Worry cycle

A simple map of one worry episode. Start at the top and follow the arrows.

Editable PDF: replace or delete the fictional examples. Blank PDF: print and write. Guidance follows.



The return arrow shows how later effects can keep the pattern going.

An uncertainty-focused episode map, informed by Dugas et al. (1998); not the full treatment model.

Copyright Calm Breathing Therapies

Using this resource

Worry cycle

What this helps with

This individual episode map explores how the meaning given to uncertainty, worry and responses such as checking or mental rehearsal may keep a difficulty going. Immediate effects vary: a response can bring relief, more worry or little change. Later effects may leave uncertainty feeling threatening. The diagram is informed by intolerance-of-uncertainty approaches; it is not a reproduction of the full Dugas model.

How to use it

1. Choose one uncertain situation and record it briefly.
2. Write what not knowing seemed to mean, including any rule about needing certainty or being prepared.
3. Describe worry, feelings and sensations, then what you did in response.
4. Record the immediate and later effects, including what happened to worry and confidence in coping.
5. Read from top to bottom, then follow the return arrow. Which link fits your experience? Discuss a possible change separately; the change itself is not part of the maintaining cycle.

A fictional worked example

Ben sends an application and receives no reply. Not knowing feels like evidence that something has gone wrong. His rule is, "If I prepare for every outcome, I will not be caught out." He worries about rejection, feels tense and checks his inbox repeatedly. Checking briefly gives him a sense of doing something, but the unanswered question remains. He puts off dinner with a friend because he feels he should keep preparing. The map highlights both the search for certainty and the cost to his evening. His first experiment may be leaving the inbox closed during dinner.

Keep in mind

This map is a possible explanation, not a diagnosis or a judgement. Include real pressures, discrimination, financial difficulties and caring demands where relevant. If worries are overwhelming or linked to a complex situation, develop the map with a therapist rather than trying to explain everything alone.

Sources and attribution

Dugas, M. J., Gagnon, F., Ladouceur, R., & Freeston, M. H. (1998). Generalized anxiety disorder: A preliminary test of a conceptual model. Behaviour Research and Therapy, 36(2), 215-226.

Hebert, E. A., & Dugas, M. J. (2019). Behavioral experiments for intolerance of uncertainty: Challenging the unknown in the treatment of generalized anxiety disorder. Cognitive and Behavioral Practice, 26(2), 421-436. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cbpra.2018.07.007

Original material informed by the sources above. No outside organisation endorses this worksheet.

Copyright Calm Breathing Therapies