

Erie Veterans Affairs Medical Center

COVID-19 Telehealth Support Group  
Worksheets

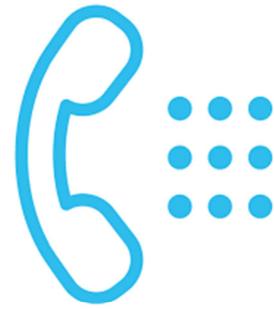
Facilitated by:  
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Adapted from “Telehealth Support Group for Socially Isolated Older Adults during the COVID-19 Pandemic” therapist manual by Weiskittle & Mlinac (VA Boston Healthcare System, 2020)

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## How to Join the Call



- 1) Dial **1-800-767-1750** and follow the voice prompts.
- 2) When asked, enter the Participant Code **87564 #** (remember the "#" sign at end). You will then be connected to the conference call and will hear "someone has entered the conference."
- 3) Please say "Hello" and introduce yourself (make others aware you are present).
- 4) If you are disconnected for any reason during the call, repeat instructions above.
- 5) For questions, contact HBPC Psychologist, Anne Schwabenbauer at 814-397-5822.



## Group Rules

1. **TIME.** Group lasts for one hour. Sometimes we will need to move ahead even though it might be nice to keep talking.

2. **PRIVACY.** Anything personal mentioned in group should be treated as private and should not be repeated outside of group.



3. **SURROUNDINGS.** Please make sure others cannot see or hear your screen when you are in group.

4. **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION.** Participation in group is voluntary. You can decide to take part or not take part in any activity.

# SESSION 1: GROUP INTRODUCTION & COVID-19 FACTS VS. FICTION

## GOALS:

- Establish introductions, review group rules, and share hopes and expectations for group
- Distinguish facts from misinformation about COVID-19
- Learn new acceptance-based skills to deal with pandemic-related stress and isolation

## SKILL BUILDING: FACE COVID

*“How to respond effectively to the Corona crisis”  
by Dr Russ Harris, author of The Happiness Trap*

- F = Focus on what’s in your control
- A = Acknowledge your thoughts & feelings
- C = Come back into your body
- E = Engage in what you’re doing
- C = Committed action
- O = Opening up
- V = Values
- I = Identify resources
- D = Disinfect & distance



**What are your values?**

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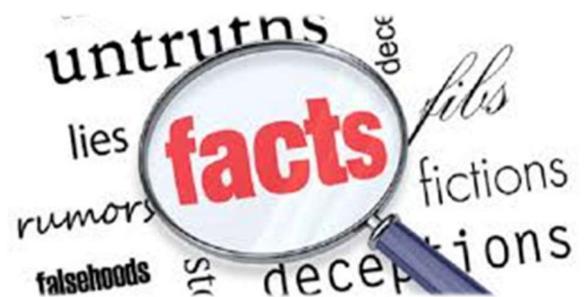
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## HOMEWORK:

- Set a goal this week to check your references
- Consider limiting your news diet



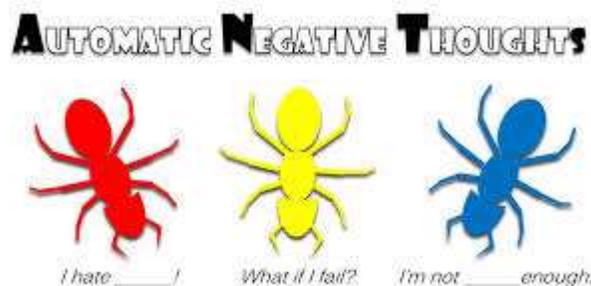
## Session 2: Noticing, Checking & Worry

### GOALS:

- Learn to identify worry thoughts
- Learn new acceptance-based skills to deal with pandemic-related stress and isolation
- Identify pleasant activities that help them manage their worry

### What is an automatic thought?

Sometimes we feel anxiety or other unpleasant feelings, but we don't know why. The reason behind our unpleasant feelings might be a stressful thought. We refer to these as **Automatic Thoughts**. These are the first thoughts that jump to our minds in reaction to something.



### Examples:

- *If we make a mistake, our first thought might be, "I'm so stupid for making that mistake."*
- *If we are feeling lonely, we might have the Automatic Thought of, "I am always alone."*
- *If we are watching the news, we might think, "This is going to go on forever."*

### SKILL BUILDING: How do we identify automatic thoughts?

1. Take a moment to turn your attention inward.
2. Silently and kindly acknowledge whatever is 'showing up' inside you.
3. Realize that it is understandable to feel anxious and worried about what may happen.

What thoughts I am having right now?

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What emotions I am noticing right now?

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**SKILL BUILDING: How can I cope with stress?**

Pleasant activities I do to manage stress:

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Activities I used to do before COVID-19 that I can safely adapt:

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**HOMEWORK:**

- Engage in at least one pleasant activity per day to help manage your stress.



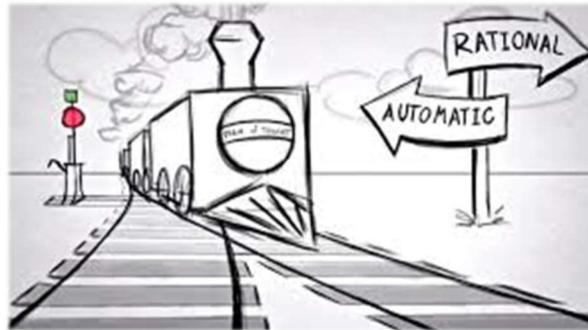
## Session 3: Challenging Automatic Thoughts

### GOALS:

- Learn cognitive-behavioral based skills to manage worry thoughts
- Learn new acceptance-based skills to deal with pandemic-related stress and isolation
- Develop a positive-self statement or mantra to use in times of worry

What is an automatic thought?

Sometimes we feel anxiety or other unpleasant feelings, but we don't know why. The reason behind our unpleasant feelings might be a stressful thought. We refer to these as **Automatic Thoughts**. These are the first thoughts that jump to our minds in reaction to something.



Why do we want to challenge automatic thoughts?

You can shift negative self-statements to statements that allow you to function with less distress, worry, or fear.

Additional reasons:

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**SKILL BUILDING: How do I challenge an unhelpful automatic thought?**

1. Ask yourself:
  - Am I thinking in an all-or-none way?
  - Does my thought include the word “should”? (Don’t “should” on yourself!)
  - Do I believe “for sure” that something bad will happen?
  - Do I believe that things are my fault when they are really out of my control?
  - Am I making a big deal out of something that isn’t a big deal?
  
2. Find another way of thinking about the situation that is more realistic. This is not just positive thinking; instead, it’s more realistic thinking. Some examples could include:
  - I can develop a plan to deal with this situation.
  - Worry won’t fix anything if it is not leading to action.
  - Keep the focus on the present. What is it I have to do?
  - Even if I make mistakes, it will be ok.

*Example Automatic Thought: “This is a terrible time,”*

*Example Alternative Thought: “this is a terrible time, but I can get through this.”*

**Give it a try:**

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*Rather than getting discouraged, focus on what you can accomplish or control.*

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Automatic Thought:

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Alternative Thought:

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3. Pick **one or two** alternative thoughts that feel the most useful. Develop it into a **positive self-statement or mantra** to repeat when you find yourself feeling anxious, lonely, or for when you identify an unhelpful automatic thought.

*Example: "I have overcome a lot. I can develop a plan to deal with this situation."*

My coping statements:

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**HOMEWORK:**

- Try out a new pleasant activity for relaxation and enjoyment.



## SESSION 4: Anxiety: Approach vs. Avoidance

### GOALS:

- Learn about the relationship between avoidance and anxiety
- Identify behavioral skills for managing anxiety
- Share worry thoughts and methods of managing stress with the group
- Learn new acceptance-based skills to deal with pandemic-related stress and isolation

Generally, **anxiety** affects our behavior in two ways:

1. Procrastination (putting something off) or avoidance
2. Checking or repetitive behaviors



These behaviors may temporarily make us feel better but the anxiety will come back. We need to **APPROACH** our anxiety in order to cope with it.

### SKILL BUILDING: How can we manage out anxiety?

*\*See following pages for exercises*

- Diaphragmatic Breathing
- Set a Worry Time

### What activities help you feel present-minded?

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### HOMEWORK:

- Call an old friend on the phone.



## Diaphragmatic Breathing

**My anxiety before the exercise was \_\_\_\_\_ on a scale of 1 to 10.**

Diaphragmatic breathing is a technique that is helpful in learning to prevent or decrease the physical component of anxiety. Often feelings of nervousness arise because we breathe too quickly and throw off the body's balance of oxygen and carbon dioxide, which results in strong feelings of anxiety, and even more breathing difficulty. This technique can restore the balance of oxygen and carbon dioxide and make us feel more relaxed.

To use the technique, try each of these and pick the one you like best:

1. Place your hand on your abdomen, just above your belly button, and one hand on your chest. Take slow breaths, and make your bottom hand move in and out while your top hand remains stationary, OR
2. Lie on your back with a book on your stomach. Try to make the book move up and down with breathing movements, OR
3. Lie on your stomach with your rib cage flush against the floor. In this position, it is virtually impossible to breathe except with the diaphragm.

After you have mastered the technique, try to slow your breathing down by inhaling for **four seconds, holding for four seconds, and exhaling for four seconds**. Please note that this is slow and deep breathing.

Keep practicing diaphragmatic breathing for 15 minutes a day at a time that works best for you, such as when you wake up or before you go to bed.

**My anxiety after the exercise was \_\_\_\_\_ on a scale of 1 to 10.**

## Setting Aside Worry Time

1. Schedule structured time in your day to worry.
2. Set a timer for 10 minutes and write every worry and thought that comes to mind.
3. Practice self-compassion and non-judgment with what worries come up for you.
4. When the timer stops, take a look at your list.
5. Identify which items are outside of your control and which ones you can problem-solve.
6. Let the worries outside of your control go.
7. Practice this once a day to help your worry become contained and productive.



## Worrying on Purpose Log Sheet

Date:

1. Rate anxiety just *before* doing the exercise, use the 0-8 scale to rate intensity of anxiety: \_\_\_\_\_

2. You worried about:

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3. How long you spent worrying on purpose (at least 10 minutes) \_\_\_\_\_

4. How many times did you notice spontaneous worrying at other points in the day? \_\_\_\_\_

5. Were you able to postpone worry until the designated time?

Circle one:            Yes            No            Part of the time

6. Now, rate your anxiety after doing the worrying on purpose, using the 0-8 scale: \_\_\_\_\_

7. How much effort did you have to expend to worry on purpose? Use the 0-8 scale. \_\_\_\_\_

8. What activity did you engage in afterward? \_\_\_\_\_

## SESSION 5: Attention & Mindfulness

### GOALS:

- Practice new present-minded meditation exercise
- Learn new acceptance-based skills to deal with pandemic-related stress and isolation

### What is anxiety to me?

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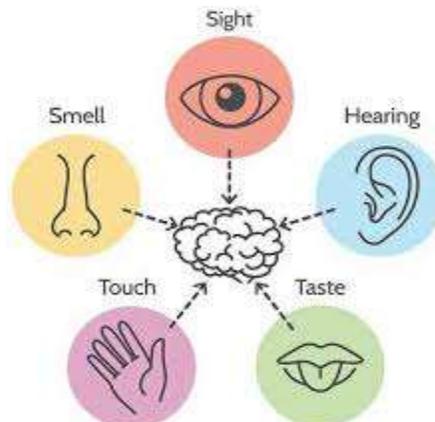
Anxiety is often thought of as your mind being “stuck” in the future--trying to plan and prepare for what might happen later. One behavioral strategy to decrease anxiety and worry is to focus on the **present**.

### Ways to be present-minded:

- Engage in activities that take your full focus. Sometimes this is a fun or challenging activity, like working on a hobby you are trying to get better at.
- You can practice being present while doing anything, even sitting in your chair.

### SKILL BUILDING: 5-4-3-2-1 Mindfulness Exercise

1. Adjust your body so you are in a relaxed and comfortable position.
2. Take **three** slow deep breaths.
3. Pay attention to how your body is feeling in this moment.
4. Look around the room and name:
  - 5 things you can see.
  - 4 things you can feel.
  - 3 things you can hear.
  - 2 things you can smell.
  - 1 thing you can taste.



I find peacefulness in the present moment by...

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**HOMEWORK:**

- Write a letter, compose a text, or engage in some other thoughtful communication with someone your life.



## SESSION 6: Dealing with Difficult Emotions

### GOALS:

- Identify emotions and feeling words
- Identify unique triggers
- Practice talking about your feelings with someone else

A pandemic like we are all in now can bring up a lot of emotions in us. Anger, sadness, guilt, and fear are normal feelings we all experience. When people are in crisis or in danger, they often go into 'fight or flight' mode, where our body prepares to either engage with danger or run from it.

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*The **emotional** part of your brain takes over and the **logical** part of our brain can take a back seat.*

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My body responds to 'fight or flight' mode by....

How do you feel in your body when you get angry?

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How do you feel in your body when you get sad?

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How do you feel in your body when you feel guilty or afraid?

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### SKILL BUILDING: Identifying Triggers

1. Identify emotions you are feeling.
  - Focus your attention inward.
  - Ask yourself, how does my body feel
2. Look at your emotional triggers.
  - Outside: noise, images, news, and people or events around you.
  - Inside: pain, hunger, and fatigue.



**My emotional triggers are:**

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**HOMEWORK:**

- Share something emotional with someone. Try to use a feeling word if you can. Be open to the feedback you get.



## SESSION 7: Emotional Barriers to Problem Solving

### GOALS:

- Learn new acceptance-based skills to deal with pandemic-related stress and isolation

**What are some of your emotional triggers?**

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### SKILL BUILDING: Emotion Regulation Skills

1. Recognize the emotions you are experiencing.
2. Take a step-back or give yourself a time out before getting overwhelmed.
3. Do something to calm down.

### Activities to Calm Yourself Down

1. Counting to five
2. Taking a deep breath
3. Meditating
4. Stretching
5. Taking a walk
6. Visualization
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_
10. \_\_\_\_\_



**How do I know if I need a 'time-out'?**

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**HOMEWORK:**

- Do one thing to remember someone or something you've lost. It might be lighting a candle, taking a moment to think of a favorite memory, shedding a tear, or allowing yourself space to let go.



## Visualization

### Sea Shore

Imagine you are at the sea shore on a beautiful day. It's the perfect time of day, and the perfect time of year for you to be there. Recall the feeling you get in your body when you are at the beach, or what it was like when you were there as a child. Let yourself explore that feeling.

Imagine the warmth of the sun on the top of your head and your shoulders. Allow this image to develop. Perhaps there's a pleasant breeze, which you feel on your face and arms. Imagine the refreshing, salty breeze off the water, and breathe. Maybe you can even taste the salt spray.

Look up and down the beach and notice the expanse of sand, the color and texture of it, the way it sparkles in the sunlight. Imagine that you are standing in the dry, soft, sand, and feel it beneath your feet and between your toes. Imagine taking a few steps, and feeling what it's like to walk in deep, warm, soft sand. Move closer to the water and walk in the cool, firm sand. Feel it take on the shape of your feet as you walk. Look behind you and see your footprints. Notice the waves gently rolling in and lapping the shore, gradually smoothing those footprints out, rhythmically washing them away as the waves roll back out.

Look at the edge of the water and notice the color. Notice that color meeting the sand, and the waves gently lapping on the shore, rolling in, breaking softly, and going back out, over and over, endlessly. Hear the, deep, calming, rhythmic sound of the waves breaking on the beach. Look out to the horizon, and notice the waves as far back as you can see, rolling toward the shore, breaking, glittering in the sunlight. Notice the dancing light moving rhythmically across the whole surface of the water. Notice the place where the surf meets the sky, and see where the colors come together. Notice the light. Let yourself feel the expanse of the sky, and imagine breathing that in, filling yourself with that feeling of spaciousness, brightness and light.

If you like, you might imagine going into the water, and feeling gently carried on the waves, safe in the protected cove, warmed by the sun. Just rolling gently on the surf, carried safely on the buoyant waves.

When you come out of the water, find the clean, dry, soft towel you have placed there. Imagine lying down on the towel, feeling the warm sand beneath mold itself to your body. Notice how the warm, firm surface supports your whole body, and allow yourself to relax deeply into it, letting the warmth and comfort fill your body and mind.

When you have finished your guided meditation, take a few minutes to sit quietly, noticing what you are experiencing in your body, what your thoughts and emotions are like.

## SESSION 8: Mobilizing Resources and Giving Thanks

### GOALS:

- Learn why gratitude is important
- Review group themes and skills learned over course of group
- Process termination of group



**What am I grateful for right now?**

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### **SKILL BUILDING: Reviewing Resources**

What has helped me to get through this challenging period?

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What resources can I see yourself needing in the future?

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**HOMEWORK:**

- Do one thing to remember someone or something you've lost. It might be lighting a candle, taking a moment to think of a favorite memory, shedding a tear, or allowing yourself space to let go.