A picture containing drawing

Description automatically generated

**Agoraphobia Group**

**Session 3: Thoughts**

In today’s session we discussed the role of our thoughts in feeding Agoraphobia, and keeping the ‘vicious circle’ going. We also learned what we can do to identify and challenge anxious and unhelpful thoughts.

Our *thoughts* or the way we think about things can play a major role in increasing or reducing our panic & anxiety levels. Many of our thoughts occur outside of our control, and can be negative or unhelpful…

**Negative Automatic Thoughts**

* They are automatic – and seem to come out of nowhere
* Because we have thought it, we presume it must be true. we therefore accept them without question.
* They are the kind of thoughts that if they were true, would make most people feel anxious
* They can be negative or unhelpful and are hard to stop.
* They can also come in the form of images or memories

**Unhelpful Thinking**

It is important to remember that it is *not the situation itself* that makes us feel anxious; it is *our perception of that situation*. Changing the way we think about situations and seeing different perspectives can help us to feel less anxious.

**Types of Negative Automatic Thoughts**

* What you say to yourself
  + - ‘I will collapse if I have to wait in a big queue at the shop’
* Images in your head
  + - ‘Seeing yourself lying on the shop floor’
* Memories
  + - Remembering an image of someone who had collapsed in a shop

***Types of unhelpful thoughts***

**Jumping to conclusions:** making negative interpretations without any definite facts or negatively predicting future outcomes

**Catastrophising:** Magnifying or exaggerating how awful or unpleasant and event will be. if you have a disaster you may view it as a never-ending pattern of defeat.

Being aware of the common patterns that unhelpful thoughts follow can help you to recognise when you have them. Some of the common patterns that our unhelpful thoughts follow are in this handout.

**Thought Diaries**

Due to the anxiety and panic you experience when faced with your agoraphobic situation, it can be hard to remember what was going through our mind at the time. You can train yourself to notice your thoughts using a thought diary. Thought diaries can provide a way of recording your thoughts, identifying unhelpful thoughts, and becoming more aware of them. When learning a new skill, it’s useful to go back to basics. Writing it down helps!

**Exercise 3.1 Think about a time when you were faced with your agoraphobic situation, what thoughts were you experiencing?**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Date/Time** | **Emotions** | **Unhelpful Thought** |
|  |  |  |

**Exercise 3.2. Do any of the thought fall into the unhelpful thoughts? If so what ones?**

|  |
| --- |
|  |
|  |
|  |
|  |
|  |
|  |

**Challenging Automatic Negative Thoughts**

When you are anxious, you look for (and find) threats that keep you feeling anxious.

* You zoom in on ‘threats’
* You find ‘evidence’ for your fears
* You ignore ‘evidence’ against your fears

Once you have identified an unhelpful thought, the next step is to challenge that thought. You can think of it like a jury in a court case. To know the truth you need to piece together the evidence.

What is the evidence **FOR** your thoughts? – refers to information that you feel backs up your thought. It may be how you feel or previous experiences.

What is the evidence **AGAINST** your thoughts? – refers to all the information that contradicts your thought such as remembering the worst hasn’t happened and how you coped before.

**Fact vs Opinions**

**Facts**: can be checked and are supported by evidence, therefore, they tend to be correct. e.g. fire is hot

**Opinions**: are based on belief or views and are not necessarily supported by evidence. Therefore, not everyone will agree e.g green is the best colour.

When you have weighed the evidence for and against your thoughts, try to come to a more realistic, balanced perspective. Sometimes it can help to ask your partner or a friend to help you with this task.

**Helpful questions to ask:**

* If a friend had that thought, what would I say to him/her?
* What would others say to my thought?
* What is the worse that can happen?
* How could I cope if the worse happens?
* Are you falling into the trap of negative thinking styles?
* Is this thought helpful to me? What would be a more helpful way to think?
* Is there another way of looking at this situation?
* How will you feel about this in 6 months time? Will this thought matter as much?
* Have you been in a similar situation before? How did you cope?
* Is my thought a fact or an opinion?

**Exercise 3.3: Try to challenge your automatic thoughts, using the 7-column thought diary. A cop is available at the end of the workbook.**

The goal of this task is to teach you to recognise, unwind, and tackle thoughts, which make you anxious. It is hoped that in time you will become an expert in identifying and challenging your own unhelpful thoughts. It is a new skill and will not happen overnight; it will take time and practise!

**Distraction**

Remember, it is impossible for your mind to think about two things at the same time. distraction can therefore be helpful when you are having difficulty challenging your thoughts or dealing with the physical symptoms of anxiety.

There is a range of distraction techniques available at the end of the workbook.

**Relaxing 'Safe Place' Imagery**

* Imagine a place where you can feel calm, peaceful and safe. It may be a place you've been to before, somewhere you've dreamt about going to, or maybe somewhere you've seen a picture of.
* Focus on the colours in your peaceful safe place.
* Now notice the sounds that are around you, or perhaps the silence.
* Think about any smells you notice there.
* Then focus on any skin sensations - the earth beneath you, the temperature, any movement of air, anything else you can touch.
* Now whilst you're in your peaceful and safe place, you might choose to give it a name, whether one word or a phrase that you can use to bring that image back, anytime you need to.
* You can choose to linger there a while, just enjoying the peacefulness and serenity. You can leave whenever you want to, just by opening your eyes and being aware of where you are now.

**Imagery**

**Start each visualisation** with relaxation by getting comfortable in a quiet place where you won't be disturbed, and take a couple of minutes to focus on your breathing. Close your eyes, then mentally scan your body and become aware of any areas of tension, and let that tension go with each out-breath.

All visualisations can be strengthened by ensuring you engage all your senses in building the picture in your mind's eye - it's more than just "seeing"! If you notice any negative links or images entering your positive imagery, then abort that image and think of something else.

Finish each visualisationby taking a few moments to bring yourself back into the room where you are, opening your eyes and looking around, sitting up, and bringing yourself back to alertness in the 'here and now'.

**Relaxing 'Safe Place' Imagery**

* Imagine a place where you can feel calm, peaceful and safe. It may be a place you've been to before, somewhere you've dreamt about going to, or maybe somewhere you've seen a picture of.
* Focus on the colours in your peaceful safe place.
* Now notice the sounds that are around you, or perhaps the silence.
* Think about any smells you notice there.
* Then focus on any skin sensations - the earth beneath you, the temperature, any movement of air, anything else you can touch.
* Now whilst you're in your peaceful and safe place, you might choose to give it a name, whether one word or a phrase that you can use to bring that image back, anytime you need to.
* You can choose to linger there a while, just enjoying the peacefulness and serenity. You can leave whenever you want to, just by opening your eyes and being aware of where you are now.

**Homework**

* Over the next week, practice thought challenging using the 7 column thought diary – look at evidence for and against your negative automatic thoughts, to come up with a more balanced, realistic thought.
* Along with the other coping strategies you have learned so far, try practicing distraction

**7 column thought diary**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Date/Time/**  **Situation** | **Emotion (rate 0-100%** | **Unhelpful thought** | **Evidence For** | **Evidence Against** | **Alternative thought** | **Outcome (re-rate emotion)** |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

**Distraction techniques**

**Categories Game**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Choose at least three of the categories below and name as many items as you can in each one. Spend a few minutes on each category to come up with as many items as possible.  Movies,  Countries  Sports teams  Animals  Colours  Cities  Cars  Films and TV |  | Cereals |
|  |  | Fruits & Vegetables |
| **Mental Exercises**  Use mental exercises to take your mind off uncomfortable thoughts and feelings. They are discreet and easy to use at nearly any time or place. Experiment to see which work best for you.  • Name all the objects you see.  • Describe the steps in performing an activity you know how to do well. For example, how to shoot a basketball, prepare your favourite meal, or tie a knot.  • Count backwards from 100 by 7.  • Pick up an object and describe it in detail. Describe its colour, texture, size, weight, scent, and any other qualities you notice.  • Spell your full name, and the names of three other people, backwards.  • Name all your family members, their ages, and one of their favourite activities.  • Read something backwards, letter-by-letter. Practice for at least a few minutes.  • Think of an object and “draw” it in your mind, or in the air with your finger. Try drawing your home, a vehicle, or an animal.  Sensory Awareness |  | Famous People |

|  |
| --- |
| **What are 5 things you can see?** Look for small details such as a pattern on the ceiling, the way light reflects off a surface, or an object you never noticed. |
| **What are 4 things you can feel?** Notice the sensation of clothing on your body, the sun on your skin, or the feeling of the chair you are sitting in. Pick up an object and examine its weight, texture, and other physical qualities. |
| **What are 3 things you can hear?** Pay special attention to the sounds your mind has tuned out, such as a ticking clock, distant traffic, or trees blowing in the wind. |
| **What are 2 things you can smell?** Try to notice smells in the air around you, like an air freshener or freshly mowed grass. You may also look around for something that has a scent, such as a flower or an unlit candle. |
| **What is 1 thing you can taste?** Carry gum, candy, or small snacks for this step. Pop one in your mouth and focus your attention closely on the flavours. |