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What is Anxiety?

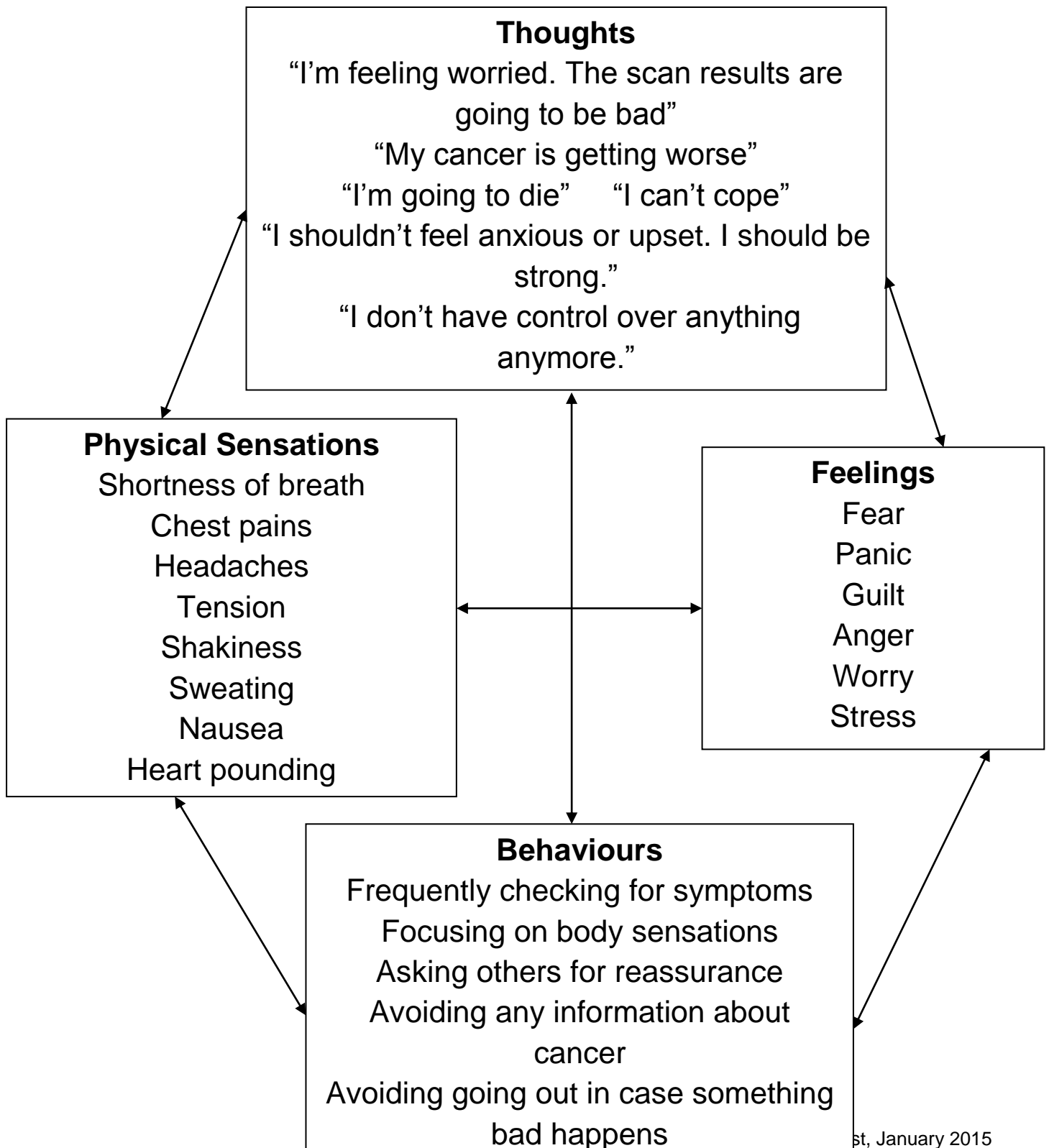
Anxiety is a normal emotion which we all feel from time to time. Anxiety is our body's natural way of reacting to threat or danger. It is helpful because it gets our body ready to fight or run away from danger (the "fight or flight" survival response). When a threat (real or imagined) is noticed, our body responds automatically – our minds watch out for the danger and sets off the alarm system.

Anxiety and Cancer

Fear, stress, anxiety and panic are very common natural reactions to having a diagnosis of cancer and needing treatment. For some people, just hearing or seeing the word 'cancer' can feel threatening. Often there can be a lot of uncertainty and a feeling of lack of control connected with cancer which can be very frightening. There may be many times during the cancer that you feel anxious. There are many different triggers for the anxiety, including diagnosis, appointments, treatment, tests results, ending treatment, worrying about the future, making decisions and feeling uncertain.

What Happens When I'm Anxious?

Anxiety and panic can affect how we think, how we feel, what we do and how our body works. For example, following treatment you have had a routine scan and are awaiting the results, you may notice a cycle similar to the following:



Top Tips For Coping With Anxiety

People can have higher levels of anxiety if they are worried about being able to cope with a situation. There are many ways that you can build your confidence in coping with anxiety. Some people prefer some techniques over others – there is no right or wrong way of coping. The most important thing is to find what works best for you in each situation. Here are some ideas below:

- 1.** Start to recognise what anxiety feels like for you, your usual triggers and how you usually cope. Noticing which ones help you most lets you strengthen the better ones and helps you know when to try new ones. Write down what works for you as a reminder. For example, talking with friends or going for a walk.
- 2.** You can also talk to others, including your family, friends and professionals, about your worries and / or write them down. This can help you to let go of them, or come back to them another time.
- 3.** When you have cancer it can feel like your life has been turned upside down and that you have lost control. Try to stick to your usual routines as much as possible and keep doing things you enjoy. If you need to go into hospital, take someone or something calming and familiar with you or something to distract yourself e.g. a magazine, a book, music or puzzles.

4. Gradually facing the situation that worries you can help you to feel less anxious over time. Think about what is the smallest, easiest step you can take and try it a few times until you feel comfortable. You can then try the next step and the next until you feel able to face the situation. For example, go the corner shop, then the local shops and then the supermarket.
5. Relaxation can help to calm the body down. There are a number of different skills you can use. For example, deep breathing, muscle relaxation exercises, listening to relaxing music, or imagining yourself somewhere safe and calm. Some people find physical activity is more relaxing for them.
6. When we react automatically to the anxiety we often do things that gets rid of the anxiety in the short-term, e.g. avoiding or escaping the situation. This works, but can make us feel less confident in the long-term. To help you choose which action will be most useful in a situation:
 - Take a few deep, slow breathes
 - Ask yourself: “How will doing this affect me in the long term?”
 - Don’t avoid situations. Go anyway – it will give you a chance to see if your worries come true.
 - Try to focus your attention outside of yourself rather than internally or only on the threat/worry.
 - Ask yourself: “What’s the best thing to do for me right now?”, “What would help me most?”

7. When we are anxious, we often feel like we cannot cope. Telling yourself coping statements, such as “I can cope with these feelings”, “I’ve got through it before”, “This will pass” can help you to feel more able to deal with any difficult thoughts/feelings.
8. When we are anxious our minds often tell us unhelpful thoughts, such as “I can’t...”, “I should / shouldn’t...”, “I must...” or focuses only on the worst possible situation. With practice, you can learn to balance unhelpful thoughts with more helpful ones. Ask yourself the following:
- Is this threat real or imagined? Is it really bound to happen? Is the threat really as bad as I think it is?
 - I feel bad but does it really mean things are so bad?
 - What would someone else say about this? What would I say to a friend in this situation?
 - What would be a more helpful way of looking at things?
9. Sometimes the worries and fears linked to cancer are realistic, such as whether treatment will work or if the cancer will come back. We cannot control things that are uncertain or have no clear answer. Mindfulness skills are very useful. Notice your thoughts/feelings and try to let them pass in their own time. Focus instead on what matters to you most in that moment.

10. It is important to be kind to yourself and reward yourself for your successes – however small they seem! This will help to build your confidence more than criticising yourself. Remember to ask for support if you need it and do things you enjoy as well!

Sources of Support

If you would like further support for coping with your anxiety you can find this from the following services:

- Free online self help resources:
<http://www.nrw.nhs.uk/pic/selfhelp/>
- Your GP (you may be referred to the surgery's counselling service).
- Macmillan Cancer Support: www.macmillan.org.uk or 0808 808 0000.
- Tenovus: www.tenovus.org.uk or 0808 808 10 10.
- Leigh Bodilly, Velindre Patient and Carer Information and Support Co-ordinator: For information on support services in your local area – 029 20196132.
- Velindre has two group programmes aimed to help you to manage anxiety and live with feelings of uncertainty.
 - **The Anxiety Group:** Helps you to build your confidence and develop strategies for managing unhelpful thoughts and feelings.
 - **The Living With Uncertainty Group:** Helps you to live your life in a meaningful way despite the worries about things that are uncertain.

- Your Consultant or Clinical Nurse Specialist can provide you information about the services available to you and request a referral to the group programmes or Clinical Psychology and Counselling team at Velindre Cancer Centre.

This leaflet was written by health professionals. The information contained in this leaflet is evidence based. It has been approved by doctors, nurses and patients. It is reviewed and updated every 2 years.

Prepared April 2014.

