
Coping with anxiety and worry

Anxiety is a common and understandable response to having cancer. We are hard-wired to experience anxiety and fear when we encounter uncertainty and threat, and this is often accompanied by a range of other responses which can become overwhelming, such as:

- Physical sensations, eg increased heart rate, shortness of breath and nausea
- Thoughts, eg ‘What if I can’t cope?’ or ‘I’m going to lose control’
- Behavioural urges, eg to avoid or escape the source of danger.

These responses are sometimes referred to as our ‘fight-or-flight response’, which has evolved to help us respond to threats. Although these responses are designed to protect us, they can sometimes become unhelpful, causing distress and getting in the way of important relationships and activities.

Most people experience anxiety sometimes, but there is a lot of variation in the degree to which it affects people’s lives. Some people rarely experience anxiety or are not too bothered by it when they do. Other people can have anxiety that is all-consuming and stops them from doing what is important to them. If you have noticed that your anxiety is feeling unmanageable, it may be helpful to find support and/or try out some new ways of managing your anxiety. Thankfully, many different approaches have been developed to help people cope with anxiety. In this handout we have pulled together some key ideas and strategies that many people have found helpful. We hope that they will be helpful for you too.

Distinguish between worries about things you can problem-solve now, and potential future worries

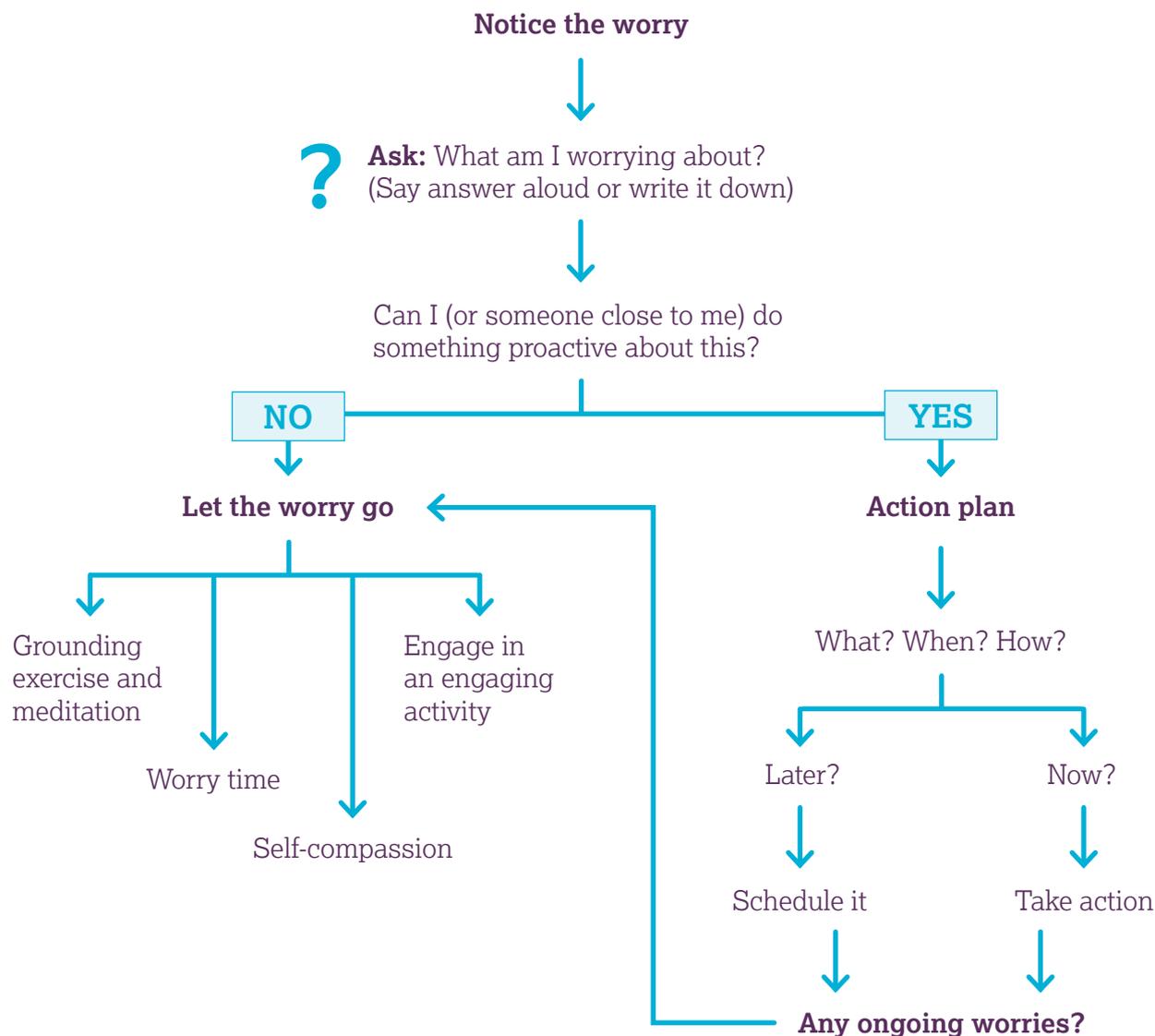
- If your worry is something you can problem-solve now, then try to develop a plan (eg when/how you will try to solve it) and apply it as soon as you can. For example, if you have concerns or questions about your cancer treatment, you could decide when you will call The Royal Marsden Macmillan Hotline.
- If you’re experiencing hypothetical and potential future worries that are not within your control (nor the control of people close to you), then it will not be possible to problem-solve them at the moment. Continuing to worry about these concerns, although natural, is likely to increase your distress and is unlikely to help you find an answer. In this situation it is helpful to find ways to try to let the worry go and focus on something different instead (eg having a cup of tea with friends and family, watching a film or engaging in a hobby).



- Below is a ‘Worry Tree’ guide to help you decide how you might respond to each worry. Further down this handout, there are more ideas on letting go of worries.



Worry Tree



Ground yourself in the present moment

- Learning and practising mindfulness is another way to become better at letting go of worries (which are often about the future) and bringing ourselves back to the present moment. For example, focusing on your breath or your environment can provide 'anchors' to focus on and as you do this you naturally let go of your worries (even if they come wandering back).
- One way of bringing your focus to the here-and-now is to use a grounding technique, such as the 'Five Senses' exercise. If you find yourself feeling overwhelmed or your breathing is becoming quicker, practise

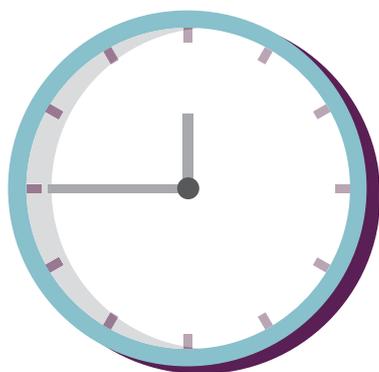
pausing for a moment and bring your attention to:

- 5 things you can see
 - 4 things you can feel
 - 3 things you can hear
 - 2 things you can smell
 - 1 thing you can taste
- Another grounding exercise is the '3 Minute Mindful Breathing Space'. Follow this link to have a go: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rOne1P0TKL8>

- Neither of these exercises aim to take away the difficult thoughts or feelings, but they can help you to feel more settled while you wait for them to pass. For more mindfulness information and exercises, try looking into apps such as 'Headspace', 'Calm' and 'Mindfulness.com'.
- The Royal Marsden's Adult Psychological Support Service runs a six-week mindfulness course. For details of how to get referred to our service, see details at the bottom of this information sheet.

Postpone your worries ('Worry Time')

- 'Letting go' of your worries is easier said than done, but some people find it helpful to try postponing their worries. Deliberately set aside a regular time in the day when you can focus on your worries (eg 15 minutes before dinner time; try not to set this time too close to bedtime). When worries come up during the rest of the day, make a brief note of them (on paper or on your phone) and tell yourself that you will come back to them at 'Worry Time'. Now carry on doing what you were doing before you noticed you were worrying.



- When Worry Time arrives, get out your list of worries and go through them – if any of them no longer bother you much then move on to others that do.
- Once Worry Time has finished (and do stick to the time slot), screw up the piece of paper with the worries on and put it in the recycling bin, or delete the notes you have made on your phone.
- If you forget to do Worry Time that's OK, just remember to postpone future worries until Worry Time comes around the next

day (don't be tempted to have an extra Worry Time).

- It can feel strange to deliberately worry for a set period of time, but knowing you have this time set aside can make it easier to let go of worries in the meantime. It can also reduce the amount of time you spend worrying during the rest of the day.

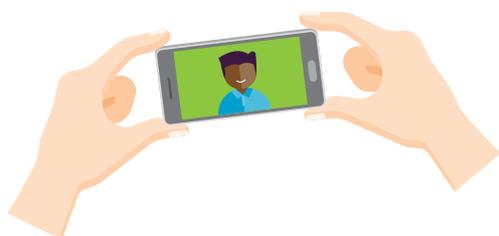
Speak to yourself with compassion

- Lots of people can give compassion to others but can struggle to give this to themselves. You might notice that you are making unfavourable comparisons between yourself and others, or criticising yourself for finding life difficult at the moment. Some people think that being self-compassionate is the same as being self-indulgent and letting yourself off the hook, and that giving yourself 'a talking to' is the best way to motivate yourself. Indeed, sometimes this helps, but not always. This mindset might be something you have learned growing up.
- If you do think that 'a talking to' is the best way to cope, try asking yourself this question: if you were sending someone you love to a new planet, which of the following two planets would you pick? Planet A, where it is strict and any mistakes are met with a telling off or a punishment, and people learn that they are not good enough. Or Planet B, where it is loving and supportive and any mistakes are met with an understanding that life is difficult, so people are encouraged to gently learn from their mistakes so that they can become the best version of themselves.
- If you think that you grew up on Planet A, and wish you had grown up on Planet B, try to:
 - Become more aware of when you are speaking to yourself in a critical way and write down the thoughts that you notice.
 - Ask yourself "Would I speak like this to a close friend or a young child?" and "If a close friend or young child was going through a similar situation, what would I say to them?". Write out the compassionate response you would say to your friend or the young child and then edit it so that it is directed to yourself instead.

- It can help to read this aloud to yourself in a warm, compassionate voice, and to try to tune into what it feels like to relate to yourself in this way.

Maintain a balance of activities that matter to you

- For most people, cancer and its treatment can cause a big change to daily routines. This may have left you feeling that you don't have much control over your life and can get in the way of you doing the things that matter to you. Therefore, it can be helpful to develop a daily routine to make sure you are still engaging in activities that are meaningful and satisfying for you.
- One way of achieving this is to make sure you are planning a balance of 'ACE' activities: activities that give you a sense of Achievement, Connection and Enjoyment. Make sure these are right for you (and not someone else) and are based on what you can do at the moment. For example, if you are not able to meet people in person at the moment, calls and video chats can be a great way of still connecting with others.



- You could also try to find alternative ways of doing things you enjoy with people that you might have done in the past (eg a 'virtual' film night or dinner).
- As well as your ACE activities hopefully being fulfilling in themselves, engaging in them can give you another way of letting go of worries and re-focusing your attention on other things.
- Sometimes people find that they are distracting themselves (or avoiding) from thinking or feeling. This is ok from time to time, however, it can cause new problems. For example, if your only way of distracting

yourself is to watch TV, this may cause problems in your relationships. If you think that you cope by distracting yourself, then try some of the other exercises on this worksheet.

The above is a short summary of strategies that can help you to cope with anxiety and worries. If you would like further advice on coping with anxiety and worries, other psychological information sheets are available from The Royal Marsden or you may want to visit one of the following websites:

Macmillan

<https://www.macmillan.org.uk/cancer-information-and-support/impacts-of-cancer/anxiety>

Get Self Help

<https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/anxiety-self-help/>

Centre for Clinical Interventions

<https://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/Resources/Looking-After-Yourself/Anxiety>

Compassionate Mind

<https://www.compassionatemind.co.uk/resource/resources>

If you need any specialist and personalised advice about your cancer treatment and appointments, please contact The Royal Marsden Macmillan Hotline. This hotline is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week on 020 8915 6899.

The Royal Marsden's Adult Psychological Support Service offers short-term, cancer-specific psychological support. This includes psycho-sexual therapy and couples counselling. You can either self-refer or ask somebody in your Royal Marsden healthcare team to refer you. We can provide psychological support to people up to two years following their active cancer treatment.

For more information, visit this website <https://www.royalmarsden.nhs.uk/your-care/adult-support-services/adult-psychological-support-service>.

Alternatively, contact us directly on 020 7808 2777 (Chelsea) or 020 8661 3006 (Sutton).

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This booklet is evidence based wherever the appropriate evidence is available,
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Details of the references used in writing this booklet are available on request from:

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