



# What? Me Worry!?!

## Module 8

### **Accepting Uncertainty**

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## Introduction

In earlier modules, we mentioned that the inability to tolerate uncertainty tends to be a unique feature of people who experience generalised anxiety and excessive worrying. This module aims to examine your need for certainty, to look at how this need keeps worrying going, to describe ways of challenging this need, and to discuss how to ultimately accept uncertainty in your life.

## Intolerance Of Uncertainty

The inability to tolerate uncertainty is an **attitude** many people have towards life. When one has this attitude, uncertainty, unpredictability, and doubt are seen as awful and unbearable experiences that must be avoided at all costs. People who hate uncertainty and need guarantees may:



- Say things like: “I can’t cope not knowing,” “I know the chances of it happening are so small, but it still could happen,” “I need to be 100% sure.”
- Prefer that something bad happens right now, rather than go on any longer not knowing what the eventual outcome will be
- Find it hard to put a plan or solution in place, because they first need a guarantee that it will work.

If you have this attitude of being unable to stand uncertainty, then you may perceive worrying to be useful to you. You may think that worrying is a way of preparing yourself for the worst – getting you ready for anything that might happen. Worrying is seen as a way of attempting to predict life so that there are no nasty surprises. As such, worrying reduces your experience of uncertainty and unpredictability. And because worrying reduces your feelings of uncertainty, you will continue worrying and worrying and worrying. In other words, you keep worrying because you believe it is your only strategy for making things in life more certain and more predictable – it helps you believe that you have more control.



In reality, has your worrying made anything more certain or more predictable? By worrying, does it change the outcome of what will happen? Isn't life still as uncertain and unpredictable as it ever was? It is only your perception that you somehow have more control by worrying. But is this really true? In fact, all you have done is think of all the worst case scenarios and worked yourself up and made yourself feel really bad in the process. So, ask yourself, is it really worth it? Does having a 'fake' sense of certainty justify all the negative consequences of worrying?

If your answer is 'No', then there are two ways you can tackle your intolerance of uncertainty, which require skills taught in the last two modules. You can:

**Challenge** your intolerance of uncertainty  
and  
Let go of your intolerance of uncertainty (or **Accept** uncertainty)

By addressing your need for certainty, you are dealing with a key factor that drives you to keep worrying. So by reducing your need for certainty, you will reduce the drive to worry.

## **Challenging Intolerance Of Uncertainty**

You should be quite familiar with the challenging process by now. You can use this process to dissect your intolerance of uncertainty and question your need for certainty. Do the exercise below and ask yourself some questions to chip away at your need for certainty. These questions can help you to see that trying to eliminate uncertainty and unpredictability from your life is both impossible and unhelpful.

<b>Can you be absolutely certain about everything in life?</b>	
<b>What are the advantages of requiring certainty in life?</b> <i>How has needing certainty in life been helpful to you?</i>	<b>What are the disadvantages of requiring certainty in life?</b> <i>How has needing certainty in life been unhelpful to you or detrimental to your life?</i>
<b>Do you tend to predict that something bad will happen, just because you are uncertain?</b> <i>Is this a reasonable thing to do? Could something good or neutral just as likely happen?</i>	<b>What is the likelihood that the things you predict will happen?</b> <i>If the likelihood tends to be low, could you live with this small chance?</i>
<b>Are there some uncertainties in your life that you can live with?</b> <i>How do you do this? Can you do the same thing in situations where you have difficulty tolerating uncertainty?</i>	<b>Talk to the people you know. Ask how they cope with the uncertainty and unpredictability of life?</b> <i>Could you do the same thing they do in situations where you have difficulty tolerating uncertainty?</i>

## Accepting Uncertainty

What was your answer to the last two questions in the ‘Challenging Intolerance Of Uncertainty’ worksheet? One question asked about how you tolerate uncertainty in certain areas of your life. The other question asked about how other people tolerate uncertainty in their lives. Chances are you came up with a similar answer to both questions, which might sound something like: *There is nothing I can do about it, so I just have to accept it and move on.*



Demanding certainty and predictability is a very future-focused task, just like worrying. In the last module, we looked at how to deal with worrying through acceptance and letting go of worries. This technique can be applied here to let go of your intolerance of uncertainty and accept uncertainty as being an inevitable part of life. You can do this by recognising or acknowledging it, then letting go of your intolerance and accepting uncertainty, and finally being more present-focused rather than future-focused. Being more present-focused can help bring about an acceptance of uncertainty. If you are focused on the present rather than the future, then uncertainty about the future is less likely to bother you.



You already know the steps for being able to achieve acceptance, but let’s look at these steps again, and use them specifically to accept uncertainty in your life. Below is an example for you, but use the worksheet on page 6 to put in your own words what would help you let go of your need for certainty and accept uncertainty.

### EXAMPLE

<b>Be Aware</b>	<i>“I tell myself how terrible or unbearable not knowing is”; “I seek reassurance”; “I get this agitated and restless feeling that comes with not knowing what will happen”; “I worry about things you can’t be certain of”; “I can’t make decisions because I need to be sure of the outcome first”.</i>
<b>Don’t Respond</b>	<i>“It is interesting to notice that in this situation I have a need for certainty, predictability, a guarantee...this need is leading me to worry. I’ll just sit with these feelings a little while...observing and noticing them for a bit”.</i>
<b>Let Go</b>	<i>“My need for certainty is unnecessary...uncertainty is just a part of life...I’ll just let my need for certainty go, and accept uncertainty” (Visualise your need for certainty floating past you like clouds in the sky or as you breathe out say under your breath “let go” or “accept”).</i>
<b>Be Present-Focused</b>	<i>“I need to bring my attention to the present. I’m noticing my breathing right now. When I inhale I can feel slight pressure on my stomach as the air fills my lungs. As I exhale I feel a release as the air flows out of my lungs...etc. I now notice my body sitting in this chair, how the seat supports my shoulders, spine, buttocks and backs of my legs...etc”.</i>
<b>Deal With A Wandering Mind</b>	<i>“Ah, my mind has wandered back to demanding certainty. That’s okay. I’ll just bring my attention back to focusing on the present now. Back to noticing my breathing...”</i>

Once you have completed both worksheets, remember that **challenging** and **acceptance** are two different techniques you can use to address your need for certainty. Try both techniques and see which works better for you. Use either of them, or a combination of the two. But remember, both require effort and lots of practice to be effective in addressing your need for certainty.

# Accepting Uncertainty

## Be Aware

What do you notice yourself doing when you are needing certainty?

## Don't Respond

What can you tell yourself to help you not respond to your need for certainty?

## Let Go

What can you tell yourself to help you let go of your need for certainty?

## Be Present-Focused

What can you tell yourself to help you be more present focused?

## Deal with a Wandering Mind

What can you tell yourself to help you when your mind wanders back to needing certainty?

## Module Summary

- If your attitude to life is that you need certainty and predictability, then you might often engage in worrying because you think it might help you achieve this
- Worrying gives you the illusion of certainty, as it prepares you for the worst, so there are no surprises. Certainty is an impossible thing to achieve in life, and worrying only gives you a 'fake' sense of certainty. After all, even Benjamin Franklin was heard to have said, "In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes."
- As part of treating your worry, you need to address your need for certainty
- You can **challenge** your need for certainty by asking:
  - Can I ever really achieve certainty?
  - What are the advantages and disadvantages of demanding certainty?
  - Do I predict bad things when I'm uncertain? Could good things just as likely happen?
  - What is the probability of what I predict happening?
  - Are there times I can tolerate uncertainty? What do I do then?
  - How do others tolerate uncertainty? Can I learn from them?
- You can let go of your intolerance of uncertainty and learn to **accept** uncertainty by:
  - Being aware of your need for certainty
  - Not responding to this need by worrying, by instead observing and describing your need.
  - Making the decision to let go of this need and instead accept uncertainty
  - Being focused on the present (i.e., breathing, bodily sensations, surroundings) to help achieve acceptance
  - Refocussing your mind on the present moment, when it wanders back to needing certainty.



Coming up next ...

In the next module you will learn some strategies to help you solve problems you are faced with, rather than simply worrying about these problems.

## About The Modules

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

Nathan, P., Smith, L., Rees, C., Correia, H., Juniper, U., Kingsep, P., & Lim, L. (2004). *Mood Management Course: A Cognitive Behavioural Group Treatment Programme for Anxiety Disorders and Depression* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). 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). CBT for generalised anxiety is a type of psychotherapy that is based on the theory that generalised anxiety and worry is a result of problematic cognitions (thoughts) and behaviours. There is strong scientific evidence to support that cognitions and behaviours can play an important role in generalised anxiety, and that targeting cognitions and behaviours in therapy can help many people to overcome generalised anxiety. Examples of this evidence are reported in:

Barlow, D.H., Raffa, S.D., Cohen, E.M. (2002) Psychosocial treatments for panic disorders, phobias, and generalized anxiety disorder. In P.E. Nathan & J.M. Gorman (Eds.), *A Guide to Treatments that Work* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., pp. 301-335). New York: Oxford University Press.

Gould, R.A., Safren, S.A., O'Neill Washington, D., & Otto, M.W. (2004). A meta-analytic review of cognitive-behavioural treatments. In R.G. Heimberg, C.L. Turk & D.S. Mennin (Eds.), *Generalized Anxiety Disorder: Advances in Research and Practice* (pp. 248-264). New York: Guilford Press.

### 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!?!”

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