

# ANXIETY & STRAIGHT THINKING

What makes us different from other creatures in the Animal World? If you think about this question, you will probably come up with an answer that identifies our ability to **think** as one of the most obvious and important differences between us and them.

As humans, we try and make sense of things around us. We try and work out why things happen. We use this information about **what has happened and why** to make **predictions about the future**. In most cases, this is a very useful way of doing things and has no doubt allowed the human race to survive all this time.

Often however, we are not aware of our thoughts. If you ask someone the question "**what are you thinking about?**" they may answer "**nothing**". This is not the case, we think all the time - (even dreams are a form of mental activity).

## What's the Big Deal about Thinking?

Thinking is the way we make **decisions** about things. People often say "*I need time to think before I decide*". That is, thinking more often than not helps us decide how to **react** to something. If we think something is **safe**, we are more likely to do it. If we decide it is **dangerous**, we are more likely to **avoid** doing it. If we think something is **good**, we are more likely to feel **happy** about it. If we think it is **bad**, we are more likely to feel **sad** about it.

Often, what we are aware of is not how we **think** about things but how we **feel** about them. So how we **feel**, is a good way of **working out what we are thinking**.

Have you ever wondered why some people react differently to others? Why do some things make some people happy and others not? Why someone might become very angry and another person might just feel irritated, even though the same thing might have happened? Why some people might be scared about doing something and another person not so scared, even if both people haven't done it before? You might answer this by saying, "*they have a different personality or maybe something in their childhood*". This is another way of saying "**people don't always think the same way about things**" and, if they **think** differently about them, they will **feel** differently about them and **do** different things.

It is also possible that, if you **think** about something in a particular way, you might **talk** yourself into it. That is, make **happen** the very thing you wanted **not to happen**.

So, thinking is a big deal because it is *what decides how you will feel and what you will do*. If it is so important then we better get it **straight**.

## Thinking and Anxiety

Anxiety is about the future. When we feel anxious or nervous, it is usually because we are thinking about something that hasn't happened yet or something that *might* happen. Anxious thinking is about “*What if ..... happens ?*”

If I *worry* about something, I'll probably feel anxious about it. When someone says “*Don't worry about it*” they are usually telling us that, if we *think differently* about it we will feel *better*.

When someone is anxious, they tend to predict the worst things. An anxious person is anxious because they are having thoughts about **DANGER**. It makes sense that if you predict something dangerous is happening - or will happen - that you would feel anxious.

An anxious person who is having a Panic Attack may think that they are in **DANGER**, that these symptoms mean that they will have a heart attack or cause them to lose control in some way and perhaps make a fool of themselves.

An anxious person who is about to do something may predict that they will not cope or that they can't stand the way they feel.

The symptoms of anxiety – including tension, light-headedness, palpitations, tremor, sweating, restlessness - are your body's response to **DANGER**. In fact they have been designed to make sure you have every chance to survive a dangerous situation. What this means is that if you have thoughts which predict you are in **DANGER**, your body will automatically set off more symptoms of **Anxiety**. These are the very symptoms you find uncomfortable and are afraid of.

So changing the way you think is a very important way of managing your anxiety.

## How do we make sure we are thinking straight?

To make sure you are thinking straight you can take the following steps:

- Try and work out what you are thinking about in the situation that makes you anxious. To help you do this, you know that if you feel anxious then it is probably likely that you have a thought in your mind which makes a negative prediction about something in the future and that you are probably thinking something will be dangerous or unpleasant. Remember that it's not only physical danger that humans are worried about, it is also **what other people may think of us, financial or relationship** problems.

- Usually, your anxious thought might begin with the words “**What if....?**”
- Use an anxiety diary to keep track of what you are thinking, in what situation and what symptoms you are experiencing.

Once you have worked out what you are thinking, ask yourself the following questions:

1. **What evidence do I have to support this way of thinking?** Or, how do I know this is true? How would I prove it to someone else?
2. **Is there an alternative way of thinking about this?** Would everyone think this way? If there is another way to think about this, how would it be better for me? Would I feel differently?
3. **How important is it?** How will this make a difference, next week, next month, in 5 years time?
4. **How bad is it?** Is it the worst thing that could happen? What could I do about it if it did happen?
5. Try and come up with **an alternative but more accurate thought**, and see if this makes a difference to how you feel.

Here is an example of how this might work. (These are real examples from people with anxiety.)

SITUATION	THOUGHTS	FEELINGS	ACCURATE STATEMENT
Shopping	I'm going to slip over and fall. I can't stand the noise and lights. I have to get out of here, if I don't I'll scream.	Scared Anxious Confused	I've been in this situation before and I haven't lost control. Just because I don't feel well doesn't mean something bad is going to happen. I'll try and find a seat, practise my relaxation and wait for this feeling to pass before I continue with my shopping.
Getting ready to sing in front of a crowd.	I have to get out. I can't go through with this.	Waves of terror going through me.	Most people feel this way when they get in front of people. This is not unusual. I'll feel better when it is over. I'll try my best.

## **Common Unhelpful Thinking Habits:**

People with anxiety often make a number of thinking mistakes. Here is an example of some of the most common mistakes.

### **Black and White/ All or Nothing Thinking:**

- Seeing things as good or bad with no middle ground.
- Seeing things as perfect or a total failure with nothing in between.

### **Focusing on the Negatives/ Making Mountains out of Molehills:**

- Concentrating on unpleasant things or mistakes and forgetting everything else that happened – especially the things that went well and what you achieved. Sometimes you might exaggerate something out of all proportions or even turn a positive experience into a negative one.

### **Setting Unrealistic Expectations:**

- Asking yourself to be perfect and not allowing yourself to make mistakes. This way of thinking encourages you to feel like a failure when you do make mistakes (which is only human ) and discourages you from trying anything new, which makes it hard for you to get a sense of achievement.

### **Taking Responsibility for Other People's Feelings/ It's all my fault:**

- Worrying about upsetting people, pretending other people are so fragile they will not be able to cope with their own feelings. Not giving other people the chance to decide to get upset or not. Making decisions for them as if they had no say in it. Deciding it is all your fault and forgetting other things, which have nothing to do with you, happen to people and that it takes two to tango.

### **Fortune Telling/ Mind Reading:**

- Pretending you can read into the future or tell what people are thinking about you. This thought usually starts with the words "What if..." This is like gambling: sometimes you will be right but most of the time you will worry over nothing.

### **Jumping to Conclusions:**

- Not checking things out before you come to a negative conclusion about something.

Remember this is **not a trick**. You will not feel differently if you **pretend** to think in a different way without believing there is some truth in it.



