

## HANDOUT 6-C

### THE FOUR CORE MENTAL BIASES OF ANXIETY

If you gather all the various ANTS that contribute to anxiety and look for common themes, you will almost always discover that the individual is engaging in one or more of the following mental biases. Look over this list, and see if you recognize any of these habits of thinking. Remember, everyone engages in this type of thinking sometimes, so there is no need to criticize yourself for having these thoughts.

1. We might be overestimating the likelihood that the bad thing will happen. Often what we fear is a very uncommon event, but our thinking gives us the idea that it is definitely going to happen. Someone who is afraid of elevators may fear that the elevator will get stuck and they will be “trapped,” and thus will suffer an unbearable panic attack—even though elevators rarely get stuck.
2. We might be overestimating the consequences should the bad thing happen. Yes, bad things happen, but we might think that the consequences would be more dire than they really would be. How often have we felt that something would be “awful” when it really wasn’t so bad? For example, when I am going somewhere I like to be sure that I arrive on time, if not early. Sometimes, it’s very important that I do so, such as when I have an important business appointment or I’m catching a plane. However, there has been many a time when I have stressed myself over arriving on time when it really wasn’t all that important.
3. We might be underestimating our ability to cope should the bad thing happen. Often when we are highly anxious, we forget that we have experiences and skills to help us cope with the bad outcome. We feel helpless. We tell ourselves that we “couldn’t stand it,” or “would just fall apart” if things don’t turn out that way we want. For example, people with severe panic disorder often believe that they just can’t tolerate it if they have another attack. Even though they know that the symptoms are harmless, and even though they have breathing and other tools to cope, they see themselves as completely incapable of getting through the attack unscathed. Another example is a person who is concerned about losing his job and is convinced that he won’t be able to find another one if he is laid off.
4. We might be having great difficulty accepting uncertainty. There are things that could possibly happen (e.g., the elevator gets stuck), but probably won’t. Sometimes when we are highly anxious, we are insisting on complete certainty. It’s not enough for it to be unlikely to happen; we have to know for certain. People with severe worry problems will focus on every possible negative outcome and unless they can know for certain that it will not occur, they will worry about it. However, certainty is rarely found in this world and all of us have to learn to live with uncertainty.