



The Great Lie of Anxiety

Background: So, what is the great lie of anxiety? The lie is something that many anxious people may tell themselves, which sounds something like this:

“If I think about this (stressful thing) long and hard enough, I will finally figure everything out and it will get better, so I have to keep on thinking and thinking until that happens”

Anxiety can tell us that the more we think about something the greater the chance the problem will somehow be “solved” just by repetitively thinking about it more and more and more. It is like waiting for a magical “Aha!” or “Eureka!” moment that will somehow unlock the answers that solve your worries and take your stress away.

The truth is that so many problems and situations that trigger anxiety are not “puzzles” or “riddles” that need to be solved by continuously thinking deeply about them. Often things that make us anxious are complex and involve a lot of factors that are out of our control.

Consider some examples of things people may repetitively obsess and worry over, that we have little (or no) control over:

The past – Anxiety can make us think repeatedly about our mistakes and traumas and other uncomfortable experiences over and over again as if that can somehow make us “fix” these issues. Consider a few examples of some thoughts related to a past event that someone may anxiously obsess over:

- I can't believe I let that person talk to me like that!
- Why didn't I leave my abusive ex many years earlier than I did?
- I should have never dropped out of college what was I thinking!
- I wish I would have just stayed home that night that I went out and got arrested

AS A GROUP: Discuss some other examples of things from the past that someone may obsess about

“What if” scenarios – In life it is great to be prepared and to think ahead to be proactive, but anxiety can make a person obsess over different potential problems that may never happen. Consider some examples:

- What if I get sick or come down with a serious illness, what am I going to do then?
- What if I never find true love and I live the rest of my life alone?
- What if I stay broke for the rest of my life?

AS A GROUP: Discuss some other examples of “what if” scenarios that people may obsess about.



Other people – Some people anxiously obsess over other people's thoughts or behaviors. Consider some examples:

- I want everyone to like me at my new job and I won't be able to handle it if they don't
- I wonder what people are saying about me behind my back.
- What if my partner wants to leave me for someone else?

ASA GROUP: Discuss some other examples of ways people may anxiously obsess about other people

Our own shortcomings and current life challenges and limitations – Some examples:

- Why am I not more attractive and loveable?
- If I just could get a hold of big chunk of money all of my problems would go away
- If I wasn't in this legal situation, I would have it made and I could do what I want with no problems

ASA GROUP: Discuss some other examples of ways people may anxiously obsess about shortcomings or limitations

Fears – Things we are afraid of can fuel obsessive thinking – Consider some examples

- I just saw terrible things on the news and now I am thinking those things will happen to me
- I can't stop thinking that my children are in danger because of....
- If I speak my mind out loud in public situations everyone is going to make fun of me, I know it

ASA GROUP: Discuss some other examples of fears people may obsess over

Closing Group Discussion – Now, try to be specific about yourself, what kinds of things personally do you find yourself overthinking about or obsessing about at times in your life?



The Great Lie of Anxiety = The more I think about it → the better things will get

Specific false messages about obsessive thinking and worrying are part of the great lie of anxiety: (Review and discuss these self told-“lies” as a group)

1. **When I worry it helps me to be ready for any scenario** – Although it is a very good thing to think and plan ahead, worrying often involves going down many obsessive, at times irrational “what if” paths which can be time consuming and counterproductive. Being prepared is one thing but worrying about things beyond our control is another and so is trying to anticipate every single possibility.
2. **Worrying is a protection so if I think about scary things, they are less likely to happen** – The truth is that some negative events are going to happen from time to time no matter what we do. Again, it is helpful to be alert, ready and to take reasonable precautions and safety measures in life but obsessively going over all of our fears repeatedly does nothing to lessen the odds that things will or will not happen to us
3. **If I worry that means I care** – This is a lie as well. You can care deeply about others whom you love without obsessing or repetitively worrying about them. It is better to be there to support, help and guide those we love rather than wasting time thinking about a host of various fearful scenarios about them
4. **Worrying about things motivates me** – The truth is that worrying and obsessing can have the opposite effect as overthinking can stifle motivation. There is a time and place to think about things that are important to us in order to build motivation, inspiration and creativity, but it is important to work on setting limits when thinking becomes anxiously obsessing about things.

COPING – All of these coping skills may be easier said than done and can be very challenging, but these are all potentially useful skill areas for people who worry or obsess. These all may take practice to learn but these skills can be mastered over time - Discuss how each of the following can help people cope with worry:

Distracting – Can you find ways to stop thoughts by distracting yourself?

Forgiving – Could it be easier to just forgive someone who hurt you rather than obsess about the situation?

Waiting – Can learning to just wait patiently for something to play itself out on its own help?

Choosing – You may be able to escape the “What am I going to do” trap by making a choice and going with it

Letting Go – For some problems and worries it is best to learn to just let go. As soon as some thoughts enter our minds it can be helpful to learn to let them go as fast as they come in

Surrendering – If it feels like you are swimming against the current, sometimes it is better to give in to the situation and go with the current instead of against it.

Sacrificing – This can be more drastic but on occasion it may be better to just get rid of something that is too much to handle. (For example, if your job is truly driving you out of your mind, maybe just take a less stressful one that pays less but you have peace of mind)

Accepting – The beauty of being able to truly believe and grasp the fact that “it is what it is” can be so liberating when it comes to anxiety and worry. Learn to accept what you cannot change

Facing (Fears) – With help and support, facing fears can be so therapeutic. Therapy can help

Your task for the next week: Pick at least one and focus on it in your life for the next 7 days