences occasional spells of anxiety, but with a condition as unpredictable and variable as MS, uncertainty can become a major pleasure zapper.

Why we worry - When we worry, we tend to think of the world as a dangerous place. We assume things will turn out badly, we 'catastrophize', expecting the worst, and we accept our thoughts unquestioningly, as if they were facts. We also tend to ignore our ability to deal with things, and fail to give ourselves credit when we do cope well.

These patterns of thinking are known as 'cognitive distortions'. They are distorted because they are not based on factual evidence, but based on the negative assumption that things will go wrong, and that it is probably our fault. These thoughts occur so quickly that we are often unaware of them. We are therefore left with the emotion that they inevitably lead to, fear, anxiety, and more worrying thoughts.

The negative spiral - In order to learn how to challenge these thoughts, we need to be aware of them when they occur and how they affect our mood. We then need to notice how the mood affects our behavior. For example:

Negative automatic thought (NAT): 'I will feel anxious about my MS symptoms if I go out and will be poor company'.

Emotion linked to NAT: Sadness, frustration, anger at MS.

Behavior following from emotion: inertia, fatigue, and tension

This behavior may then affect your thinking further... 'I feel so heavy and tired, I definitely will cancel the arrangement.'

As you can guess, this leads to an even deeper spiral into more

prolonged sadness, loneliness, and anxiety about letting others down.

Catch your worries - *don't mistake a thought for a fact!*

Is the thought fact or fiction? Is there any evidence that the thought is actually true? Would others who know you agree with your low opinion of yourself?

Consider a more balanced and realistic view of the situation. For example, remind yourself that it's probably a situation you've coped with before, even though you felt anxious beforehand. Can you remember that you actually ended up enjoying the event?

Do you own a crystal ball? You may feel sure that the event will turn out badly, but consider how likely is it that your prediction is going to be accurate? Are there ways you could ensure that things are manageable?

Is it your inner critic talking, or your inner coach? Can you turn up the volume of your coach? Your inner critic might be telling you that you won't be able to handle things, but your inner coach says you've managed it before and that, with a little planning, you can do it again and enjoy yourself.

Keep a Worry Diary - Make a simple worry diary by drawing four columns on a piece of paper. Note 1) the date and time, 2) a brief description of your thoughts, 3) your feelings, and 4) your behavior. After a week or two, make a new record sheet, adding a column with alternative, helpful thoughts, and note how these thoughts affect your feelings. Most of us struggle with the same old tiresome worries, sort of like a loop tape that never changes. Keeping a thought diary is a good way to change the way we think, by identifying more helpful and accurate ways of looking at a situation. Here is an alternative example of the earlier scenario:

Negative automatic thought (NAT): 'I will feel anxious about my MS symptoms if I go out, and I will be poor company'

Alternative thought: 'I have felt like this before. I always end up enjoying myself. I feel better when I see friends. They don't judge me for my MS.'

Emotion linked to alternative thought: Mild apprehension, but glad not to let my anxiety get the better of me. Pleased that I'm making the effort.

Behavior: Do some calming breathing before I go, and make an effort on my appearance to boost my confidence.

Training your brain to think differently takes time and practice, but has big rewards, enabling you to get out of the negative spiral and back into the activities you enjoy!