



Facing Anxiety and Flourishing

A New Perspective on Anxiety

The Facing Anxiety and Flourishing course emerged from a desire to help people better understand and respond to anxiety. This course is designed to help give people the skills and tools required to manage anxiety when it appears and take steps to reduce its impact on their lives in the long run.

Anxiety is part of being human, but for many it can come to play a large and unhelpful role in their lives. It can increase feelings of stress, sadness, frustration, fear and isolation, colouring decisions, thought processes and emotional responses. Anxiety impacts our personal and professional lives and influences how we see ourselves and how we relate to others.

This course takes a fresh look at how we manage anxiety, using experiential, cognitive and practical exercises. When we experience anxiety, frequently our response is to engage in a struggle with it, a struggle that includes various understandable but often unsatisfactory responses such as distraction, suppression and denial. This struggle can leave us feeling exhausted and even make the anxiety worse. We wanted to try a different approach, a new perspective on anxiety that allows us to respond skilfully rather than reactively.

- This will involve:

Getting to know and better understand our anxiety. Recognising triggers and patterns of behaviour that sustain anxiety so we can respond differently to them

Befriending anxiety. Seeing it not as the enemy to be defeated, but something that wants attention, to be cared for and managed

Utilising a series of approaches and techniques to give us back control over our anxiety, to allow us to build resilience and to flourish.

- Our approach is a combination of empirically researched disciplines:

Cognitive Behavioural Theory – Understanding how thoughts influence our emotions, sensations and behaviour and how we can learn to relate to thoughts differently

Mindfulness – An experiential discipline that helps us manage and reduce the symptoms of anxiety, lowers stress and allows us to relate to our thought patterns differently.

Compassionate Mind Training – The other side of the coin of mindfulness. Mindfulness increases our awareness of our habitual patterns and Compassion allows us to develop the care and resilience needed to support ourselves through difficult times.

Gratitude – An experiential and cognitive approach to life that cultivates balance through recognising that which we are grateful for in our life. Helps establish equilibrium that counters the negativity and fear associated with anxiety.

Practical Changes – Small changes and activities to weave into our day that can help reduce anxiety.



Experiential Practice: The Gym for the Mind

This four-session course utilises an experiential approach to exploring and managing anxiety. **The method and emphasis are practical rather than therapeutic.** Many of the exercises and practices we will engage in are not about fixing or solving the issue of anxiety but exploring how we relate to it emotionally, physically and cognitively and giving us the space to choose to respond differently.

Experiential practice allows the participant to take a different perspective on the habitual patterns and thought processes that fuel anxiety, helping loosen their grip on our behaviour.

Experiential practice is a bit like a gym for the mind. In order to get fit we know we have to put in the time exercising. Similarly, when looking to change our relationship with anxiety and develop a robust sense of resilience, we need to put in the time and commit to practice.

Home Practice

Between session there will be an invitation to engage in these practices and it is recommended that you do as much of the set home practice as you can. If you miss practices one day, do not see it as an opportunity to criticise yourself, but simply resolve to pick up the practices again the next day! The aim of these practices is not to “get them right” but to commit to them as a way of exploring and building a new relationship with our experience and anxiety.

Challenges

As with any course that looks at anxiety, there will be moments that may be difficult or challenging. This is to be expected and part of developing a new perspective on anxiety involves turning towards those sensations and emotions that are associated with anxiety.

However, at the heart of this course is empathy, compassion and support so we have some suggestions for supporting yourself throughout the course:

Support Network: When things are difficult it can be good to have a friend/family member/colleague who you can connect with. If it feels appropriate perhaps sharing with someone you trust that you will be engaging in this course. Sometimes a simple chat can give us the support needed at difficult times

Giving Yourself a Break: If you feel the practice is just too difficult, you can stop and come back later in the day or even a few days later if need be. If you have ongoing issues with the practice then contact the course tutor to discuss.

Letting go of tendency to analyse/problem solve: When we feel uneasy, stressed or anxious, it can be easy to get drawn into problems solving, analysis and rumination. Remember that this is not a therapeutic approach and that learning to let go of these ruminative patterns is key. If you find you are caught up in ruminating, choosing to try one of the exercises or perhaps do something enjoyable for yourself.

You can always **contact the course tutor by email** if you feel the need for further support.

Good luck and remember to be kind to yourself!



Session 1: "A Wandering Mind is an Unhappy Mind"

"The human mind is a wandering mind, and a wandering mind is an unhappy mind. The ability to think about what is not happening is a cognitive achievement that comes at an emotional cost"

- M.A Killingsworth & D.T. Gilbert

Anxiety: Developing a New Approach

This course and its combination of techniques, practices and skills will allow the practitioner to:

- Respond at times of overwhelm to limit the impact of anxiety as it arises
- Develop longer term strategies to help understand and undermine patterns of behaviour that trigger and sustain anxiety, weakening their hold over behaviour.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) Theory.

"You cannot stop the waves, but you can learn how to surf" – Jon Kabat-Zinn

CBT Theory highlights that the meaning we place on experience can influence how we feel. The thoughts that arise as we analyse and make sense of life and experience have a huge impact upon our behaviour.

Its chief understanding is that it is not the thoughts that arise but the way we relate and respond to thoughts that is important in helping us manage anxiety.

Trying to stop ourselves thinking is a bit like trying to stop the waves with our hands. Instead, using CBT theory and understanding we can develop a nuanced approach to thoughts and experience that allows us to ride out those waves without being overwhelmed by anxious patterns of thought and behaviour.

Cognitive Distortions/Negative Automatic Thoughts (NATs)

Cognitive Distortions or Negative Automatic Thoughts (NATs) are unhelpful thinking patterns that people hold, although they may not be aware of them. They arrive in various forms but tend to share various qualities including negativity, criticism, fear or condemnation and they drive the rumination of anxiety.

Cognitive Distortions/NATs often involve:

- 'All or Nothing' Thinking
- Over-Generalisation
- Perfectionism
- Fortune Telling
- Catastrophising
- Pessimism/Negativity Bias



Getting Unstuck: Autopilot and Settling the Scattered Mind

Learning to settle our minds is a key component in this course. Our minds are rarely focused on the present moment, the life we are living. Instead, we are caught up in habitual patterns of thought and reaction that is termed “Autopilot”. Cognitive Distortions thrive in our Automatic Pilot mode.

Living in Autopilot means the mind is often scattered, with our focus caught up in thinking of things in the past or what may come in the future. Harvard psychologists M.A. Killingsworth and D.T Gilbert highlighted that humans spend between $\frac{1}{3}$ and $\frac{1}{2}$ of our waking hours caught up in the Autopilot.

Killingsworth and Gilbert emphasised that the more the mind wandered, the unhappier people were and suggested that training the mind to be more settled, to spend less time in autopilot was key to less stress and greater happiness.

At times of anxiety the mind is like a whirlwind of thoughts and fight-or-flight alerts which serve to heighten the experience of anxiety. Therefore, learning ways to help the mind be more settled is key for facing anxiety and overcoming negative thoughts.

Daily Mindfulness Practice

The first technique we use to being to change the way we manage anxiety is Mindfulness.

Mindfulness is an experiential practice that gently trains the mind to be less scattered. It makes the practitioner more aware of the autopilot and trains us to refocus more regularly on the present moment. This is the basis for being more aware of your thought patterns and the Cognitive Distortions and NATs.

Mindfulness is clinically proven to reduces stress and anxiety.

When engaging in this practice during the week it is important to remember these gentle guidelines:

- You cannot do Mindfulness badly! Your mind will wander, it is all part of the practice.
- We are not “trying to make the mind go blank”. We are not trying to stop thoughts. We simply notice them and refocus on the present moment.
- Approach the practice with an open mind and kindness. Just be curious about your experience without having an expected outcome or goal to aim for.

Home Practice

Do the “Daily Mindfulness” Practice from Mindfulness UK app once a day for the next 6 days

Record anything of interest you notice in the diary sheet

Begin to Notice any Cognitive Distortions/NATs during the week – record them on the Cognitive Distortion Sheet

Incorporate the practical tips into your day and note any changes

- **Getting out in the daylight.**
- **Physical activity/Exercise**
- **Screen Free Times**
- **Stay in touch with people who boost mood/support you.**