

## Helpful Thinking

Source: [Anxiety Canada](#)

When we are anxious, we tend to see the world as a threatening and dangerous place. This reaction makes sense, because imagining the worst can help you to prepare for real danger, enabling you to protect yourself. For example, if you are home alone and you hear a strange scratching sound at the window, you might think it's a burglar. If you believe that it's a burglar, you will become very anxious and prepare yourself to either run out of the house, fight off an attack, or run to the phone and call for help. Although this anxious response is helpful if there actually is a burglar at the window, it is not so helpful if your thought was wrong: for example, it might be a tree branch scratching the window. In this case, your thoughts were wrong because there was no real danger.

The problem with thinking and acting as if there is danger when there is no real danger is that you feel unnecessarily anxious. Therefore, one effective strategy to manage your anxiety is to replace anxious, negative thinking with helpful thinking.

### How to Do It

#### STEP 1: Pay Attention to Your Self-Talk

Thoughts are the things that we say to ourselves without speaking out loud (self-talk). We can have many thoughts every hour of the day. We all have our own way of thinking about things, and how we think has a big effect on how we feel. When we think that something bad will happen – such as being bitten by a dog – we feel anxious.

For example, imagine that you are out for a walk and you see a dog. If you think the dog is dangerous and will bite, you will feel scared. However, if you think the dog is cute, you will feel calm.



Often, we are unaware of our thoughts, but because they have such a big impact on how we feel, it is important to start paying attention to what we are saying to ourselves.

#### STEP 2: Identify Thoughts That Lead to Feelings of Anxiety

It can take some time and practice to identify the specific thoughts that make you anxious, so here are some helpful tips:

Pay attention to your shifts in anxiety, no matter how small. When you notice yourself getting more anxious, that is the time to ask yourself:

- “What am I thinking right now?”
- “What is making me feel anxious?”
- “What am I worried will happen?”
- “What bad thing do I expect to happen?”

### **STEP 3: Evaluate and Challenge Your “Anxious” Thinking**

Thinking about something does not mean that the thought is true or that it will happen. For example, thinking that a dog will bite you does not mean that it will. Often, our thoughts are just **guesses** and not actual facts. Therefore, it is helpful to challenge your anxious thoughts, because they can make you feel like something bad will definitely happen, even when it is highly unlikely.

Sometimes, our anxiety is the result of falling into **thinking traps**. Thinking traps are unfair or overly negative ways of seeing things. Here’s an example to help you challenge your negative thinking:

If you have an important interview tomorrow and have been feeling quite anxious about it, you may think: “I’m going to mess up on the interview tomorrow.”

To challenge this thought, you can ask yourself the following questions:

- **Am I falling into a thinking trap?**  
*Yes, I have fallen into the trap of fortune-telling, predicting that things will turn out badly before the event even takes place. But I still feel like I’ll definitely mess up.*
- **Am I basing my judgment on the way I “feel” instead of the “facts”?**  
*I might feel like I’m going to mess up, but there is no evidence to support it. I’m very qualified for the position. I have had interviews in the past and generally they have gone well.*
- **Am I 100% sure that I will mess up?**  
*No, but what if I mess up this time?*
- **Well, what’s the worst that could happen? If the worst did happen, what could I do to cope with it?**  
*The worst that could happen is that I don’t get a job I really wanted. It’ll be disappointing but it won’t be the end of the world. I can always ask for feedback to see whether there is anything I can do to improve my chances of getting another position similar to this one.*