

# Disrupting Rumination: Changing the Cognitions that Underlie Anxiety

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# Brain Structure and Function Contribute to Rumination

- Negative attention bias – consequence of neurotransmitter activity causing overactivity in cingulate gyrus
- Basal Ganglia “Idle of Brain” creates feelings of vigilance and sensation of dread
- Functional connectivity = reducing cortical control.

# Why Worry?

- The sensation of anxiety is the human response to ambiguity
- It drives you in the direction of problem identification and solution
- When the sensation of anxiety exists without cause, when a sense of dread exists, the brain searches for problems
- Worry: maladaptive attempt to resolve anxiety, worsening it in the absence of a real problem

# Thought Content

- Anxiety rumination tends in the direction of “Why” and “What if...” kinds of thoughts
- Error Related Negativity. Essential ability to detect and respond to errors (e.g., social missteps). Critical to successful adaptation to a changing environment.
- The ACC (anterior cingulate cortex) is more active in anxiety for identifying errors so errors magnified and responses are exaggerated.

# Repetition Strengthens Brain Activity

- One important principle is that repetition strengthens
- Ruminative thinking results in increased vascularization and more glial cell support – makes worry path into worry super-highway
- Interrupting rumination consistently and persistently quickly starts to ‘erase the trace’ of worry

# Correct Cognitive Mis-Steps

- If the worry is about something *possible*, anxiety leads to thinking and behaving as if it is *probable* – teach the distinction between these
- If you can make a plan, it is a real problem with a real solution. Then planning solves the problem of worry too. (Teach Planning!)
- If you cannot make a plan it is a worry. Use worry-elimination strategies.

# Anxiety: Condition Looking for Content

- Brain scans environment for cause – usually will find it
- People seek relief by seeking reassurance: Internet searching is becoming a major source of anxiety-increasing reassurance-seeking.
- If the anxiety can be ‘de-bunked’ or it becomes obvious the worry is not going to happen, relief is brief.
- Guilt becomes a target for worry/anxiety

# Guilt is Excellent Content for Anxiety

Guilt is excellent content. So:

- Need to resolve guilt BUT without falling into reassurance trap.

Potential guilt: something you *maybe* did wrong or *possible* negative outcome of an action

- Use thought stopping/thought replacing



# Legitimate Guilt

## Legitimate Guilt

1. Write down what you did wrong
2. Talk it over with someone safe
3. Decide what will make restitution
4. Make restitution

# Erase the Trace of Ruminative Thought

Thought Stopping - Thought Replacement – Always planned, used **consistently**:

- Sing
- Two-P method (Pleasant/Productive) thought replacement list – has relevance and novelty
- Re-focus on work or people around you
- Be prepared with an inspirational/positive thought to recite

# Invite the Worry

- The model of inviting rather than fighting
- Natural follow up is “What is the worst that could happen?”
- Then the focus shifts to coping and resourcefulness – facing reality and recognizing skills (or planning how to develop skills)

## Contain Worry: Clear the Mind – Imagery or Concrete Methods

Use guided Imagery of “Contain Your Worry”

- Teaches the defense mechanism of suppression
- Calm down physically or settle thinking, relax to sleep
- Start any activity that requires focus (home-to-work transitions, writing tests or reports, therapy)
- Help reduce anxiety about transitions
- Can be done concretely with list, “God-box”, worry back-pack, etc.

# Handling Magical Worry

Worry can have an unrecognized function

- It may be a protection to ward off bad things, e.g., “If I worry about this it won’t happen.” – bring to awareness. Use thought stopping.
- It may be center of a relationship or identity – develop an image of life without anxiety
- It may be important worry without a resolution – ***honor this worry and ‘contain it in time.’***

# Types of Stress: Increase Anxiety, Increase Risk of Relapse

Stress – directly affected by perception of control:

- Quantity (capable but overwhelmed)
  - more likely with generalized anxiety
  - High activity clients
  - Work Addicted Clients – may not recognize stress from work
- Quality (skills deficits, need help) –
  - Parenting
  - ADHD or other neuroatypical condition

# 4 Competencies for Stress Recovery

1<sup>st</sup>: Eliminate stressor: Being chronically stressed interferes with ability to appraise the detriment of the stressor. Look at relationships, caregiving especially, and work  
What if you cannot eliminate the stressor? There are ways to manage it.

2<sup>nd</sup>: Attitude about degree of control

- Is control possible?
- How about influence vs. control?
- Is this a situation where no control is possible – can the person let go?

# Managing the Stress of the Pandemic

- Acceptance – This is what is. Anger, frustration, fear are all emotional responses based on interpretations and assumptions. What are yours?
- Find ways to express emotional responses responsibly and then step back. Note what is catastrophic vs what is inconvenient
- What has not yet happened, and might not ever happen – when should you deal with it?
- What are your resources to cope with the challenges?



# Contain Your Worry (in Time)

Necessary for important concerns that are outside of normal control or are irresolvable.

Most effective by making it a kind of ritual:

- Same place and time (10 minutes maximum)
- Symbols or reminders of the problem or intention
- Physical objects that focus the mind
- Sounds that starts and stop the worry time.

# Manage Time and Environment

1. Manage Time and environment
  - Utilize calendars and reminders – electronics can be helpful!!
  - What does environment contribute?

# Manage Attitude, Learn to Rest

- Rest from Rumination: Default Mode Network = “Sit and stare time” creates insight, empathy, creative problem solving.
- Find time to sit and look at moving water, moving clouds, fire flickering
- Walk or run without earbuds giving you input

# Learn to Physically Relax

- Relaxation
  - Progressive muscle relaxation
  - Mental/physical relaxation through meditation
- Physical activity is desirable relaxation – movement can release tension and create mental relaxation as well via fun and change of focus.
- Alternate breath techniques
  - In 2, Out 2-4-6-8-10
  - Alternate nostril breathing
  - In 5, Out Huh-huh-huh-huh-huh