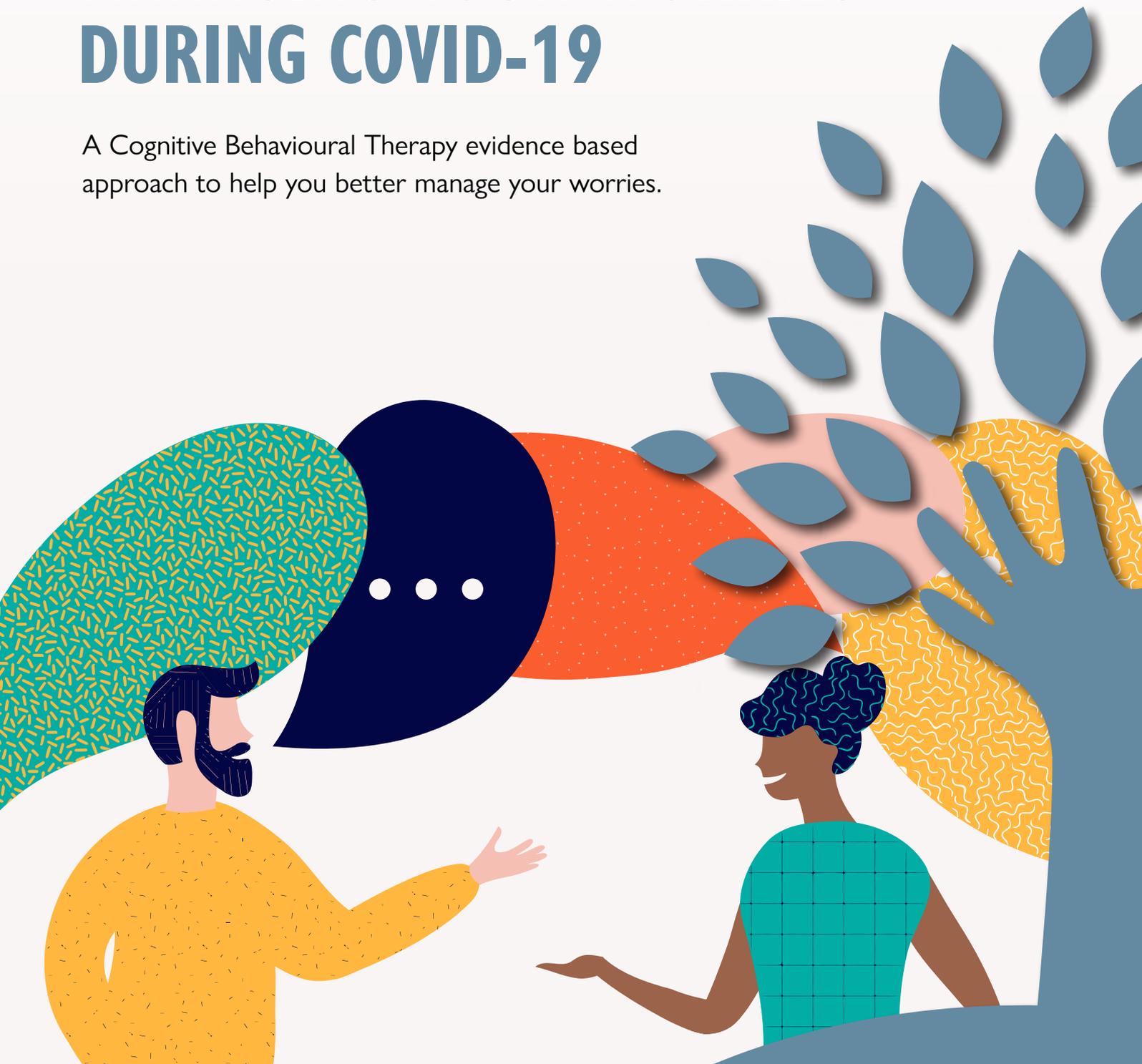


MANAGING YOUR WORRIES DURING COVID-19

A Cognitive Behavioural Therapy evidence based approach to help you better manage your worries.



MANAGING YOUR WORRIES DURING COVID-19

YOUR WELLBEING SERVICE IS HERE TO HELP

It is not surprising that COVID-19 is causing people to be worrying about many different things. For students, this worry may be having a significant impact on their ability to continue with their studies or just go about their daily life. This self-help approach is here to help you *manage your worries* and put you back in control. Being self-help, this approach has been designed for you to work through on your own. At times however, you may find yourself struggling with a specific Step.

IF SO, YOU ARE NOT ON YOUR OWN!

If needed, trained Practitioners at the University of Exeter Wellbeing Service with expertise in supporting this approach are ready to offer support by e-mail, video-conference or over the telephone. See website for information on how to do this.



You are in control of the way you choose to work through this workbook. Therefore, the speed you want to go using the workbook is down to you alongside how you put the techniques you'll learn into practice.

WORRYING IS SOMETHING WE ALL DO

At times it can be something helpful, making us feel more in control and prepared.

However, events such as the COVID-19 pandemic can begin to make us worry uncontrollably a lot of the time, about many different things. This can significantly impact our ability to go about our daily lives and paralyse our ability to make decisions. As a student at the University of Exeter this may have a significant impact. It may affect your ability to go about your daily life and continue studying for your degree to the best of your ability.

The self-help techniques included in this approach are based on two evidence-based techniques for the treatment of worry, called **Worry Time** and **Problem Solving**. These techniques can help break the **vicious cycle of worry**, that like many others, you may understandably be experiencing during this challenging time.

Managing some of your worries will help give you the space to solve worries that can be solved! **Problem Solving** helps you deal more effectively with practical problems you experience in life and may be worrying about. The technique provides you with a structured way to think about different practical solutions that may exist to help solve your problems and stop worrying about them.

Research has found these techniques to be effective, especially for people experiencing difficult life events.

What are these techniques?

Worry Time is a technique to help put you back in control and stop being a slave to worries as they occur throughout the day. It will help you better manage a type of worry through scheduling a specific time to dedicate to worry about them.



WHY WORRY ASSOCIATED WITH COVID-19 IS PARTICULARLY HARD NOT TO WORRY ABOUT

Intolerance of uncertainty is when people overestimate that future events will be negative whilst believing they will not be able to cope if the worst happens. In these situations, they may believe that worrying about potential problems in the future helps them generate solutions if problems do arise.

Challenges presented by events such as the COVID-19 pandemic arise because such an event is thankfully extremely uncommon. Due to these events being so uncommon, everyone; including scientists, medical staff, politicians and the public alike, are having to live with a certain amount of uncertainty. Such uncertainty will remain until knowledge about the pandemic improves.

Furthermore, given that problems presented by the pandemic are not that common or indeed are unique, having an awareness of appropriate solutions may be limited. This therefore requires people to use their problem solving skills, whether that be to find a cure for COVID-19, identifying the best ways to reduce the spread, maximise medical treatment or indeed find ways to help people better manage their worries.

Whilst knowledge and understanding about the medical and psychological management of COVID-19 are improving, not least contributed to by University of Exeter clinical and academic staff, levels of uncertainty will remain.

This approach will hopefully help you learn how to manage your worries better in these uncertain and challenging times.



HELPFUL TIPS

Before you get started, sharing some tips may be helpful. Many of these have come from people that have used self-help approaches before.

Give it your best shot

Because you will not have experienced the demands imposed on you by COVID-19 before, you may initially struggle with some Steps covered by this approach. But just give the approach your best shot. That's all anyone, including yourself, can ask of you.

Avoid Boom and Bust

Working through this approach, you should go at a rate best suited to you. However, often slow and steady works best.

Involve family and friends

Given the limitations of COVID-19, you may be using this self-help approach from home and just being with your family and having others around may be helpful. They may be able to help you if struggling in any way with specific Steps, can help you look at things differently, find ways to solve problems or sometimes just for a chat. However, you might be living away from others you trust and find helpful, so you can't ask for face-to-face advice, but you could consider using the telephone or having a video chat.

Ask for help

Although this is self-help, if you find yourself struggling with any Step then please send the Wellbeing Practitioner an email, being as specific as possible about the difficulty you've experienced with the self-help approach. They will initially provide e-support including specific advice on ways to overcome any difficulties with any of the stages. This approach will hopefully help you to learn how to manage your worries better in these uncertain and challenging times.



START MANAGING YOUR WORRIES AGAIN

This self-help approach consists of 3 Steps:

STEP 1: Capture your worries

STEP 2: Categorise your worries

STEP 3: Identify the best way to manage your worries

Following these steps will lead you to two techniques that each address different types of worries:

Worry time for Hypothetical Worries

Problem solving for Practical Worries

STEP 1: CAPTURE YOUR WORRIES

Try and capture your worries and write them down in your **WORRY WORKSHEET**. It's important to write down all the worries you're having, no matter how small they might seem. It's also important to try and be as specific as possible about the worries by considering each of the following:

■ **What is the situation you are worried about?**

For example: *"My Grandad catching COVID-19"* or *"Ability to complete degree"*

■ **What thoughts are you having?**

For example: *"What if I get corona virus?"* or *"The home internet is so bad, I won't be able to connect to the on-line module lectures?"*

■ **What do you fear might happen? What would be the consequence?**

For example: *"I'll get really ill and may need to interrupt my studies"* or *"I won't get as good a degree I would've were I still at University"*

■ **What emotions are you feeling?**

For example: *'Fearful', 'Sad', 'Overwhelmed' or 'Frustrated'*

I'M WORRYING A LOT AT NIGHT

Worrying a lot at night is common. You may find your worries are preventing you from being able to fall or stay asleep. If you find this is the case, you could try following these tips:

- Keep a copy of the **WORRY WORKSHEET** next to your bed and write down any worries you're having when you have them.
- For the moment, try to “*Let the worry go*”. Remember, you'll come back to these worries as you work through this approach.
- If you find it difficult to get back to sleep, try the following:
 - Focus your attention on the present. For example, the touch of the pillow, the duvet on your toes, or focus on your breathing.
 - If you cannot fall asleep within 15–20 minutes, get out of bed, go to another room. Do a relaxing activity until feeling sleepy then go back to bed (repeat if required).



STEP 2: CATEGORISE YOUR WORRIES

Think about the types of worries you're currently experiencing and categorise them into the following three different types:

NOT IMPORTANT

Worries you may be having but of little current importance, perhaps because of the limitations associated with COVID-19.

For example: "I need to sort out the disagreement I had with Oli before Uni ended" or "My car only has a month left on the MOT". (With current restrictions MOT expiry dates have been extended by 6 months).

IMPORTANT AND CAN BE SOLVED (practical worries)

These are worries of importance and you should actively work towards solving.

Often these worries are related to practical difficulties affecting you now, for which there is a practical solution.

For example, such worries may include things like: "I'm struggling to keep up with the module assessment demands but don't know how to raise this with the module convenor" or "I'm struggling to keep my mood up without my friends".

IMPORTANT BUT CANNOT BE SOLVED (hypothetical)

Worries that have no way of being solved at present but are still important to you.

*Currently, many of these **may** be related to COVID-19 or the impact they may happen in the future.*

For example: "Grandad's got severe asthma and in a high-risk group, what if he gets coronavirus?". Often, they may start with '**What if**', for example "What if my degree gets interrupted, it will be another year before I graduate and get a job!". Worries about things that may happen in the future are known as **Hypothetical Worries**. Although you may dwell on these a lot, there's no way of solving them.

At present there's the possibility that many of your own **Hypothetical Worries** are being fuelled by questions or conversations you hear listening to the news or chatting to family and friends. This is because many questions being asked, although understandable, are in fact hypothetical or highlight uncertainty. For example, "What if self-isolation continues for many more months, what will that mean for our degrees?".

Uncertainty also often drives a scientific approach. For example, "We need to do research to compare this drug with a placebo as we currently simply don't know if it affects the respiratory system". Hypotheses are then derived to answer research questions and reduce uncertainty. On the basis of this uncertainty, hypotheses are derived.

Although these types of questions are fully understandable or associated with a scientific approach, at least in the short term, or until research questions are answered, they may initially escalate **Intolerance of uncertainty**.



Transfer worries identified on the **WORRY WORKSHEET** and write them on your **TYPE OF WORRY WORKSHEET**. Write each worry in the column most appropriate to represent that type of worry.

TYPE OF WORRY WORKSHEET

NOT IMPORTANT	IMPORTANT AND CAN BE SOLVED	IMPORTANT BUT CANNOT BE SOLVED (hypothetical)



BEFORE MOVING ON TOO QUICKLY, LOOK BACK OVER YOUR HYPOTHETICAL WORRIES AND CONSIDER IF THERE MAY BE A PRACTICAL SOLUTION?

Sometimes, “What if” worries may be able to be adapted to have a practical solution. If you think this may be the case, ask yourself questions such as “Is it a worry I can do something about now?” or “Is there a specific plan I can put in place to overcome this worry?”

To help decide whether a worry has a practical solution, it is helpful to look at the specific situation you’re worrying about. For example, you may find yourself worrying “What if I can’t get hold of the text I need to complete my essay” and then “What if it prevents me supporting the argument I’m trying to make?” finally leading to “What if my module gets capped and it brings my degree classification down?” Whilst these are “What if?” worries, the situation you are worrying about is something you could address.

It’s a problem that is practical and can be solved. For example, “What if I can’t get hold of the text I need to complete my essay” could lead to reframing into a question to generate a solution in the **here-and now**. “What can I do to see if I can get hold of the text?”

As the problem is about a specific situation, there may be a specific plan you could put in place to achieve it. For example, “First I will try to get hold of the library to see if there is anyway I can get hold of it. If not, I will contact my Personal Tutor and see if he can help me problem solve or offer advice”.

CONSIDER

Sometimes trying to find a practical solution to worries means you may be slipping into using worry behaviours.

For example, reassurance seeking or over-preparing and planning.

You might want to consider asking yourself “Am I putting this solution in place to plan for the unknown?” If you find yourself struggling with this, consider getting some e-support from a University Wellbeing Practitioner. They are keen to help.



STEP 3: IDENTIFY THE BEST WAY TO MANAGE YOUR WORRIES

You've identified different types of worries you are currently experience. Use the diagram below to decide how best to deal with them.



WORRY TIME

It can be difficult not to worry about hypothetical worries, even when they can't be solved. Whilst it's important to try and *let them go*, this can be easier said than done!

A technique some people find helps them with this type of worry is to schedule something called Worry Time. **Worry Time** allows you to plan time to worry about your hypothetical worries, but at a specific time and for a specific duration set by you.



CONSIDER

Scheduling time to worry when you are currently overwhelmed with many worries may not seem to make much sense! This is understandable but can help you regain control over your worry.

Worry Time has been shown to be really helpful for many people and can help you manage your worries better again. It will give you more time to focus on practical worries you're more likely to be able to do something about.

SCHEDULE WORRY TIME

Think about a specific time each day you can set aside to worry about your hypothetical worries. Ensure this is your protected time where you can worry and do nothing else.

People often report finding 20 minutes is enough. Although when you get started you'll be the best judge as to the amount of time you need to schedule your Worry Time for.

Having a scheduled Worry Time can help you stop your hypothetical worries from impacting too much on other things you're doing during the rest of your day and put you back in control. Once you've decided on a suitable time, write this in your **WORRY TIME WORKSHEET**.

Scheduling Worry Time

- Let others know not to disturb you
- Turn your phone off, or if needed, ask others to get the phone if it rings
- Find somewhere quiet and free from other distractions
- Plan for the week in advance
- Don't schedule it too close to your bed time



WORRY TIME WORKSHEET

Worry Time
My scheduled Worry Time is:
Duration:
My hypothetical worries
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13



WRITE YOUR WORRIES DOWN

Scheduling Worry Time won't stop worries from popping into your head during the day. However, when they do, write them down in your **WORRY TIME WORKSHEET** and set them aside until your scheduled Worry Time. You may find it helpful to carry the **WORRY TIME WORKSHEET** with you, to capture them as they arise.

You're still taking these worries seriously as you'll be coming back to them during your scheduled worry time. However, writing them down and putting them aside can help reduce their impact on what you're doing there and then.

CONSIDER

The worries you write down during the day may not just be hypothetical. They might be worries that have a solution – so they are practical problems that can be solved.

However, when you come to your scheduled Worry Time later you will go through the worries you've written down. If there are problems that have a solution you can then use **Problem solving**.



REFOCUS ON THE PRESENT

Once you've written the worry down, try to **refocus** on what you were doing before you started worrying. Sometimes however, if you're struggling to refocus it may help to do something different to what you were doing before. Remember, you have set aside worry time later so try to let the worry go for now. **You're not ignoring it, just delaying it until Worry Time when you can give it your full attention!**

Ways to Refocus

- Remember you have your scheduled Worry Time later.
- Pay attention to the present. For example, the task or activity you were doing when the hypothetical worry came into your mind.
- If you find paying attention to the present difficult, concentrate on the task you were doing by using your senses. For example, what can you see, smell, hear, touch or taste? If you are cooking, focus on the smell of the food, or the sound of the food cooking.
- If you find re-engaging in the task you were doing too difficult, it can be helpful to switch entirely to a new task.

USE WORRY TIME

During your scheduled Worry Time, read through the worries you've written down on the [WORRY TIME WORKSHEET](#) during the day. Then use your Worry Time to worry about them.

Sometimes, when you come back to these worries you may find that some of them are no longer a worry for you. If this is the case put a line through them.

If, on looking at any worry again you find you can reframe it from a 'What if..' to a practical worry, put a line through it and add to your [TYPES OF WORRIES WORKSHEET](#) in the 'Important and can be solved' column. If you decide you want to work through that worry, you can then use Problem Solving to solve it.

Using Worry Time takes time and practice. However, over time you may find this a useful technique to reduce the impact of hypothetical worries on a day-to-day basis.

As you begin to use Worry Time more often you may also find yourself being able to reduce the amount of time you schedule for it each day. Over time you may not need Worry Time at all, but this is something you should work towards.

REVIEW WORRY TIME

After your scheduled Worry Time, use the [WORRY TIME REVIEW WORKSHEET](#) to write down what you've learnt during worry time.

For example:

- Did some of your worries have practical solutions?
- Did you notice you have fewer worries than you realised? Or perhaps a lot of your worries were about the same thing?
- Did some of the worries no longer bother you?

It's important not to review your Worry Time until after the time you've set aside to worry has finished. Initially Worry Time itself should be used just to worry.



WORRY TIME REVIEW WORKSHEET

WHAT HAVE I LEARNT DURING WORRY TIME?

Try to think about what you've learnt during Worry Time. For example, what have you noticed using Worry Time? Were some of your worries practical worries? Were you able to reframe some of your hypothetical worries to make practical? Were you having lots of worries about the same thing? Were some of the worries no longer bothering you?



PROBLEM SOLVING

Many worries we experience have a practical solution. However, when you're experiencing lots of different practical worries it may seem they are too difficult and overwhelming to solve. Trying to follow a structured method to solve your problems may help find practical solutions.

SELECT A WORRY

Select a worry you've listed under '**Important and can be solved**' column from the **TYPES OF WORRIES WORKSHEET**. It's your choice which worry to begin to work on, however it can be helpful to choose the worry that is currently most important or has the largest consequence if not addressed. Once selected, write the worry down on your **PROBLEM SOLVING WORKSHEET**. If not done so already, convert the worry into a practical problem. For example, "I may not be able to access the online teaching platform" could be converted into "Where can I find information or help to let me know about accessing the teaching platform".

CONSIDER

Sometimes, you may find you've identified problems that seem too big or overwhelming to solve. This is normal and to be expected, especially if they are problems you've been looking to solve for some time.

One way of helping with problems that seem too big or overwhelming is to look at **breaking them down**.

For example, you may be experiencing difficulties paying off a finance loan. When breaking down a difficulty with finance, think about the different components such as how much debt you have, what your income and what your expenditure is. Sometimes with problems such as this, it's also worth thinking if there are others with specialist knowledge who can help. For example, professionals with this specific type of knowledge or organisations and charities in the community that may be able to help.

If you find yourself struggling with **breaking your problems down** then send an email to the Wellbeing Practitioner to seek support.





MY PROBLEM SOLVING RECORD WORKSHEET

What is the worry you'd like to try and solve? Convert this into a practical problem if not already done so.

My worry:

My practical problem?:

Identify a solution

Identify as many potential solutions as possible to the problem identified and write them down. Don't worry at this point if the solution seems ridiculous. It's important not to reject anything too early.

What are the potential solutions? (Remember not to dismiss anything too early!)

ANALYSE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Consider the strengths and weaknesses for all of the potential solutions identified.

Think about the following:

- Do you believe the solution is likely to work?
- Are you going to be able to try the solution out?
- Do you have everything you need to try the solution out? If not, this may represent a weakness.
- Could the solution cause even more problems?
- Is it likely the University will be able to provide help or direct you to helpful support.

In the final column of the **STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES WORKSHEET** put:

Yes: For solutions you'd like to try out,

No: For solutions you feel you can reject

Maybe: For solutions you may want to think about more.

If you struggle you may consider asking family or friends you find helpful. Or if needed, send an email to the Wellbeing Practitioner for *e-support*.

Remember: The University Wellbeing Service is here to help.

CONSIDER

Be careful not to slip into using worry behaviours.

For example, reassurance seeking or over-preparing and planning. You might want to consider asking yourself *“Am I putting this solution in place to plan for the unknown?”* If you find yourself struggling with this, consider getting some *e*support from the Wellbeing Practitioner. They are keen to help.





MY STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES WORKSHEET

My Problem – write the problem that can be solved here:

Strengths and weaknesses of each solution?

SOLUTION	STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES	CHOICE (YES/NO/ MAYBE)

SELECT A SOLUTION

Select a solution you'd like to try out.

The solution am I going to try out?

PLANNING

Solutions to problems often require careful planning. To make a solution more achievable, it can be helpful to think about the steps and resources that may be needed such as time, support, finance, equipment etc. Remember the University has many Support Services that may be able to help.

Ensure all steps are specific, linked and realistic. To make the steps more specific it can be helpful to think about the "4 Ws":

- WHAT are you doing? For example, phoning my electric company
- WHERE are you going to do it? For example, in my kitchen
- WHEN are you going to do it? For example, on Wednesday at 3pm
- WHO will you be with? For example, on my own

What steps will I follow to apply my solution?

e.g., What, When, With Whom, Where? What resources do I need? What steps do I need to follow?

APPLY THE SOLUTION

Now, put your plan into action by applying the solution!

It's really important to write down how you went about trying your solution out. So, you don't need to rely on your memory, it's best to do this as soon as possible after trying the solution out.

What exactly did I do?

HOW IT WENT

Review how well your solution worked.

Some solutions may have worked, some may have worked a little and some may not have worked at all. If your plan didn't work this can be very frustrating. However, some problems are very difficult and may need more than one plan to solve.

If the solution has worked, then based on what you've learnt here, you may want to consider if this or a similar solution may help with other problems you've identified.

Otherwise, if the solution didn't help solve the problem, consider if there was anything about this solution that may have been helpful to inform another solution. Or if it did not help at all consider if there is another solution.

Review how it went

How successful was the solution? What went well? What didn't go to plan? If things didn't go to plan has anything been learnt that may inform another solution?

Remember: Regardless of whether the solution worked or not, every time you try out a solution you're learning about the types of things that work and those that don't. All this information is good, as it may help you generate further solutions that may work in future.

CHECKING-IN

As you work through your worries listed on your **TYPES OF WORRIES WORKSHEET**, it's important to cross off worries you've solved or that no longer bother you.

Remember, some worries with practical solutions may take longer to solve than others, so these worries will end up staying on the **TYPES OF WORRIES WORKSHEET** for longer. By crossing off your worries you'll be able to see how you've managed to tackle various problems in your life and start to regain control of your worries rather than letting your worries control you.

Otherwise, remember you are not on your own!



AUTHORS

Professor Paul Farrand is Director of the Low-Intensity Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (LICBT) portfolio within Clinical Education, Development and Research (CEDAR); Psychology at the University of Exeter. His main clinical and research interests are in LICBT, especially in a written self-help format and has developed a wide range of written CBT self-help interventions for depression and anxiety. He sits on the Expert Advisory Group for the Department of Health Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) programme, national level committees developing a broader psychological therapies workforce and at an international level concerning worldwide developments in LICBT. Clinically, he has been Psychological Lead attached to Head and Neck specialties for over 20 years and Academic Lead for the University of Exeter Wellbeing Service.

Dr Joanne Woodford was involved in developing the intervention that formed the basis of this prevention approach whilst working as a Research Fellow within Clinical Education, Development and Research (CEDAR); Psychology at the University of Exeter. She has now joined the Uppsala University in Sweden as a Researcher within the research group Clinical Psychology in Healthcare. She has a special focus on informal caregiving and family mental health and has developed a wide range of CBT self-help interventions for informal caregivers of people with stroke, people with dementia, and parents of children with cancer. Joanne has also worked on several educational programmes directed at training mental health professionals to support patients in the use of CBT self-help materials.

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