

# Therapy aids in quelling negative thinking

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Believing that worrying about a problem can help overcome it may be the trigger that sets off much more serious anxiety disorders, recent research suggests.

While traditional [cognitive behaviour therapy](#) targets the content of [negative thoughts](#), Curtin University researchers say their metacognitive approach keys in on how people feel about the nature of worry itself.

By changing how people perceive worry, they can in turn stop 'repetitive negative thinking', the habit that fuels ever-escalating cycles of emotional distress.

"A metacognitive approach argues negative thoughts will only be replaced by new negative thoughts if the beliefs about thinking itself are not changed," Associate Professor Peter McEvoy says.

"By identifying and challenging these beliefs, we can encourage [patients](#) to control their negative thinking in more helpful ways."

These helpful techniques include increasing a person's abilities to shift their attention away from issues of concern and enhancing general coping skills.

In the study, 52 patients referred to a specialist community clinic in Northbridge, attended six two-hour weekly sessions plus a one-month follow-up.

The researchers measured patients' metacognitive beliefs, degree of repetitive negative thinking, symptoms and positive and negative affect (their level or intensity of feeling).

## **Negative thinking decreases in group therapy**

At the first, last and follow-up sessions, participants also provided feedback on their perceived quality of life.

"With metacognitive [group therapy](#), we found patients experienced a substantial and significant decrease in repetitive negative thinking and ultimately, an improved quality of life, [and] with fewer sessions than previous treatments," A/Prof McEvoy says.

"This makes it ideal for group therapy in community mental health clinics at which patients might have a range of disorders but recognise they engage in repetitive negative thinking."

The scientists found metacognitive therapy was effective for patients with primary anxiety disorders, where anxiety is the main issue, for example obsessive compulsive disorder.

They also suggest the approach is effective for non-primary [anxiety disorders](#)—secondary conditions created by anxiety, such as problems with drugs and alcohol—as repetitive negative thinking often exacerbates these conditions.

A/Prof McEvoy says a certain amount of worry can be helpful but clinicians need to be watchful for those caught in a cycle of worrying about their worry.

"A flow-on effect from [negative thinking](#) is that people worry about their worry being dangerous; that worrying [can] give them cancer and make them sick somehow," he says.

"Through metacognitive therapy, we can suggest methods to allay people's [anxiety](#) by taking positive actions in their daily lives."

**More information:** "Group metacognitive therapy for repetitive negative thinking in primary and non-primary generalized anxiety disorder: an effectiveness trial." *J Affect Disord.* 2015 Apr 1;175:124-32. [DOI: 10.1016/j.jad.2014.12.046](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2014.12.046)

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