A tool for dealing with worry and rumination

This is the fourth in a series of podcasts guiding you through some of the key techniques of CBT for low mood and depression. In this podcast we're going to focus on two of depression's most common companions – worry and rumination.

Without going into this in detail, I want to acknowledge that I'm recording this in the context of the coronavirus pandemic, a time of huge global and personal anxiety, uncertainty, and loss. Everyone's experience of this time will be different, but I think it's fair to say that this is ripe territory for worry. The impact of the restrictions, and the potential loss of valued outlets, opportunities and freedoms, may also be keenly felt. Whatever your circumstances and experiences, I hope there'll be something of value in this and the other podcasts. But if you are feeling stuck, if you're struggling – please don't suffer in silence. The university counselling service is continuing to offer online appointments throughout the academic year, and you can also reach out to your GP.

So, back to the topic at hand. Let's start with some definitions: what do I mean by worry? Using our CBT model, we can think of worry as having a cognitive and an emotional component. The cognitive bit is the repetitive, doom-laden cycles of thought that hook you in, often relating to hypothetical future scenarios. "What if…" thoughts. "What if it's a really impossible exam and I don't have anything to write?" "What if I've accidentally plagiarised in my coursework?" "What if my friend was really offended when I made that joke and is now telling everyone what an awful person I am?" "What if I've passed on the virus?" "What if I have to self-isolate again: how will I cope?"

The emotional component is the accompanying feeling: more often than not, anxiety. But there's also a crucial third component here which is to do with your attention. A worry becomes a worry not when that first unwanted thought pops into your mind, but when it hooks you in, when it sets off a train of thought that won't let you go, conjuring all manner of worst case scenarios. I sometimes like to think of attention as a bit like a moving spotlight: we're dimly aware of what's going on in the periphery but at any one moment there's really only quite a narrow field that we can properly attend to. Some of the time that spotlight is centred on the action out there in the world. Other times it flips right back on ourselves, and it's our own internal drama that is the more compelling plot. Worry sees us stuck in our minds, playing and re-playing all that might go wrong.

Rumination is very similar to worry, but more past-focused. It shares the same repetitive, stuck-ness, a focus on problems, on questions that don't yield answers. It takes its name from the way in which cows eat grass: chewing it and chewing it and then swallowing it only then to regurgitate it and chew it some more. Typically, in depression, there is a heavy self-critical flavour to ruminative thoughts, and the accompanying feelings might be of guilt, anger, or hopelessness. "Why is it so hard for me to work at the moment, why am I so lazy, why can't I do the things I know I should?" "If only I'd gone about things differently in that relationship, maybe it wouldn't have ended: why am I so needy, are my relationships doomed to fail?"

Now, we all worry at times, and we all ruminate – I don't know anyone who can claim they don't. The focus here is on the kind of worry and rumination that really bogs you down: the relentless, seemingly uncontrollable kind – the kind that stops you in your tracks, stops you doing the things that you love. Research has shown there are strong links between rumination and depression, and it probably acts both as cause and consequence of depressed mood. Worry is usually more associated

with anxiety rather than depression, but the two often go together. In my experience, worry is a particularly common problem for students, and for good reason: university is a time of massive change; it brings tremendous academic pressure and, often, social and developmental turbulence. And right now, you're having to navigate all of that in the context of the pandemic.

In the second podcast I talked about some ways to handle troublesome negative thoughts. The technique I'm going to focus on here builds on one of these techniques. Essentially, in CBT, there are two key questions to ask yourself when it comes to negative, worrisome thoughts: "is this thought true?" and "is this thought helpful?" The first question is useful for recognising ways in which low mood can skew your thinking, allowing you then to reflect on more compassionate, balanced interpretations. Sometimes though, when you go through the process of challenging your thoughts, there's still a seed of doubt, a crack through which anxiety can gain a foothold – a "yes, but". So maybe you challenge again, you look again at the evidence, you play out all the hypothetical scenarios…. and at this point, your thought process is beginning to look a lot like worry. If this sounds familiar to you, you may find it helps to focus on that second question: is this thinking helpful to me right now?

In my own training, reading and personal therapy, I've found this simple question to be really valuable in dealing with my own propensity for worry. So often our thoughts present themselves as convincing, as important and worthy of our attention. They're also pretty sneaky – they're not usually that obvious, they get clouded by our moods and gain traction with our habitual patterns of responding to them. But remember here that central CBT idea: they are not facts, they are only ideas – mental events – that may or may not be true, and may or may not be worth our time.

When it comes to worry and rumination, often the thoughts can *seem* quite helpful. If worry is a prediction about possible threats, it makes sense to pre-empt, to prepare and problem-solve –right? Similarly, reflection and insight can be an important part of learning and growth. So when do these helpful faculties turn into the much less helpful and destructive kinds of thinking that are worry and rumination? Here are a few signs to look out for:

1. Your thoughts are feeling repetitive, tired, familiar – you're going over the same ground over and over again with little movement or steps forward. Often there may be an abstract feel to your thinking which makes it hard to problem-solve or work towards concrete solutions, or you might be pouring over things over which you have little or no control.
2. The thinking is dragging down your mood, leaving you feeling anxious, low or guilty
3. The thinking is interfering with your ability to do stuff: making it hard to concentrate on work, for example, or leading you to withdraw from friends and social engagements.
4. The thoughts have a personal, attacking tone to them: they're not just about something that has happened or may happen, they're about you – your competence, or worth.

Thinking back to the ideas around getting in touch with your values that I talked about in the first podcast, a useful companion question to ask yourself is: "is this thinking taking me towards or away from my values?" If it's the latter, that's a sure sign that you're better off investing your energy and attention elsewhere.

Now, that's the hard bit of course: once you've spotted unhelpful thinking at work, how do you let go of the thoughts? In the rest of this podcast I'll outline some top tips for standing up to unhelpful, worrisome or bully-ish thoughts.

1. Get good at catching the thoughts

It takes practice to spot troublesome thoughts at work. It can help to keep a diary for a week or so of your worrisome or troubling thoughts. Writing your thoughts down can help you spot patterns and themes – the familiar stories that play and re-play, their tricks and tactics. It can also help you get a bit of distance from your thoughts and to work out where the line is between productive thinking and unhelpful worry or rumination.

2. Find the words and pictures

If you've begun to notice some thoughts that come up again and again, you might like to try and find a word or phrase to capture what they say. The "I'm not good enough" story; the "I mustn't get too big for my boots" warning; the "bully" of perfectionism. Sometimes it can help to picture what your troublesome thoughts look like. There's a story I read to my kids in which worry is pictured as a little cloud hovering about the place, growing and growing until eventually it takes up so much room that the character, Ruby, can barely see anything else. What does Worry or Rumination look like for you? What – or who – does it sound like? When is it most vicious?

3. Tackle the worry or rumination, not the thought

I mentioned earlier the idea that worry and rumination really take hold when we invest our attention in problematic thoughts. This is really important. Your aim here is not to get rid of the negative thoughts but, rather, not to get hooked in by them. Research suggests that unwanted negative thoughts are actually pretty universal and seem to be part of the way human minds respond to the complex and ambiguous social worlds in which we live. Of course, some people are more prone to them than others, but the point here is that we can run into trouble if we try too hard to be rid of them. If the fact of having negative thoughts becomes itself a source of worry or frustration, we can end up getting caught in layer upon layer of distress – worrying about our worrying, or feeling bad about ourselves for feeling bad. The psychologist Blake Stobie has a lovely Ted Talk on the psychology of intrusive thoughts, and the mental processes that turn them from mental clutter into messengers of doom (see the link at the end of the transcript). He likens them to "spam" emails – messages that pop into our inbox which often we neither want or need, but which occasionally can maskerade as important and urgent. The skill you're learning here is to send those messages straight into the junk folder.

4. Consider the pros and cons of distraction

Distraction gets bad press – it sounds like you're sweeping something under the carpet, letting problems build up. But there's a big difference between avoiding something that really does need addressing versus making a conscious decision not to invest your energy in thoughts that you know are only going to bring you down. So if you've decided a thought is unhelpful, there's a lot to be said for then finding ways to attend to something else instead – importantly though, it should be something that brings you closer to the things you value, be it work or sport or creativity or other people. It can be really hard to engage in any kind of productive thinking about yourself or your

problems when you're feeling low, and so finding a short-term distraction, especially one that lifts your mood, makes a lot of sense in putting you in the right frame of mind to do this. Having said that, I've worked with some students who also find themselves getting caught in endless distraction, never able to stop for fear of worry creeping in. At this point distraction starts to look more like avoidance. I think there's a subtle but important distinction here between acknowledging and choosing not to engage with unhelpful thoughts, versus not engaging with them for fear of what they might have to say. Part of the ethos of this approach is to build a capacity to tolerate or even accept unwanted thoughts and feelings, and thereby ultimately to take the struggle and sting out of them. There's more that could be said on this which I haven't the time for here, but I'll point you to Russ Harris' book, The Happiness Trap, which I think does a nice job of explaining the philosophy of acceptance and how it fits with the technique I've introduced you to here. I'll leave you here with a metaphor, courtesy of Stephen Hayes, that captures something of this approach:

Imagine you're driving a bus, on which are various passengers. Now some of these passengers are friendly or silent, but others have an agenda and don't hesitate to make their voices known. They have clear ideas about where you should be going and how to get there, and they don't hold back in hurling abuse your way if you slip up or deviate from the planned route. They're also very good at alarming you about the threats and dangers ahead. In fact, there are places you'd really quite like to explore, routes you haven't taken and sights to be seen, but it's desperately hard to contemplate a change of direction with these noisy passengers on board. Now one way of responding is to argue with them – but this only adds fuel to the fire and besides, it's pretty hard to concentrate on your driving when things get heated. The other approach is to do exactly what they say, but of course the sad downside to this is that you end up limiting yourself, shelving your ambition to explore. But there is a third way. The third way is to note what these passengers are saying and, without arguing with them, to go your own way regardless. Now at first the passengers are likely to scream all the louder, the threats and warnings will ratchet up, and it might feel pretty uncomfortable. But the thing is, the passengers can't do more than scream and shout. And the more you can stick to your course, the more you can focus your attention on the road ahead, the more it becomes possible to live with these noisy passengers, the less threatening they seem, the less power they have. You've probably clicked but in this metaphor the passengers are supposed to represent the worries and troublesome thoughts that bog you down, that get in the way of your life and pursuing your values. As the bus driver then, your job is not to argue with them but to calmly and stubbornly let their unhelpful comments wash over you, and hold true to your own preferred route.

Russ Harris has some nice examples of techniques you can use to help you in building a capacity to do this. One idea is to imagine the worrisome, self-critical thought in the voice of someone comical – a cartoon character even. Another is to sing the unhelpful thought to the tune of a familiar, light-hearted song – a nursery rhyme or the like. I think it doesn't actually matter too much exactly what you do or say to yourself, the key thing here is the attitude, the resolve not to engage. A student I worked with captured this well in her own response to a particularly bothersome thought. She was in the first year of her DPhil and plagued by imposter syndrome, working all hours to try and ensure she was "good enough". Sat in the office one day she was comparing herself – negatively of course – to her peers, thinking "I'm inferior". Often, in the past, this thought had been the source of considerable anxiety – and it had become all-too familiar to her again on starting at Oxford. Her response, which I think nicely captures the mental flexibility that is the essence of this technique, was to say to herself: "well suppose I'm the worst DPhil student here – dwelling on that certainly

isn't helping me, so let's crack on and see what happens". The slightly wry tone to this is also worth noting: it can be hard to find this, but if you can reach for an element of playfulness or even humour here, so much the better.

The thing to remember here is that this is a skill: it takes practice to unhook yourself from worry and rumination; they are powerful habits. And this technique is much, much harder when you're feeling low – so think of it as one more tool in your belt, and do keep up with the behavioural stuff I talked about in the first podcast, that fits in well here. As with any new skill, the best way to learn is to do it regularly and systematically: there are some links at the end of the transcript that will point you to some useful resources to take this further if you've found it useful. As ever, if it's something you'd like support with then do reach out to the university counselling service, or to your GP. Look after yourself, and thanks for listening.

References and Resources

Blake Stobie's Ted Talk, Stopping Spam from Going Bad

Russ Harris, *The Happiness Trap* (book – available via Solo). See also his YouTube channel which has some nice cartoons on useful concepts

Free guide: Living with Worry and Anxiety Amidst Global Uncertainty – by Matthew Williams and Hardeep Kaur

CCI Workbook on Worry and Generalised Anxiety - by Lisa Salsman and colleagues

see also the links on the Counselling Service website

For something more general, Pamela Myles and Roz Shafran's *The CBT Handbook: A Comprehensive Guide to Using CBT to Overcome Depression, Anxiety, Stress, Low Self-Esteem and Anger* focuses (unusually for many CBT self-help books) on these often overlapping areas of difficulty