

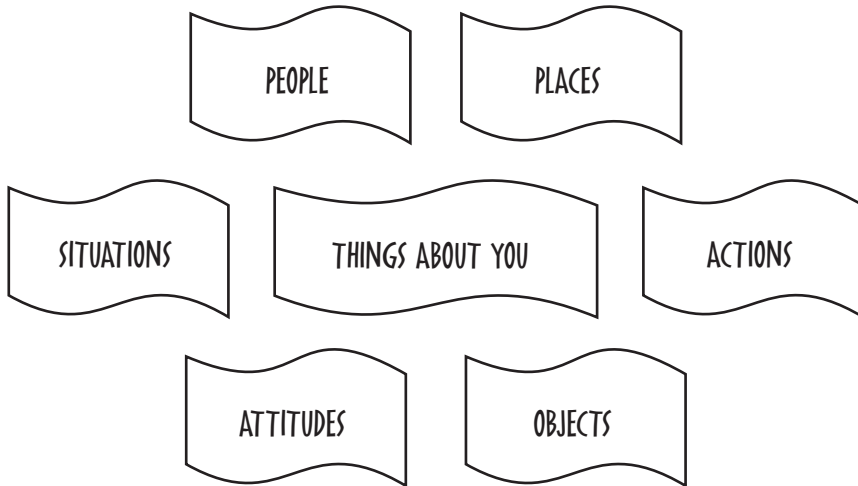
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The Anxiety Gremlin

How Anxiety Occurs

Understanding how anxiety occurs is Step 4 in managing anxiety.

In the previous chapter, you rated how anxious you felt in response to lots of possible sources of anxiety. Another word for these possible anxiety sources is *triggers*. These triggers can be:



In the Anxiety Box below, write down a list of your anxiety triggers.

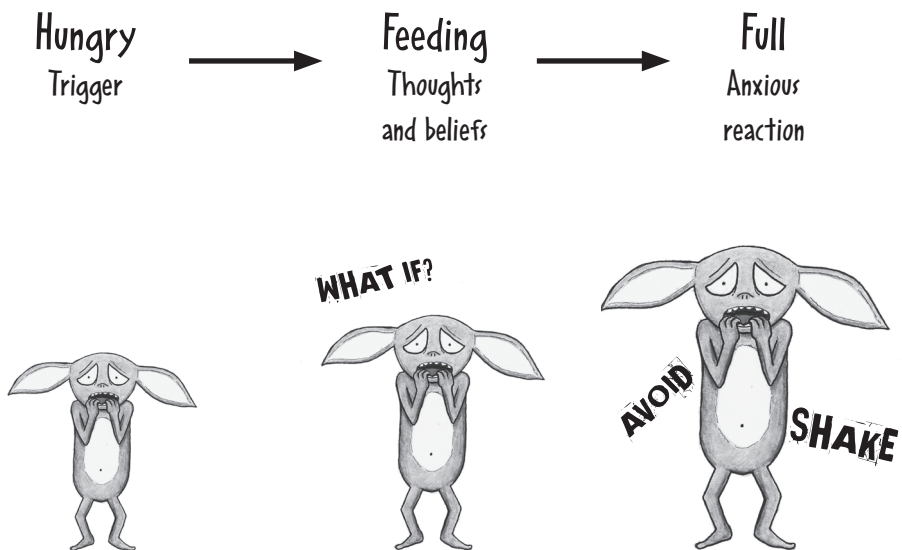
ANXIETY BOX

My anxiety triggers

You will probably have realised by now that we are all different when it comes to what we worry about. What one person finds worrying, another person can see as a positive challenge or as something exciting. As a result, not everyone will experience chronic anxiety or an anxiety disorder. As we said in Chapter 2, of those of us that do experience anxiety, some of us will get anxious in response to a wide variety of things and some of us will get anxious in response to things that are more specific. We are all different.

So what leads to these differences? What causes one person to experience anxiety in a certain situation and another person not to? To answer that question, let's meet the Anxiety Gremlin.

The Anxiety Gremlin Model



Situations, places, objects, people and their actions and attitudes are all *triggers* that are often believed to *cause* anxiety or *make us* anxious, as though we have no control over whether we get anxious or not. Well, this is what the Anxiety Gremlin wants you to think!

But if this was really the case, what would be the point in trying to control our anxiety? We would just be puppets on a very anxious

string! And guess who'd be holding the puppet strings...your Anxiety Gremlin!

Thankfully, as the Anxiety Gremlin Model shows, situations *don't* make us anxious. They are only ever *triggers*. Think about it! If it was a situation that caused us anxiety, we would all feel and react in the same ways in the same situations. But we don't. As the Anxiety Gremlin Model shows, it is how we *think* about a situation that leads to our anxiety. It is how we *think* about the situation that *feeds* our *Anxiety Gremlin*, making him bigger and bigger and fuller and fuller!

Let's look at an example scenario that highlights this.

THREE FRIENDS AND A GEOGRAPHY PRESENTATION!

Three friends, Freddie, Matthew and Grace, aged 11, have to write and give a presentation in geography about volcanos. They each have to write their presentation at home and then deliver it in the following week's geography lesson. This is the first time any of them have done a presentation.

Freddie

Freddie's dad has always talked about finding presentations at work very difficult. He's often spoken to Freddie about how horrible it is to stand up in front of other people and talk. Freddie starts to think about all the possible horrible feelings he might have when he gives his presentation. He starts to avoid eating as he feels sick and begins to plan a variety of ways to get out of doing the presentation as he is so worried about not being able to cope with the horrible feelings that he is expecting it to cause. He eventually decides to tell his geography teacher that his presentation was accidentally deleted from his home computer.

Matthew

Matthew knows he isn't the best person at reading out loud. But he keeps telling himself that he can do it and that he just has to practise as much as he can beforehand so that he will feel more comfortable. He talks about it with his mum and she listens to him rehearse. She tells him how good his presentation sounds and he feels happy. The night before the presentation he keeps thinking 'I just have to try my best and so what if it doesn't go brilliantly, it's not the end of the world. The most important thing is that I try.' On the day of the presentation Matthew feels nervous and has butterflies in his stomach, but keeps thinking positive thoughts.

Grace

Grace doesn't like standing up in front of other people. The thought of people looking at her makes her anxious. She also worries that people will judge her negatively and that she will make a fool of herself. At the age of nine, she had experienced a panic attack while speaking in a class assembly. Nowadays, Grace comes up with as many ways as she can to avoid situations that involve her speaking or standing up in front of others. The moment she hears about the geography presentation, she immediately starts to think negatively about the situation and about herself. 'I'm rubbish at these things. I will make a fool of myself. People will think I'm stupid and say nasty things about me.' She feels like she can't breathe and she starts to shake. She decides that the only way forward is to pretend to be ill on the day of the presentation and not go to school.

Q. Each of the three friends is facing the same situation – giving a presentation. But do they each react in the same way? Circle your answer.

Yes

No

**Q. Which of the three friends seems to be the least anxious?
Circle your answer.**

Freddie

Matthew

Grace

Q. Why do you think this person ends up being less anxious about the presentation than their friends?

.....
.....

Q. Which friends are feeding their Anxiety Gremlin?

.....
.....

Well done if you have written that:

- Each of the friends reacts in a different way to the same situation.
- Matthew appears to be less anxious than Freddie and Grace.
- Freddie and Grace are feeding their Anxiety Gremlins.

Matthew is less anxious because he *thinks* in a different way about the situation and his ability to cope with it than Freddie and Grace do. Freddie and Grace think negatively about the situation whereas Matthew thinks realistically about it and tries to focus on positive ways forward. And because he *thinks* differently about the situation he then...

**FEELS
DIFFERENTLY
PHYSICALLY**

For example: normal nervous butterflies.

**FEELS
DIFFERENTLY
EMOTIONALLY**

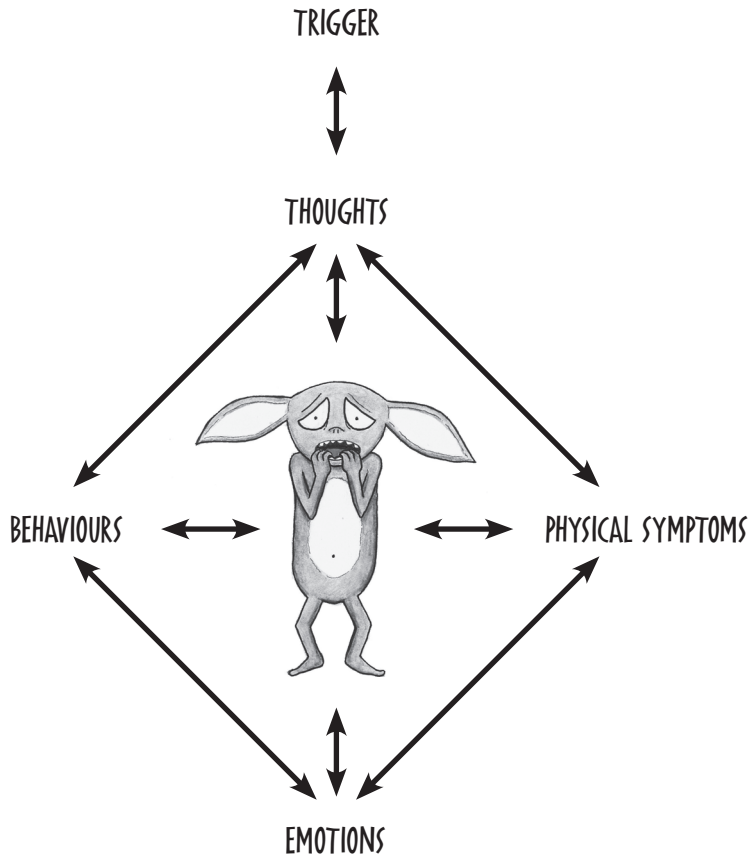
For example: calmer.

**BEHAVES
DIFFERENTLY**

For example: does positive things to prepare for the presentation.

Let's look at this using something called the Anxiety Gremlin Cycle.

The Anxiety Gremlin Cycle



The Anxiety Gremlin Cycle shows the links between our thoughts, feelings and behaviours when we get anxious, and is based on a cognitive behavioural approach. It highlights how anxiety is maintained due to an interaction between:

- THE TRIGGER
- OUR THOUGHTS
- OUR PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS

- OUR BEHAVIOURAL REACTION
- OUR EMOTIONAL REACTION.

The Anxiety Gremlin Cycle shows:

- If we think about a particular situation we are facing in a negative and out of proportion way, we feed our Anxiety Gremlin.
- The more we feed our Anxiety Gremlin, the more anxious physical symptoms we are likely to experience.
- The more we think in a negative or out of proportion way and the more anxious physical symptoms we experience, the more likely it is that our behaviours will become unconstructive.
- The more unconstructive our behaviours, the more we feed our Anxiety Gremlin and the more negative or out of proportion our thoughts will get and the more anxious physical symptoms we will experience.
- The result – we end up stuck in the middle of a vicious cycle of anxiety, where our Anxiety Gremlins get bigger and bigger and fuller and fuller and we get more and more anxious!
- We might also start to experience other negative emotions, such as stress or low mood, thus bringing other Gremlins along to keep our Anxiety Gremlins company!

So it is how we *think* about a *situation* that affects how we then feel both *emotionally* and *physically* and how we then choose to *behave*. Let's look at two examples to show what I mean by this.

EXAMPLE 1

If we think we are going to die when we have a panic attack, we are more likely to keep that panic attack and its physical symptoms going. Thus we are feeding our Anxiety Gremlin. And if we start believing that we will have a panic attack again and that it will be really horrible and scary, we are more likely to keep our anxiety

going between panic attacks – again feeding that hungry Gremlin! Plus, if we start to avoid certain situations out of a fear of having a panic attack, we don't get the chance to see that it will all be OK and once again we feed our Gremlin and keep the anxiety going.

EXAMPLE 2

If we have obsessive thoughts that we are going to be contaminated by the germs of others and that something very bad will happen to us as a result, we are going to feel anxious. If we feel the only way to stop this happening is to wash our hands over and over again every day and to clean our house several times a day, we are feeding our Anxiety Gremlin and keeping those thoughts going. This is because we don't give ourselves the opportunity to see that if we don't wash our hands that many times each day, we will still be OK. Instead we are more likely to think that the hand-washing is the only way to protect ourselves. We may then start to avoid situations where we come into contact with other people as our level of anxiety increases, which will feed our Anxiety Gremlins some more and will once again get us caught in a vicious cycle of anxiety.

But if these examples sound familiar all is not lost as Step 5 in managing your anxiety is recognising the following:

- The situation is only the trigger and **YOU** have a *choice* as to how you react to that trigger.
- **YOU** can *choose to think* differently.
- **YOU** can *choose to act* differently.
- **YOU** are in *control* of your reactions.
- **YOU** are in *control* of your *Anxiety Gremlin*.

Why not have a go at drawing your own Anxiety Gremlin in the Anxiety Box given on the next page. Then give your Anxiety Gremlin a name!

ANXIETY BOX

My Anxiety Gremlin named

So now let's look at Step 6 in managing your anxiety – understanding the effects anxiety can have on our lives.