

A network diagram with several nodes connected by lines, overlaid on a faint silhouette of a human brain. The background is a light blue gradient.

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Worksheets

# Identifying Anxiety-Igniting Thoughts

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A printable tool for helping clients examine their anxiety.

## Common Anxiety-Igniting Thoughts from the Cortex

Take some time to examine the cortex-based tendencies described on the following pages. We call them *anxiety-igniting thoughts* because they have the potential to activate the amygdala. They could be a primary source of your anxiety. In the descriptions to follow, we will identify the potential sources of these different processes in the cortex.

# Pessimism

One of the simplest ways that you can see the influence of your cortex is to consider, in general, the way that you view yourself, the world, or the future. When the cortex helps us to interpret our experiences and to make predictions about what is likely to happen in the future, our general perspective can have a strong impact. Some people tend to be optimistic and expect the best, while others are more pessimistic and expect the worst. Optimism is the more common approach, and it also tends to result in less anxiety. If you tend to be pessimistic, you are likely to have increased anxiety. Furthermore, a pessimistic attitude can reduce your willingness to try to change your anxiety, since you don't expect success, even though changes may prove helpful. The following assessment will allow you to examine whether you tend to engage in negative, pessimistic thinking.

## Pessimism Assessment

**Directions:** Check all statements that apply to you. Once complete, add up the number of checked boxes.

- When I have an upcoming presentation or examination, I worry quite a bit and fear that I won't do well.
- I generally expect that if something can go wrong, it will.
- I'm often convinced that my anxiety will never end.
- When I hear that something unexpected has happened to someone, I typically imagine that it is something negative.
- I frequently prepare myself for negative events that I fear will occur, but which never do.
- If it weren't for bad luck, I wouldn't have any luck at all.
- Some people want to make the world a better place, but that seems pretty hopeless to me.
- Most people will let you down, so it's best not to expect too much.

\_\_\_\_\_ Total Checked Responses

If you agreed with many of these statements, you have a tendency to worry and will benefit from cortex-based interventions, including thought stopping, cognitive restructuring, distraction, and mindfulness.

# Worry

Worry is a source of anxiety for many people, and the central difficulty for those with Generalized Anxiety Disorder. Worry can involve images or thoughts. It is focused on problem-solving designed to plan responses to expected future difficulties. You may be a “worrier,” if you have a habit of frequently thinking about possible negative events that could occur. The following assessment will allow you to explore whether you tend to worry.

## Worry Assessment

**Directions:** Check the statements that you agree with. Once complete, add up the number of checked boxes.

- I am good at imagining all kinds of things that could go wrong in a specific situation.
- I sometimes worry that my symptoms are the result of some medical illness that has not been diagnosed yet.
- I know I tend to worry about trivial things.
- When I am busy (at work or at other activities), I don't have as much anxiety.
- Even when things are going well, I seem to think about what could go wrong.
- I sometimes feel that, if I don't worry about a specific situation, something will surely go wrong.
- Even if there is a small possibility that something negative could have happened, I tend to dwell on that possibility.
- I have trouble falling asleep because of my thoughts.

\_\_\_\_\_ Total Checked Responses

If you agreed with many of these statements, you have a tendency to worry and will benefit from cortex-based interventions, including thought stopping, cognitive restructuring, distraction, and mindfulness.

# Obsessive Thinking

## *Obsession or Holding on to Certain Thoughts or Behaviors*

Another way in which the cortex can increase your anxiety is when it won't let go of a certain idea or behavior. A person can feel compelled to think about something, or to carry out a certain behavior. When this happens, the individual feels preoccupied with a particular situation and can't stop thinking about it. With compulsions, someone might find that they repeatedly engaging in a specific behavior which gives them temporary relief, but which they feel they must perform over and over. If you find yourself preoccupied with certain thoughts or compulsions and you have trouble getting past them, this is definitely a problem that arises from the cortex pathway. The following assessment will allow you to identify difficulties with obsession or holding onto thoughts.

## Obsessive Thinking Assessment

**Directions:** Check all statements that apply to you. Once complete, add up the number of checked boxes.

- I can spend a long time rehashing certain events in my mind.
- When I forget to do something or I make some kind of mistake, it takes me a long time to come to terms with it.
- If a friend or relative disappoints me, it can take me months to get over being upset and return to a good relationship with the person.
- I can get very upset if I can't keep certain objects in order or good condition.
- I can become preoccupied with arranging, counting, or evening up things.
- I need to repeatedly check on things in order to reduce my anxiety, either by checking with people or inspecting something, like my stove.
- I tend to go over my mistakes or embarrassing moments in my mind, playing them over and over.
- Unpleasant thoughts or images frequently come into my mind and I can't get them out.

\_\_\_\_\_ Total Checked Responses

If you agreed with many of these statements, obsessive thinking may be a source of your anxiety, and you may benefit from thought stopping and distraction.

# Perfectionism

Placing unrealistically high standards on yourself or others is a sure way to increase your anxiety. Because none of us are capable of perfection, high standards have the effect of setting ourselves up for failure. Whether you learned perfectionistic expectations from your parents or whether you see them as a part of your own personality, these expectations are anxiety-igniting thoughts.

## Perfectionism Assessment

**Directions:** Check below to see if you show signs of perfectionism. Once complete, add up the number of checked boxes.

- I have high standards for myself, and usually hold myself to them.
- I usually have a "right way" to do something, and it is difficult to vary from that approach.
- People consider me extremely conscientious and careful as a worker.
- When I am wrong, I am very embarrassed and ashamed.
- When others are watching me, I am concerned that I am going to humiliate myself.
- I almost never perform at a level that I am satisfied with.
- I have a hard time letting go of mistakes I make.
- I feel I have to be hard on myself, or I won't be good enough.

\_\_\_\_\_ Total Checked Responses

If you agreed with many of these statements you may have difficulties with perfectionism, and will benefit from cortex-based interventions, including cognitive restructuring and mindfulness.

# Catastrophizing

Catastrophizing is the tendency to make our problems into catastrophes. When you catastrophize, a small set back seems like a huge disaster. If you are a person who feels that your whole day is ruined if one specific thing goes wrong, you are catastrophizing. This cortex-based interpretation can result in a great deal of anxiety, but, once you recognize it, you can take steps to reduce it.

## Catastrophizing Assessment

**Directions:** Put a check next to any of the statements below that seems to describe you. Once complete, add up the number of checked boxes.

- I often imagine the worst when I am thinking about how some situation might turn out.
- I can make a mountain out of a molehill.
- People would think I am going crazy if they knew the awful thoughts that go through my mind.
- I often feel as if I can't handle one more thing going wrong.
- When something doesn't turn out the way that I want it to, I find it difficult to cope.
- I admit that I overreact to problems that others would not consider so much of a concern.
- Even a small set back, like being stopped for a traffic light, can infuriate me.
- Sometimes what begins as a small doubt in my mind becomes an overwhelming, negative thought as I dwell on it.

\_\_\_\_\_ Total Checked Responses

If you agreed with many of these statements you have a tendency to catastrophize and will benefit from cortex-based interventions, including thought stopping, cognitive restructuring, and mindfulness.

# Guilt and Shame

Guilt and shame are emotions that come from the frontal and temporal lobes. Whereas guilt involves a feeling that one has behaved in a way that one finds unacceptable, shame is related to feeling that other people will perceive you in a negative way. Both emotions are very anxiety-provoking.

## Guilt and Shame Assessment

**Directions:** Examine the following statements and check those you agree with. Once complete, add up the number of checked boxes.

- I frequently feel that I am not measuring up to what I expect of myself.
- I become very concerned when I contemplate not doing something that I feel I “should” do.
- I frequently worry about disappointing people and have trouble saying no.
- If a friend is very upset when I don’t come to an event, I may feel guilty for days.
- It feels awful to know I have let someone down.
- It is easy for others to guilt me into doing what they want.
- It’s very hard to admit and discuss my mistakes with others.
- Once a person criticizes me, I tend to avoid spending much time around that person.

\_\_\_\_\_ Total Checked Responses

If you agreed with many of these statements you will benefit from cortex-based interventions including cognitive restructuring and mindfulness.

# Right Hemisphere-Based Anxiety

The right hemisphere has a tendency to focus on negative information, whether that information is visual or auditory (Hecht, 2013). It tends to be the source of some of our pessimistic thinking. It also can use its imaginative abilities to produce images and scenarios that can be extremely frightening. The right hemisphere focuses on the nonverbal aspects of our experiences, and is watchful for anything negative in a person's posture, tone of voice, or facial expression. See how many of the items below relate to your experience.

## Right Hemisphere-Based Anxiety Assessment

**Directions:** Examine the following statements and check those you agree with. Once complete, add up the number of checked boxes.

- I picture potential problem situations in my mind, imagining various ways things could go wrong and how others will react.
- I can practically hear what people will say that will upset me.
- I tend to imagine ways that people will criticize or reject me.
- I can just feel people judging me at times.
- I'm good at imagining gory things.
- I am very sensitive to the tone of people's voices.
- I sometimes see images of terrible events occurring.
- I am watchful of people's body language, and pick up on subtle cues.

\_\_\_\_\_ Total Checked Responses

If you agreed with many of these statements, your right hemisphere may be the source of much of your anxiety. Using positive imagery as well as singing and listening to music may be helpful.

# Anxiety-Igniting Cognitions: A Personal Overview

If you review the number of items you checked for each of the various types of anxiety-igniting thoughts, you can use those scores to complete the chart below. Color in each column to indicate your scores. This chart can help you to organize and compare your responses. Please note that this chart is not diagnostic, but is simply a method to help you identify potential cortex-based tendencies and how much they may be contributing to your anxiety.

## Anxiety-Igniting Thoughts

Score	Pessimism	Obsessing	Perfection	Catastrophizing	Worrying	Guilt/Shame	Right Brain
8							
7							
6							
5							
4							
3							
2							
1							