

Exercise

Professional Version | US English

What If ... ?



Description

“What if...?” questions are a powerful way in which anxious individuals generate or maintain anxious states. Asking oneself a “what if...?” question invites an individual to worry about low-probability / high-consequence possibilities (to catastrophize). *What If...?* is a worksheet for identifying “what if ... ?” cognitions and generating balanced responses. It contains elements of psychoeducation, threat identification, and cognitive restructuring.

Instructions

This exercise presupposes that anxious “what if...?” thinking is a biased form of cognition in which an individual selectively attends to possibilities with negative consequences. This can be framed as a habitual (but inaccurate) form of thinking which leads to heightened anxiety.

Using this worksheet clients are invited to counter their biased thinking by deliberately attending to positive as well as negative consequences of a situation / event. For every negative “what if...?” thought clients should be encouraged to generate three positive “what if...?” alternatives. For further benefit clients might also be encouraged to rate the likelihood of each of the possibilities generated.

References

Davey, G. C., & Levy, S. (1998). Catastrophic worrying: Personal inadequacy and a perseverative iterative style as features of the catastrophizing process. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 107(4), 576.

Vasey, M. W., & Borkovec, T. D. (1992). A catastrophizing assessment of worrisome thoughts. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, 16(5), 505-520.

What If ... ?

When we say to ourselves “what if ... ?” we are often identifying a potential danger: “what if something terrible happens?”, “what if it all goes wrong?”.

Each time we do this there are many equally plausible positive possibilities that we are failing to see. If we only see the bad possibilities and not the good ones then we have an unbalanced view of the situation.

Try to come up with three ‘glass half full’ ways of seeing each ‘glass half empty’ one.

Negative “What if... ?”	Positive “What if... ?”
How does each kind of “what if... ?” make you feel? Which is more likely than the other?	

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Try to come up with three ‘glass half full’ ways of seeing each ‘glass half empty’ one.

Negative “What if... ?”

what if Kirsty makes jokes about my weight again?

what if I crash the car?

Positive “What if... ?”

what if we have a nice time?
what if I’m assertive this time and tell her how she makes me feel?
what if I make jokes back?

what if I don’t?
what if I’m a very careful driver?
what if I get there safely like every other time?

How does each kind of “what if... ?” make you feel?
Which is more likely than the other?

What If ... ?

Negative "What if... ?"

Positive "What if... ?"

How does each kind of "what if... ?" make you feel?
Which is more likely than the other?

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