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The goal of learning self-management skills for anxiety is not only to help you to feel better in the short term — but also to help you maintain your progress and gains and continue to stay well in the years to come. For this reason, another important part of self-management of anxiety is making a plan for how you will maintain your progress and reduce the chance that your symptoms will return or worsen.

This section is most useful once you have been successfully applying the skills taught in this guide for at least a few weeks.

Even when you have been feeling better for a time, it is still important to continue to practice your CBT skills



Tips for preventing a future increase in symptoms

Many women who have experienced anxiety during pregnancy or following the birth are worried about having a return of symptoms. Women with a past history of anxiety during pregnancy or following the birth have a higher risk of having another episode if they become pregnant again but many women do not go on to have anxiety in later pregnancies. In addition, there are a number of things that you can do to reduce the chances of a return of symptoms or relapse. This section offers some ideas on how you can do this.

The most important things that you can do to prevent a future increase in symptoms are:

Keep on using the anxiety management skills you have learned.

Even when you have been feeling better for a period of time, it is still important to keep practicing these skills and doing the activities that helped you feel better. It is the best way to prevent an increase or relapse in symptoms of anxiety. Just like exercise, if you stop self-management strategies then you usually start to lose the benefits.

- **Check in with yourself on a regular basis.** Make sure that you put aside some time to do this. For example, you may want to fill out the Self-Test for Anxiety (see Module 6, page 20) or the Anxiety Symptoms Checklist once a month to see how you are doing. You could also review the list of symptoms that you recorded on your CBT diagram from the introduction section to make sure that you are aware of any symptoms of anxiety. It is much better to notice and work on any increases in symptoms early on before the symptoms are more severe and more difficult to manage.
- **Keep this guide handy** and use it to “refresh” the skills you are already using and to remind you of other skills you may not have tried out yet.

Continuing self-care is an important part of maintaining improvements and preventing relapses

module 5



- **Manage your physical symptoms.** People who regularly use controlled breathing, muscle relaxation, yoga, or exercise find these skills become easier to use over time. Keeping physical symptoms of anxiety well-managed can help us to reduce and better manage anxiety and can save valuable physical, mental and emotional resources. These skills can also be helpful in improving sleep quality when used around bedtime.
- **Keep building your NEST-S**

As you will remember from earlier in this guide, good self-care is a very important part of maintaining good mental health. Many women are tempted to cut back on their self-care activities once they start to feel better. However, ongoing self-care is an important part of maintaining your progress and reducing your risk of relapse. It is a good idea to check in with yourself from time to time about how you are doing in each of the areas of self-care: Nutrition, Exercise, Sleep and Rest, Time for Yourself and Support. One good way to do this is to reread the self-care section of this guide (and answer the 5 Questions for each area of NEST-S) on a regular basis to make sure that you are keeping to your self-care program. If you find that you have cut back on your self-care in one of these areas, you can use the “Goal Setting” section of this guide to help you to gradually get back on track.
- **Keep active**

In the “Goal Setting” section of this guide, you learned how to set SMART goals. Most people start by making changes to some of the important areas of self-care. If you are doing well with your self-care, you may want to use the goal-setting steps that you learned to help you with tackling other behaviours you would like to change
- **Build strengths: decreasing safety behaviours and overcoming avoidance**

Another key component of relapse prevention involves continuing to build strengths by decreasing safety behaviours and overcoming avoidance (see Module 4, page 100). Just like athletes, those people who have been training and practicing for some time will be stronger and more effective than people who have just started their program.

 - Continue to face feared situations and triggers. The more familiar you are with something the less frightening it becomes.



- Try not to avoid things as it actually increases anxiety over time.
- Always look for ways to gently push yourself. Don't kid yourself that being careful with yourself is good.
- Try new things, do something you have always dreamed about or plan an adventure. This way you will learn to enjoy feeling excited about life again without feeling anxious.

- **Identify and challenge anxious thinking patterns**

In the “Managing Anxious Thoughts” section of this guide, you learned how to identify and challenge anxious thoughts and to replace these with more healthy thinking patterns. Sometimes you need to remind yourself of the facts in order to maintain a healthy perspective — otherwise old unhealthy patterns of thinking can sneak back into your life and start to create problems again. Also sometimes new negative thinking patterns are triggered and need to be challenged just like older negative thinking patterns you have already worked on (see Module 4, page 73). Keeping track of changes in your anxiety and thinking patterns can help you to keep your skills sharp in this area. You may have developed some healthy thinking statements to challenge some of your more common negative thoughts. Continue using them to encourage yourself, especially if you are facing new challenges that can trigger old thought habits.

In addition to continuing to check in with yourself about your symptoms and practicing your self-management skills, there are a few other things that you can do to help you to reduce your chances of relapse.

- **Know your “red flags” and early warning signs**

“Red flags” are events or experiences that can be stressful for anyone (see below for a list) but people who have experienced anxiety in the past are more at risk of an increase in symptoms when they are coping with stressful situations such as those listed here. When people are aware of the types of situations that are “red flags” for them, they can be better prepared to take steps to prevent significant increases in symptoms and to respond quickly when symptoms begin to rise.



If you can see that a “red flag” situation is coming, it is especially important to make sure that you are practicing good self-care and that you are using your self-management skills. Think about how you tend to respond during times of stress (e.g., don’t eat enough, pull back from friends and family) and have some specific ideas about what you can do to be prepared for this challenging period (e.g., ensure you have some microwave dinners in the freezer, make plans to get together or talk to friends at a specific time).

Red Flags	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pregnancy and post-partum • Parenting stressors • Relationship abuse or conflict • Moving or house renovations • Other problems with housing • Financial troubles or changes in income • Ministry involvement in own or family’s life • Health problems (self or others) • Continued sleep deprivation, disruption or other sleep issues • Drinking or using drugs beyond recommended intake 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling anxious • Having too many responsibilities • Getting separated or divorced • Starting a new relationship • Getting engaged or married • Death of a loved one • Death of a pet • Starting or returning to work or school • Other work or school stress • Any other life events involving change. • Any other stressful experiences • Stopping medications for depression or anxiety

Most women are also aware of their “early warning signs”, that is, the thoughts, behaviours, physical symptoms or emotions that tend to appear when their anxiety is building. Being aware of your early warning signs makes it more likely that you will “catch” your anxiety and that you will be able to apply your self management skills to bring your anxiety back down.

● **Have a personal wellness plan**

It can be very helpful to have a list of your “Red Flags” and your “Early Warning Signs”. In addition, once you have figured out which anxiety management skills are most useful for you, consider making a list of these and keep it handy. That way, if you experience some red flags, notice some early warning signs, or that your anxiety begins to increase again you can put your wellness plan into action more easily.



For example, an ‘early warning’ sign may be that you are starting to do everything yourself again. So, it would be helpful to have ideas about how to keep your social support strong, e.g. seeking professional help, sharing responsibilities and reaching out to friends.

Example

My Red Flags	Early warning signs and symptoms (what to watch for)	What I can do
Renovating my house	Feeling overwhelmed Letting daily tasks slip	Ask my mom to watch the kids Set some small goals with my partner Go for a walk with friend
	Reassurance seeking too much	Limit myself to asking questions at Doctors appointments
	Not getting enough sleep	Make a plan with my partner to get to bed ½ hour earlier

Based on what you learned from your recent experience with anxiety, fill out the table below.

My Red Flags	Early warning signs and symptoms (what to watch for)	What I can do



If you do experience an increase in symptoms

Remember that symptom “lapses” (e.g., temporary increases in anxiety) are very common, especially during “red flags”. They do not necessarily mean that you are going to go back to when you were feeling your worst. Lapses are very common and typically pass with time and some effort to apply skills that you have learned. Think of a lapse as a “reminder call” to get back to using your self-management skills, especially any that you may have stopped using. Remind yourself that you typically feel better in a few days or weeks. In the meantime focus on continuing to do the usual things in your life even when you are feeling anxious or low. Keep in mind that many lapses are predictable (see Red Flags section above) and sometimes even avoidable.

Pull out your personal wellness plan and make sure that you are following it.

If the symptoms do not go away after a short while or are very upsetting or disruptive for you then make an appointment to review your concerns with a health professional so that you can get additional help or treatment if necessary.



What to do if you become pregnant again

There are a number of things you can do that are helpful:

- Continue to monitor yourself throughout your pregnancy and following the birth. That way, if you notice that you are having increased symptoms of anxiety, you will be able to ask for support.
- Keep in touch with your health care provider over the course of your next pregnancy and following the birth. Let your health care provider know about any symptoms of anxiety or depression that you may be having. This will make it easier for you to get the help that you might need sooner and can reduce the chances of a relapse.
- Plan for practical support during pregnancy and following the birth.
- Plan for emotional support during pregnancy and following the birth.
- Continue to use this guide to help you to practice effective anxiety self-management skills.

SHERRIE'S STORY

Sherrie is a 37 year old married secretary who recently gave birth to her first child. At her scheduled 6 week follow-up visit, Sherrie told her family physician that she had been feeling extremely anxious and worried about her son becoming ill. Because of this, she was washing and rewashing the baby's pacifier any time she put it down somewhere for fear that the baby would get "germs" from the soother being placed on an unclean surface.

She worried that these germs would make him seriously ill. She was experiencing panic attacks a few times a week and was beginning to feel depressed. She was reluctant to be left alone with her son for fear that something would go wrong and she wouldn't know what to do. This was causing significant problems for her because her husband works full-time outside the home and most of her family lives in another city.

Sherrie's family physician prescribed medication and referred her to a mental health professional with experience in CBT who provided her with sections of this guide to help her understand her anxiety and learn skills to better manage her symptoms.



Here's an overview of how the different components of CBT from this manual helped Sherrie with her anxiety:

FROM INFORMATION FOR WOMEN (MODULE 2): When she read this section, Sherrie was surprised to learn that anxiety affects thoughts, feelings, behaviours and physical symptoms. She was relieved to read the information about panic attacks (**MODULE 4**) and to learn that although these episodes are uncomfortable, they are not dangerous or an indication that she is going crazy. She was reassured to learn that her symptoms are treatable and that she could learn skills to help her change the thoughts and behaviours that are keeping her anxiety going and also better manage her panic attacks.

FROM SELF-CARE (MODULE 4): As she read through the nutrition section and answered the questions, Sherrie realized that she was only eating one meal a day when her husband was home from work. She set a goal of eating a protein bar every morning while her son has his first morning feed. Sherrie also realized that since her son was born, she had had little social contact with her friends and that this was probably contributing to her feelings of anxiety and depression. She and her husband did some problem solving together and agreed that he would care for the baby for an hour after work once a week so that she could meet a friend for a walk, which would also help her to increase her exercise.

FROM MANAGING SYMPTOMS OF ANXIETY (MODULE 4): From this section, Sherrie learned techniques that she could use during a panic attack and began to practice these techniques every time she felt that a panic attack was coming.

FROM MANAGING ANXIOUS THOUGHTS (MODULE 4): From this section, Sherrie learned to identify when she is having anxious, unrealistic thoughts about the likelihood of her baby getting sick. She then worked with her mental health professional to generate more fair and accurate statements that she uses to “talk back” to her anxious thoughts when they arise. She wrote these on “coping cards” that she reads over when these thoughts are bothering her.

FROM OVERCOMING AVOIDANCE AND OTHER ANXIETY-RELATED BEHAVIOURS COMPONENT (MODULE 4): Together with her mental health professional, Sherrie created two separate hierarchies to work on. The first involved gradually increasing the amount of time she that she is alone with the baby. This was her hierarchy:



Item	Anxiety Rating
Care for baby while partner is in another room	3
Care for baby while partner is in the yard	4
Care for baby while partner runs a 10 minute errand	6
Care for baby while partner goes for a 30 minute errand	8

She also made a hierarchy to work on gradually decreasing the amount of excess pacifier washing she was doing related to her son.

Item	Anxiety Rating
Washing the baby's pacifier 5 times before using it	2
Washing the baby's pacifier 4 times before using it	4
Washing the baby's pacifier 3 times before using it	6
Washing the baby's pacifier 1 time before using it	9

Sherrie worked on each step over and over again until that step caused her only a little bit of anxiety and then she moved on to the next, more difficult step on the hierarchy. Within a few weeks, she was able to care for her son by herself without becoming anxious, and was no longer washing and rewashing her son's pacifier.

FROM MAINTAINING GAINS AND RELAPSE PREVENTION (MODULE 5): Once Sherrie had made significant progress she and her mental health professional made a list of the all of skills and ideas that she found helpful in managing her anxiety. She also made a specific plan for ensuring that she continues to regularly practice her self-management skills. She and her mental health worker also discussed "early warning signs" that the anxiety is again becoming unmanageable and talked about what to do if this happened (e.g., contact her mental health professional, review list of skills learned in treatment, etc).

With medication, these skills and ongoing support from her friends and family, Sherrie gradually began to feel less anxious and more confident in caring for her baby. Her mood improved and she began to enjoy spending time alone with her son. Although she still experiences anxiety from time to time, as we all do, she now feels empowered to manage her symptoms.



We hope this guide has helped you to learn more about yourself and provided you with some ideas about how to improve your sense of well-being so that you can truly enjoy the 'great moments' of being a mother. Good luck on your journey.