

MODULE 2: THOUGHTS: Using Techniques to Challenge and Identify Unhelpful Anxious Thinking.

PART 1: MANAGING NEGATIVE THOUGHTS:

I have split this section into two parts. If you have occasional negative thinking, it would be helpful to focus on section a-c. Thought records are useful for people feeling some anxiety, who may be feeling depressed or struggling with low self-esteem. If you have repetitive worry that feels uncontrollable you may find the 'dealing with repetitive worry' section more helpful as this section will help you manage excessive 'what if thinking'.



a.) Write thoughts down and spot thinking errors.

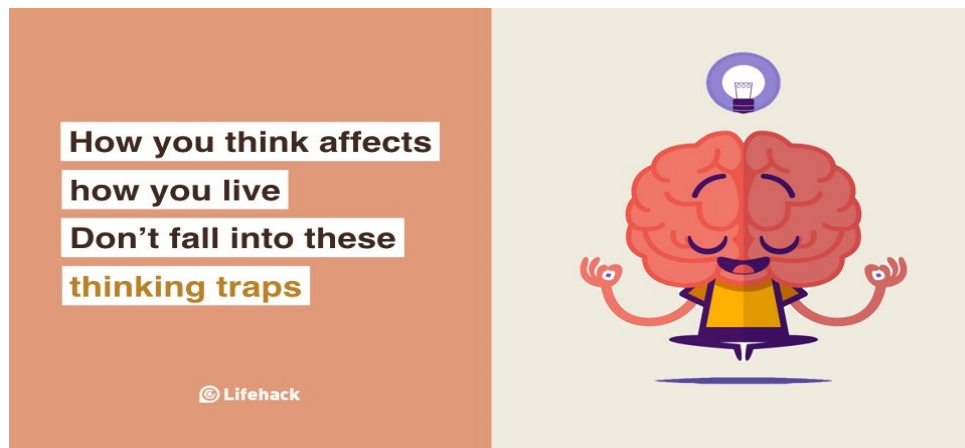
It is likely you may be experiencing more negative thoughts than usual and it would be useful to identify these thoughts and see if you can challenge them.

The first thing you need to do is write your thoughts down and see if you are making any 'thinking errors'. We are all prone to 'distorted thinking' but at times of stress we are more likely to slip into unhelpful thinking habits.

Right now, we may be 'fortune telling' and trying to predict the future. We may be 'catastrophising' and believing that the worst-case scenarios will happen. It is helpful to recognise that **thoughts are not facts** and these unhelpful habits are important to challenge as they make our anxiety worse.

For a full list of thinking errors please view this link:

SELF HELP TOOL- <https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/docs/UnhelpfulThinkingHabits.pdf>



SELF HELP TOOL You can use a thought record to log times you have negative thoughts and to help you spot your thinking errors. I'm going to put in some possible COVID-19 negative thoughts to give you an example of how you can make a note of your own COVID thinking errors.

THOUGHT RECORD- THINKING ERRORS

Day and Time.	Situation. (What, where, when and who)	Negative Thoughts. What were your thoughts? Rate how much you believe them on a scale of 0-100%	Feelings. How did you feel on a scale of 0-100%?	Errors. What thinking errors were you making?
Saturday 11.30am	Sitting on my bed	'This situation is never going to end' (believe 80%)	Anxious 85%	Black and white thinking, Fortune telling, Predicting, Catastrophising, Mental filter
Monday 1.45pm	Looking at Facebook and seeing someone's relative has got COVID-19	'I just know I'm going to get it next; it feels like it's on its way' (believe 70%)	Panicky 70% Upset 65% Worried 80%	Fortune telling, Predicting, Mental filter, Emotional reasoning
Wednesday 8pm	In the lounge finding it hard to concentrate on my book.	'I just can't focus on this book. I'm so weak! I'm the man of the house I should be able to cope' (believe 75%)	Sad 60% Upset 60%	Labelling/ Judgements, Shoulds and musts, Critical self, Black and white thinking.

Once you have been able to catch your negative thoughts and recognise which thinking errors you are making you are now ready to try and challenge those negative thoughts! (See below, B)

b.): Write thoughts down and challenge the negative thoughts.



SELF HELP TOOL Now we need to try and make our thoughts more realistic and balanced.
Balanced thinking is not about seeing everything positively, balanced thinking is about looking for new information that you may otherwise overlook:

THOUGHT RECORD- BALANCED THINKING

Day and Time	Negative Thoughts. What were your thoughts? Rate how much you believe them-0-100%	Support. What evidence supports your thoughts?	Challenge What evidence challenges this thought?	Best friend. What would I advise them? What would they say to me?
Saturday 11.30am	'This situation is never going to end' (believe 80%)	This has been going on for weeks already and cases seem to be increasing.	From what I've read a peak is expected and after a peak, things usually come down again. I don't have any hard evidence to support that this will keep getting worse it just feels that way. China went through this and their situation has improved and no new deaths have been reported.	If my friend was concerned about this, I would tell them to feel hopeful as China has beaten it and there's a chance we may too. My friend David would say stop thinking the worst you always do and 9/10 he reminds me I get it wrong.

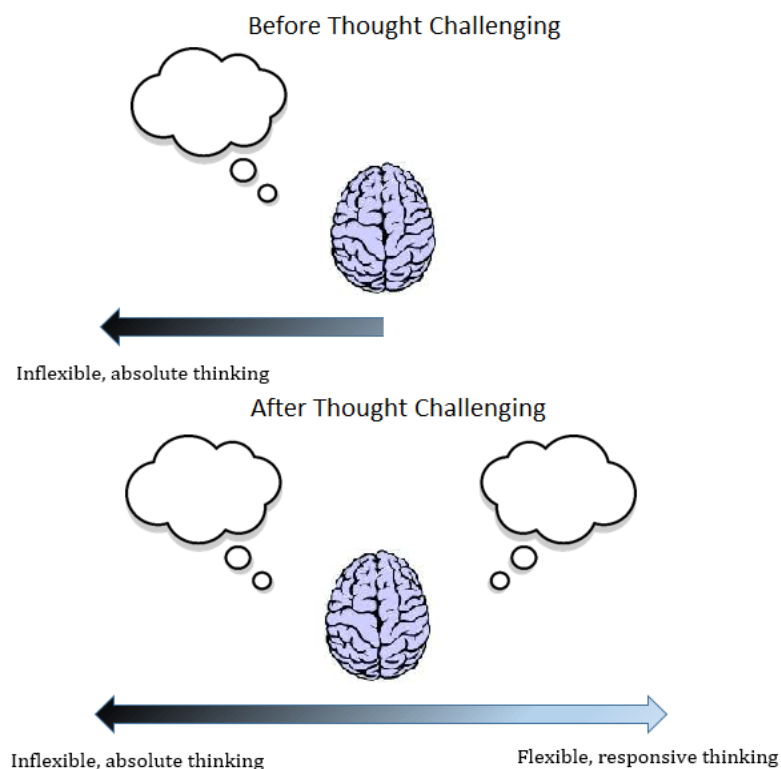
What could be a new balanced thought?	Outcome. How do I feel now? How much do I believe the negative thought now?
Even though I feel this may never end, there is no hard evidence that this will continue getting work. Cases are rising yes but this is expected in a pandemic and if China can beat it maybe we could too'.	I was anxious 85% before, now my anxiety is at 40% I believed it was 80% true before but now it feels more like 35% believable.

The more you can challenge your negative thoughts and consider alternatives, the less anxious you will feel with lots of practice.

SELF HELP TOOL If you would like to practice your own thought records. Here is a free template you can print from getselfhelp:

<https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/docs/ThoughtRecordSheet7.pdf>













c.) Other questions you can ask yourself to help balance out negative thoughts:



As well as looking for evidence for and against a negative thought and thinking about what advice you would give to a friend and what advice they would give to you (see thought record above), you could also ask yourself:

- How would I have viewed this situation in the past, before I was feeling this way?
- Am I ignoring the middle ground?

- Am I overestimating the chances of disaster?
- Am I blaming myself for something that's not my fault?
- Am I looking at the dark side and ignoring my strengths?
- Am I jumping to conclusions?
- Does this way of thinking help me, or hinder me from getting what I want? How?

Finding Alternative Thoughts	
Unhelpful Thinking Habit	Alternative more balanced thought
Mental Filter 	Am I only noticing the bad stuff? Am I filtering out the positives? Am I wearing those 'gloomy specs'? What would be more realistic?
 Mind-Reading	Am I assuming I know what others are thinking? What's the evidence? Those are my own thoughts, not theirs. Is there another, more balanced way of looking at it?
Prediction 	Am I thinking that I can predict the future? How likely is it that that might really happen?
 Compare & despair	Am I doing that 'compare and despair' thing? What would be a more balanced and helpful way of looking at it?
Critical self 	There I go, that internal bully's at it again. Would most people who really know me say that about me? Is this something that I am totally responsible for?
 Shoulds and musts	Am I putting more pressure on myself, setting up expectations of myself that are almost impossible? What would be more realistic?
Judgements 	I'm making an evaluation about the situation or person. It's how I make sense of the world, but that doesn't mean my judgements are always right or helpful. Is there another perspective?
 Emotional Reasoning	Just because it feels bad, doesn't necessary mean it is bad. My feelings are just a reaction to my thoughts – and thoughts are just automatic brain reflexes
Mountains and molehills 	Am I exaggerating the risk of danger? Or am I exaggerating the negative and minimising the positives? How would someone else see it? What's the bigger picture?
 Catastrophising	OK, thinking that the worst possible thing will definitely happen isn't really helpful right now. What's most likely to happen?
Black and white thinking 	Things aren't either totally white or totally black – there are shades of grey. Where is this on the spectrum?
 Memories	This is just a reminder of the past. That was then, and this is now. Even though this memory makes me <u>feel</u> upset, it's not <u>actually</u> happening again right now.

www.getselfhelp.co.uk/unhelpful.htm

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PART 2: DEALING WITH REPETITIVE WORRY

Thought challenging is a useful way to tackle negative thoughts but sometimes we may need to use a few other techniques too especially if we find that we have lots of 'what if' future thinking.



'Worry is a thought process that is concerned with future events, where there is uncertainty about the outcome, the future being thought about is a negative one and this is accompanied by feelings of anxiety'.

If worrying feels excessive or hard to control we may have generalized anxiety disorder (GAD). In this case we may need to deal with our thoughts differently. Instead of directly challenging the content of the thoughts, we need to challenge the process. What I mean by this is that we need to see the worry as the problem in the first place and train ourselves to separate helpful and unhelpful worries before we allow ourselves to get caught up in the content of the thoughts.

Figure 1: Example of a possible worry chain, with someone experiencing excessive worry:

SITUATION:

Julie goes into the super market and for the second day running there is no pasta

WHAT IF.....?

Julie thinks 'what if I go in there again tomorrow and there's no pasta again. My kids really need some'.

JULIE THEN CONTINUES TO 'WHAT IF' AS SHE HAS POSITIVE BELIEFS ABOUT WORRY/ POSITIVE BELIEFS ACTIVATED

WORRY

Julie worries: 'What if we can't get any next week either', 'what if all the shops sell out', 'what if we struggle to get their other favourites too', 'what if we all end up hungry and it becomes hard to get any food at all', 'what if it gets so bad people come round and start stealing our food'.

ANXIETY

Julie gets a headache (physical aspect of anxiety) and finds it hard to concentrate for the rest of the day (psychological aspect of worry).

DEMORALIZATION and EXHAUSTION

Julie is exhausted by the end of the day and wishes she hadn't even gone into the shop to look for pasta, she then feels guilty and upset as though she's not a good mother and is giving up too easily.

**When Julie let her first worry in and moved her attention towards this worry, lots of other 'what if's came in and started to snow ball. We need to help ourselves to catch those initial 'what if' worries and relabel them as helpful (current) or unhelpful (hypothetical) before worry takes over, demoralizes us and makes us more vulnerable to stress and further excessive worry.*

a.) Why Do I worry So Much: The Role of Positive Beliefs About Worry.

One of the main reasons people engage in excessive worry is because they overestimate the usefulness of worry. However, many patients may not realise that they hold positive beliefs about worry, so it is important to identify them as they are another factor that is maintaining their worry problem. If you look at figure one you will see that worrying only continues because Julie's initial worry activates her 'positive worry beliefs' this then encourages her to worry further.



Positive beliefs about worry

People may hold positive beliefs about worry from any of the following **five categories**...

Worry helps me to solve problems: *as well as believing that worrying finds solutions to problems, this belief involves the idea that worry increases vigilance and preparedness to address a problem, or helps to avoid a problem all together.* For example, "If I think about a problem for long enough, I will find a solution"

Worrying helps me to motivate myself: in this case worrying is believed to ensure that a task / chore will get done. For example, "If I worry about my to do list, I am more likely to start going through it"

Worrying helps me to cope if something bad happens: Worrying before a potential negative event occurs is conducted in order to try and prevent feelings of disappointment, upset or guilt being felt if the actual event was to occur. For example, "worrying about losing my brother will help me cope should anything happen to him"

Worrying stops bad things from happening: Worrying here is thought to directly stop something bad from happening. For example, “It’s a good job I worried about my driving test because otherwise I would have failed”. This can also be called magical – thinking or thought – action fusion.

Worrying shows that I care: Worrying is thought of as being a good characteristic as it shows that the individual is caring, compassionate and conscientious. For example, “I need to worry about my Mum as she is in hospital, to show that I care”.

Patient’s paradox

The concept of having positive beliefs about worry may well seem counterintuitive to patients especially when they have sought help to reduce worrying. They may appear in conflict when their goal in therapy is to reduce their worry and anxiety in a general sense whilst at the same time, they are reluctant to reduce worrying about a specific topic.

“I want to worry less and feel less anxious” vs “I have to worry because it shows I care about my children”

It is important to ask your self if you have any positive worry beliefs that may be fuelling your ‘what if’ worrying.

If you are unsure about what your positive beliefs are when you complete your worry diary (next section), you could also ask yourself what the **purpose of each worry is to help identify your positive worry beliefs**. Occasional some people with excessive worry do not seem to have any positive worry beliefs.

SELF HELP TOOL Once you know what your beliefs try to challenge them and think about how helpful they really are. It can help to do a **pros or cons list** for each positive belief to look at the negative side to holding your belief.

Or go through the questions below



Challenges to Positive Beliefs about the Usefulness of Worry



1. **Worry aids with problem solving.** Example: If I worry about problems that come up at work, I am able to find better solutions to them.

Possible Challenges: Do you actually solve your problems by worrying, or are you just going over the problem again and again in your head? Does worry get you to actually solve your problems, or do you become so anxious that you delay solving your problems or avoid them altogether? Are you confusing a thought (worry) with an action (problem solving)?

2. **Worry as a motivating factor.** Example: If I worry about my performance at work, then I will be motivated to succeed. *Possible Challenges:* Do you know anyone who is successful at work and who is not a worrier? Are you confusing worrying with caring? That is, is it possible to want to succeed at work and not worry about it all the time? Does your worry really improve your performance? Are there negative repercussions as a result of your excessive worry about work? (For example, difficulty concentrating, memory problems, intense anxiety.)

3. **Worry protects against negative emotions.** Example: If I worry about my son potentially getting serious disease, I will be better prepared. *Possible Challenges:* Has anything bad ever happened that you had worried about before? Does worrying about things that might never happen actually increase your negative emotions in the here and now?

4. **Worry, in and of itself, can prevent negative outcomes.** Example: When I worry about an upcoming exam at school, I do well; when I don't worry, I don't do well. *Possible Challenges:* Have you ever done poorly on an exam even though you worried? Is your rule about worry (that is, worry=good outcome; don't worry=bad outcome) based on real evidence or is it an assumption? For example, is it possible that you only remember the exams you did well on when you worried, and that you forget those you didn't do well on when you worried? Were you really not worrying when things didn't go well on some exams, or are you just remembering it that way to support your assumption? Could you test this theory? For example, could you track your worry prior to exams and then look at your performance on each exam?

5. **Worry as a positive a positive personality trait.** Example: The fact that I worry about my children proves that I am a good and caring parent. *Possible Challenges:* Is there anything else you do that shows you are a good and caring parent? Is it only worrying about your children that shows caring and love? Do you know any other parents that you would consider "good and caring" but who do not worry excessively?

b.): Worry Awareness training:



Once you have identified and challenged any positive beliefs about worry it is now time to try and **spot the differences between helpful worry** which focuses on current situations (things you can do something about) and **unhelpful, hypothetical worry** (things you can do nothing about right now).

Not a lot of people are aware of the fact that some worries are helpful and some are unhelpful. This is a really useful exercise to do and helps you decide if to continue to focus on the worry and take action or to 'let go' of the worry.

You can use a Worry Diary to try and become more aware of your worries:

DATE AND TIME (3 x PER DAY)	INITIAL WORRY	ANXIETY (0-10)	WORRY TYPE: HYPOTHETICAL SITUATION OR CURRENT SITUATION.
Monday 6 th of April at 10.32am	What if I can't get my car repaired this week because garages are shut.	6/10	Current (as can do something about it)
Monday 6 th of April at 13.45pm	What if my friend Sarah catches COVID when she goes out to work as a community nurse next week.	8/10	Hypothetical (future based, can't influence outcome)
Monday 6 th of April at 8.25pm	What if our internet goes down during this crisis and we can't contact anybody'	9/10	Hypothetical (future based, can't influence outcome)

You could always add an extra column to this, asking yourself what the purpose of your worry is and to see if you hold any of the 5 positive worry beliefs from the previous section.

****SELF HELP TOOL: Try completing your own worry diary above for a week and see how many of your worries are helpful and how many are unhelpful.***

With practice you will no longer need to write them down. When worries come into your head you can 'relabel' them as unhelpful or helpful as they come in.

c.). Reducing Time spent on Worry: Postponing Worry and Worry Time.

If worry is so repetitive and frequent and causes constant anxiety then it **may be helpful to postpone worry**. When you postpone worry you don't block the worry from your mind, you acknowledge it, write a down and make a commitment to look at it later during a specified worry period. This exercise is particularly helpful if you have generalised anxiety (GAD).

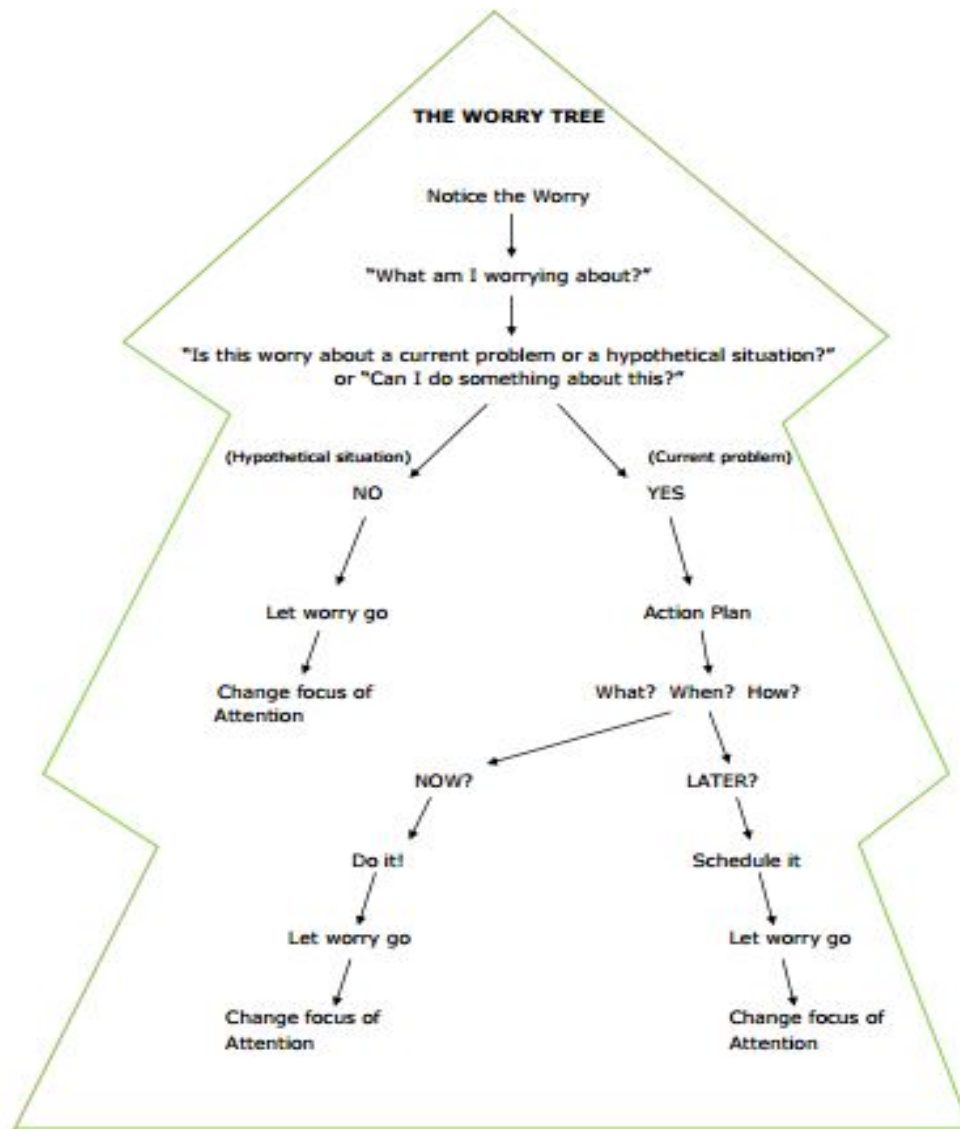
You show yourself with time that worry is controllable and you should feel less stressed if you spend less time going over the same worries again and again.



SELF HELP TOOL If you would like to try reducing your worries, set aside a set time every day of around 20 minutes. Throughout the day write worries down and don't look at them until your worry time period. Then to help you differentiate between helpful/ current and unhelpful/ hypothetical worries you can write them in a diary or use the worry tree below:

d.). Worry Tree

<https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/worrytree.htm>



e.): Letting Worries Go- Mindfulness:

Many clients ask me how exactly do I let worries go...when I use the worry tree? This is a good question and does take time and practice. The key is to not block the worry but to sit with and acknowledge the worry and let it pass. It might help to say 'I'm noticing that I'm having an unhelpful hypothetical worry right now about us not being able to travel abroad again'. By using the phrase 'I'm noticing that', you put distance between you and the worry.

SELF HELP TOOL You also need to be mindful of the worry and not engage with it. Let it pass. It might help to see the worry as.....

- Leaves in a stream. Imagine all your worries written on leaves, you see them you notice them but they float past you and go down a water fall out of sight. You don't engage with them you see them and allow them to pass.
- Maybe you could imagine your thoughts are like clouds floating by. You see them they pass you but you chose not to give those clouds too much attention.

Notice thoughts



without judgement.

These tools are particularly helpful if you are in bed. If you are awake you could choose to refocus your attention on something else. Start an activity that will engage your mind fully, maybe go to a different room to reset yourself if you can.

f.) Positive and Negative What If's



If you have a particularly stubborn hypothetical worry that you can't let go of during worry time, then try using this method.

For every negative 'what if' you have you need to write next to it another less catastrophic alternative. This can be a useful way for you to see more helpful and plausible alternatives.

SELF HELP TOOL

NEGATIVE 'WHAT IFS'	POSITIVE 'WHAT IFS'
1) What if I get coronavirus and become seriously unwell and end up in hospital	1.)What if I get coronavirus and have mild symptoms like the majority of other people. What if I don't end up in hospital because I don't have an underlying condition. What if I need health advice but don't end up being hospitalised. What if I avoid getting the illness all together because I'm indoors most of the time.

g.): Replace 'What If's' with 'If Thens'. (PROBLEM SOLVING):

This is a simple but effective technique which can also be used instead of *or in addition to the positive and negative what if method* if you're struggling with a particularly stubborn, hypothetical worry that feels hard to 're label'.

It's often helpful to allow ourselves **to face our fear and think about what we could actually do if the fear actually happened**. Even if this feels hard to do in the short term it will feel helpful and even relieving in the long term, as we have a chance to problem solve and see we could cope or act if our fear did come true.

For example if you had a thought such as '*What if someone in my home gets ill with coronavirus*'.

This thought may make you feel so anxious you block it and don't have a chance to think about what you could do if that actually happened.

If you faced the fear and got some advice you would know that in order to care for someone sick you could do any of the following:

SELF HELP TOOL



IF THENS....IF someone is ill THEN-

- I can give them honey and lemon to help them cough less and feel more comfortable.
- If they have a fever, I can make sure they are not over-dressed.
- I can make sure I give them lots of fluids.
- I can offer them paracetamol if needed.
- I can allow them to rest as much as possible, as this is the best way for people to recover.
- I can monitor them and if they are struggling to breath or do not feel better after a week I can seek medical advice.

Source:[https://www.bing.com/videos/search?](https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=babylon+health+what+to+do+if+someone+in+your+home+getrs+coronavirus+youtube)

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If you researched the topic enough to be informed you will feel prepared and be equipped to manage the situation the best you can. If you block the thought you may feel better in the short term but you will feel more powerless in the short term.

People with high levels of anxiety also tend to under estimate their ability to cope, however they tend to cope when the event happens far better than they think they actually will. Ask yourself these questions:

Are you under estimating your ability to cope?

Have you coped with things far better in the past than you predicted you would?

What challenges have you faced and overcome?

What skills have you used in the past to help you cope?

If you have any stubborn 'what ifs'. Take a moment to write down this worry, research if needed and write down all the possible things you could do if the worry is helpful, current and something you can do something about.

SELF HELP TOOL Looking at your 'If thens' will give you some ideas on how to deal with your fears. It can also help to consider the pros and cons of your possible solutions too.

Here is a template of a problem solving sheet which you may also find helpful: <https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/docs/ProblemSolvingWorksheet.pdf>

INTOLERANCE OF UNCERTAINTY IS ALSO A FACTOR THAT FUELS WORRY; HOWEVER I WILL BE COVERING THIS AREA IN A SEPARATE BLOG POST SOON.