



## **Problem Solving When You're Feeling Uncertain or Worried**

**This document describes problem solving as one part of a strategy to deal with your worries or uncertainty.**

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This tool has been excerpted from the TEMPO (Tailored, wEb-based, self-Management PrOgram) symptom self-management program. The content of this document has been reviewed and approved by healthcare professionals.

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## Feeling worried or uncertain

*“I was really surprised that in this day and age there was still so much uncertainty about how best to treat cancer. That made me worry a lot more about my diagnosis.”*

**Antonio, diagnosed with prostate cancer.**

It's common for people diagnosed with cancer and those supporting them to feel scared, worried, nervous and anxious. Fortunately, **there are things you can do to manage your worries and uncertainty.**

### **WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BEING WORRIED AND HAVING CLINICAL ANXIETY?**

Everybody gets worried and anxious, and you're bound to feel this way when dealing with cancer. Anxiety can be very useful, because it can motivate you and enhance your thinking and reactions. Generally, when the situation causing the anxiety passes, the anxiety itself will also fade away.

The main difference between 'worry' and 'clinical anxiety' is that, in the case of clinical anxiety, the anxiety lasts most of the day every day, lasts more than two weeks and gets in the way of relationships and the ability to work and enjoy life. If you're finding that fears and worries are affecting you in this way, it's a really good idea to seek help from your family doctor.

## **Suggestions for dealing with your worries and uncertainty:**

1. Challenge your self-talk
2. Unfinished objects (UFOs)
3. Mental tasks
4. Delay worry
5. Solve problems effectively
6. Do regular physical activity to clear your mind

While these suggestions focus on using different ways of thinking, there are many other strategies (e.g. relaxation techniques, pleasant activities and exercise) that can also be very helpful in dealing with worries. Feel free to pick from these other strategies, because it's about what works for you.

Find the suggestion right for you:

- ✓ Read the description of each suggestion that follows
- ✓ Choose the strategy or strategies that you prefer
- ✓ Make an action plan to help you fit your preferred suggestion into your daily life
- ✓ Set rewards for the progress you make toward achieving your goal.

**We will now provide step-by-step guidance on how to use these suggestions and will explain how each of these can help you.**

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## Suggestion 1: Challenge your negative self-talk

Changing self-talk helps people become aware of unhelpful thoughts that add to their worry and negative feelings, and to challenge these thoughts with more helpful ones. It allows worries and problems to be approached with a clearer mind so they can be dealt with.

Many people find changing self-talk a helpful exercise, but don't be discouraged if it doesn't feel right for you. This technique is not necessarily right for everyone.

Read through the steps and the examples in the table below about how to challenge your unhelpful thoughts. If you find the steps helpful, move on to the blank table to practice changing your unhelpful self-talk.



## What the experts have to say?

Everyone encounters worrying situations and what we say to ourselves (self-talk) about them has a direct impact on how we feel. Thoughts like ‘things will never improve’ are often far more negative than they should be. We’re not suggesting you should simply ‘be positive’, but being optimistic, without denying that cancer is worth worrying about, can be helpful. Completely avoiding negative thoughts doesn’t work. What you’re aiming for is realistic self-talk that recognizes the impact that cancer has had on your life, but also recognizes that you are able to deal with it.

### How do I use this suggestion? Step-by-step guidance.

Changing your negative self-talk	
<p><b>Identify negative or unrealistic thoughts.</b></p> <p>Unrealistic thoughts are distorted, they do not accurately reflect the situation and can include:</p>	<p><b>Filtering: Only seeing the negative of a situation while ignoring the positive</b></p> <p>Example: You had a great day at work, you were able to finish all your tasks and you were complimented by your boss on the great work you did, but you missed one step. For the rest of the day you focus on your mistake and forget about the positive comments you received.</p> <p><b>Overgeneralization: one negative event is like the start of many others</b></p> <p>Example: “I had a fight with my partner today; everyone is turning away from me, I’m going to end up alone forever.”</p> <p><b>All or Nothing Thinking: seeing the world in terms of extremes, there is no middle ground. You feel that you have to be perfect, if not you feel like a failure.</b></p> <p>Example: You tried to do some physical activity but you weren’t able to do as much as usual, you feel that you failed.</p> <p><b>Catastrophizing: A small disappointment turns into a disaster</b></p> <p>Example: “I was late for my doctor’s appointment, my whole day is ruined.”</p> <p><b>Labeling: you talk to yourself using insults</b></p> <p>Example: “I can’t do anything right today, I’m useless.”</p>

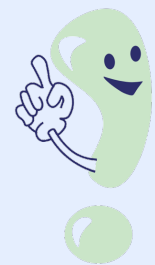
<p><b>Pay attention to the feelings triggered by the unrealistic thoughts</b></p>	<p>When you feel low, ask yourself: <i>what was going through my mind?</i> and write it down. In other words, what were you thinking about when you noticed you were feeling low or upset.</p> <p><b>Example: Evan, diagnosed with prostate cancer</b></p> <p><b>Feelings:</b> Worried and guilty</p> <p><b>Self-talk:</b> “This cancer is going to ruin everything.” “I’m putting so many demands on my wife, she must be so fed up”</p> <p><b>Example: Jacinta, partner of Roberto, diagnosed with prostate cancer</b></p> <p><b>Feelings:</b> Depressed and panicky</p> <p><b>Self-talk:</b> “I just can’t cope with this.” “I’m going to find out that Roberto’s cancer has spread and I will completely fall apart.”</p>
<p><b>Pay attention to your self-talk (thoughts)</b></p>	<p>Now think about the thoughts you’re having that are related to you feeling upset. Ask yourself:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Is there evidence that this thought is completely accurate and true?</li> <li>○ Is this thought a realistic one?</li> <li>○ Is it helping me to think this way?</li> </ul>
<p><b>If you answer ‘no’ to any of the above questions, the next step is to challenge the thought you are having.</b></p>	<p>Ask yourself:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Is there a chance this thought is overly negative? Can I get more evidence by asking someone about the situation?</li> <li>○ Is there a chance this thought exaggerates how big my problems are? Would most people agree with this thought?</li> <li>○ Is it possible that this thought underestimates how well I might be able to deal with my problems?</li> <li>○ If my best friend told me they were thinking this way, what would I say to them?</li> <li>○ What will happen if I continue thinking this way?</li> </ul>

<p><b>Find helpful replacement self-talk</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In this last step you are focusing on a way of thinking that is more encouraging or useful. Make sure that the replacement thought is <b>believable</b>. There must be evidence that there is truth to the new self-talk</li> <li>• Don't try to be overly positive or pressure yourself to put on a brave face; just be realistic</li> </ul> <p><b>Example: Evan, diagnosed with prostate cancer</b>  <b>Helpful replacement self-talk:</b> "The cancer is getting in the way of things already, but I guess it won't ruin everything. I am being too negative. My wife has not mentioned she is fed up, and I am still doing the tasks I can."</p> <p><b>Example: Jacinta, partner of Roberto, diagnosed with prostate cancer</b>  <b>Helpful replacement self-talk:</b> "I'm thinking too negatively; the cancer may not have spread. I don't feel like I'm coping very well, but I am not alone. My family and friends have been very supportive and they will stay that way, no matter what. When I get a good night's sleep and focus on the deep breathing technique I learned, this will help. I can deal with things as they come, one day at a time."</p>
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Adapted from the Antidepressant Skills Workbook

**TOP TIP: Health care and seeking psychological services**

In Canada, patients can see psychosocial oncologists at a local cancer centre and there is no fee. You can also check out Cancer Chat Canada <https://cancerchat.desouzainstitute.com/> and see if there is a professionally-led support group right for you. If you have extended health care insurance, you may also want to look into whether your insurance company may reimburse the cost of some psychological services.



Use the worksheet below to reflect on your negative self-talk. Simply write down the feelings and self-talk you're experiencing and answer the questions listed in the table.

<b>Worksheet: Changing your negative self-talk</b>	
1	<b>Identify negative or unrealistic thoughts</b>
2	<b>Pay attention to the feelings triggered by the unrealistic thoughts</b>
3	<b>Pay attention to your self-talk (thoughts)</b>
4	If you answer 'no' to any of the above questions, the next step is to <b>challenge the thought you are having.</b>
5	<b>Find helpful replacement self-talk</b>

Adapted from Bilsker, Samra & Goldner (2009)



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## Suggestion 2: Unfinished objects (UFOs)

### What the experts have to say?

You might be facing worries and negative thoughts that just won't go away, no matter what you do. When this happens, it's useful to think about how much emotional energy you're putting into these thoughts. Think about whether you could use this energy to achieve something. Doing small tasks can give you a sense of accomplishment that makes you feel good about some parts of your overall situation.



### How do I use this suggestion? Step-by-step guidance.

Walk around your house and write a list of all the little things that you've been meaning to do but haven't gotten around to yet, like fixing a knob on a drawer or changing a light bulb. Keep the list handy and when you're feeling overwhelmed with worry, pick up the list and choose one or more 'unfinished objects' or 'UFOs' to do. You'll be surprised at how it can help you feel that you've achieved something. Don't pressure yourself to do everything on the list; just do what you need to do to take your mind off of your worries, *especially those worries that just won't go away.*

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### Suggestion 3: Mental tasks

#### How do I use this suggestion? Step-by-step guidance.

Mental tasks are things like counting your breaths or the number of passing cars, mental arithmetic (like reciting times tables or counting back from 100 by sevens), doing crossword puzzles, reading books, or planning how you'll complete an ordinary task using a basic step-by-step method (such as a 'how to' bake a cake or change oil in a car). Almost anything that requires a bit of thought and mental effort can be a mental task – just as long as it keeps your brain busy for a while.

### Suggestion 4: Delay worry

#### What the experts have to say

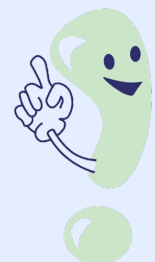
Sometimes delaying dealing with worries is the best way to cope in the short-term. Distancing yourself from the situation can help you calm down and gather personal resources. This can help you worry more effectively when you reach the time of day you've set aside for your worries.

#### How do I use this suggestion? Step-by-step guidance.

Delaying worry is about giving yourself a period of time during the day when you get your worrying done. The trick is to stick with this time period and finish worrying when time is up. So, if a worrying thought pops up in the morning, you can say to yourself *"That's stressful, but I'm choosing not to worry about it right now. I'll deal with it later today, between 4 and 5pm, when I can focus on my worries and think more about how I'll deal with them"*.

**TOP TIP:** Sometimes thoughts can keep coming back, even though you do not want to think about them. To help your mind move on from the thought, try:

1. Recognizing the thought and asking it to leave your mind.
2. Writing it down on a piece of paper; that way your mind knows it won't be overlooked or forgotten.



## Suggestion 5: Solve problems effectively

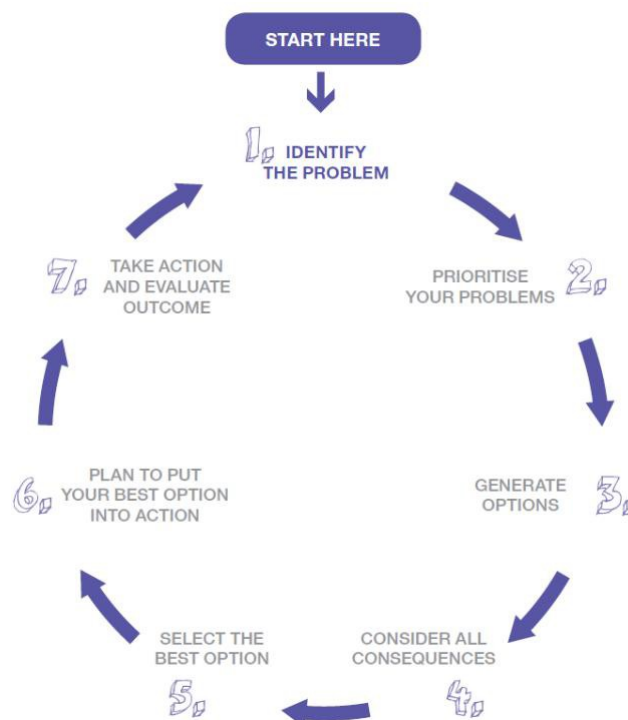
When you are worried by a problem, it can be hard to know what to do about it, which can make you worry even more. This suggestion introduces the problem-solving technique can help you think through and solve problems successfully.

### What the experts have to say?

Because we solve problems every day, we usually don't think about how we actually do it. Cancer brings many new problems to solve, so it's useful to think about different ways to approach problem-solving. The problem-solving technique presented next can help you:

- ✓ Work out exactly what you're trying to solve
- ✓ Break down large problems into smaller, more solvable problems
- ✓ Think about the resources and support you can use
- ✓ Gain skills that will help you to make important decisions
- ✓ Feel in control of what you're facing, and less anxious about problems

### How do I use this suggestion? Step-by-step guidance.



**TOP TIP: Solutions to problems can be action-based or emotion-based.** Action-based solutions mean that you do something to directly address to try and solve the problem. Emotion-based solutions mean that you do things to change the way you feel. A good solution may involve have both action-based and emotion-based responses.



### STEP 1: Identify the problem

Make a list of your problems. Sometimes describing the problem can point out steps to a solution. Look at the problem in as many different ways as you can. Are other people affected? How does the problem look to your family, your friends, your doctors or your boss? If the problem feels too big or overwhelming, **break it down into smaller ones.**

#### Scenario – Step 1

Samuel has been undergoing treatment for prostate cancer and has little energy. His partner, Sofia, has been as supportive as she can, but lately she's been worrying to the point of lying awake at night, not being able to sleep. She hasn't told anyone what she's been going through because she feels she needs to stay 'in control' for Samuel's sake. She's started to feel a bit resentful bitter and this, in turn, makes her feel guilty. Samuel can tell that something's wrong and Sofia eventually tells him a bit about what's been happening to her. Sofia and Samuel decide to work through the problem, starting by identifying it as:

"Sofia is feeling weighed down by the pressure of Samuel's cancer". They realize that this is a broad issue which, stated in such a general way, will be difficult to tackle. So their best bet is to break it down into this list of challenges:

- ✓ Sofia is overwhelmed by worries about Samuel's treatment.
- ✓ Sofia is feeling really tired because of her lack of sleep and finds that she's struggling to get things done.
- ✓ Sofia feels that she shouldn't talk about how she's feeling, because that would be a selfish thing to do while Samuel is so unwell.

## STEP 2: Prioritize your problems

First, list the problems or challenges you've identified that need immediate attention, followed by those that can wait.

### Scenario – Step 2

Sofia and Samuel decided that the first problem they'll tackle is Sofia's hesitation to talk about how she feels, because they think that this will probably help her deal with feeling selfish and guilty. It might even help her get to sleep more easily and maybe worry a bit less. They also think that it will help them figure out what sort of emotional support Sofia needs.

## STEP 3: List all available solutions

List all available solutions for dealing with the most urgent problem. Come up with as many solutions as possible and don't think too much about the worth of each idea. Think of how you've solved problems in the past. Use your creativity and don't hold back.

### Scenario – Step 3

Sofia and Samuel come up with the following options:

- ✓ Try to ignore how Sofia's feeling and just keep moving forward.
- ✓ Make a list of all the reasons why talking about Sofia's feelings is and isn't a selfish thing to do.
- ✓ Ask Sofia's best friend what she thinks about Sofia talking about her feelings.
- ✓ Ask a healthcare professional (e.g. family doctor, social worker, counsellor) what they think about Sofia talking about her feelings.

## STEP 4: Consider all consequences

Think about the positive and negative consequences of all solutions. Questions to ask when evaluating the consequences of your options:

- ✓ What are this option's advantages (pros)? What are the disadvantages (cons)?
- ✓ Who will that option affect? How much time and effort will that option take?
- ✓ What are the short-term and long-term consequences of this option?

### Scenario – Step 4.

An extract from Sofia and Samuel's problem-solving plan is included here:

**Try to ignore how Sofia is feeling and just keep moving forward.**

#### Advantages:

- It takes very little effort.
- Sofia won't have to feel like she's being selfish.
- Sofia can avoid feeling like she's burdening others.

#### Disadvantages:

- Sofia is likely to keep feeling the way she does now, and might even start to feel worse.
- Samuel will continue to worry about Sofia and how she's coping.
- Samuel cares too much about Sofia to ignore how she feels, so it's probably unrealistic.

**Make a list of all the reasons why talking about what Sofia's feelings is and isn't a selfish thing to do.**

#### Advantages:

- Sofia will be able to help Samuel understand her thinking.
- Samuel will be able to help Sofia understand why he thinks it's not selfish to talk about how she feels.
- The list might help convince Sofia that it's okay to talk about her feelings.
- Just making the list might help Sofia open up about her feelings.

#### Disadvantages:

- The list might further convince Sofia that it's selfish for her to talk about her feelings
- Making lists can be dull and feel a bit phony.

## STEP 5: Choose the best option(s)

Choose one or a combination of possible solution! Make a choice and set a time limit to reach your goal. This option may not be your final solution, but it's the best available option.

### Scenario – Step 5

Sofia and Samuel decide that the best option is: *“Make a list of all the reasons why talking about what Sofia’s feelings is and isn’t a selfish thing to do”*. They feel that this is a good place to start, as they’d really like to work through this together and understand each other’s perspective.

**TOP TIP:** Although it’s often easier to deal with a problem one step at a time, this doesn’t mean that you’re limited to just one solution. If another option seems like a good, achievable one to carry out at the same time as another, try it out.



## STEP 6: Plan to put your best option into action

Put your chosen option into action by planning ***what, how, who, how long and what if?***

Questions to consider when putting your best option into action:

- ✓ What needs to be done?
- ✓ How will you achieve this?
- ✓ What resources will you require?
- ✓ Who will be responsible for what?
- ✓ How much time is needed to carry out the option?
- ✓ What will happen if unexpected difficulties come up?

## Scenario – Step 6

Sofia and Samuel plan how to put their chosen option into action.

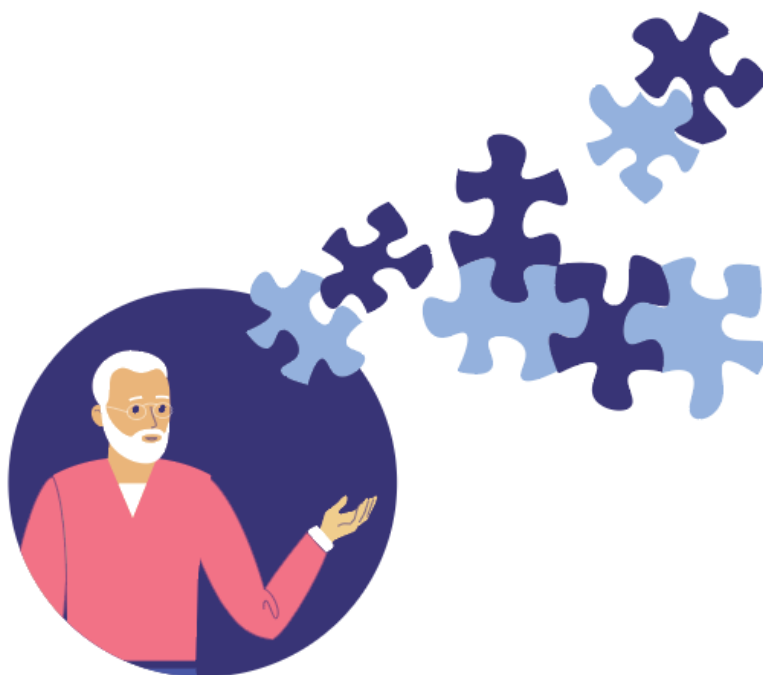
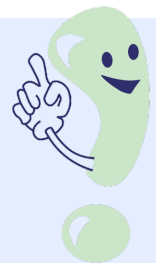
Steps/ Resources required	Who	When
Decide on a good time to sit down and make the list together	Sophie et Samuel	Immediately
Pens and paper	Sophie	Just before the time to make the list

## STEP 7: Take action and evaluate the result

You're now ready to put your plan into action. Once carried out, your plan should also be monitored and evaluated to find out if it achieves the results you expect and desire.

Not all problems have perfect solutions and some solutions may not work as you had planned. Just do your best and repeat the previous two steps as needed.

**TOP TIP:** Once you have been through the problem-solving technique, **reward yourself.** Going through each step is not easy and takes time, what a great way to acknowledge your efforts with something you enjoy!





**Problem-Solving Worksheet**  
**Follow the steps in this table to solve a selected problem.**

Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4		Step 5	Step 6	Step 7
<b>Identify the problem</b>	<b>Prioritize your problem</b>	<b>List all possible solutions</b>	<b>Positive consequence</b>	<b>Negative consequences</b>	<b>Choose the best option(s)</b>	<b>Plan to put your best option into action</b>	<b>Take action and evaluate the result</b>
						<i>What?</i>	At the end of it all, do not forget to plan for a reward!
						<i>How?</i>	
						<i>Who?</i>	
						<i>How long?</i>	
						<i>What if?</i>	

Problem-solving technique adapted from Nezu, Nezu, and D’Zurilla (2007) and Chang and Kelly (1993).

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## Suggestion 6: Do regular physical activity to clear your mind

### What the experts have to say:

Regular physical activity can improve your overall mood, decrease your levels of anxiety and stress and also improve your sleep, which in turn leads to lower levels of stress. Any exercise can help to reduce your levels of anxiety, whether you join a gym or work out at home. Here are some suggestions to get you started:

- ✓ Do activities that you enjoy whether it's walking, jogging, weightlifting, gardening, yoga, or swimming.
- ✓ Do some housework.
- ✓ Go for a walk instead of watching TV.
- ✓ Remember to schedule it in: make it a priority and decide when and for how long you will exercise.
- ✓ Exercise with a friend or your partner.

### How do I use this suggestion? Step-by-step guidance.

**Remember** to talk to your health care team before you begin any new physical activity plan. Ask about when you can start, and what type and intensity of physical activity is best for you.

## Other strategies for dealing with stress and worry

- Talk to people who have had cancer experience similar to yours, for example, join a support group – this could help you reduce anxiety and learn coping strategies from others.
- Gather information – some people experience worry because they do not have enough information about their condition and/or treatment.
- Keep a journal or diary during your treatment.
- Limit the amount of caffeine and alcohol in your diet.
- Focus on what you can control and not on what you can't.



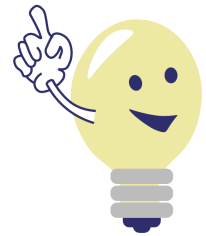
## What others say about dealing with their worries/uncertainties

*“Until I forced myself to step back and look carefully at all of the possibilities, I had absolutely no idea how I was going to keep on top of everything. I spoke to a psychologist, who showed me how I could solve problems in a structured way and reminded me to think about who could help. It ended up being one of the most important things I did.”*

**Craig, diagnosed with prostate cancer.**

### Key Points: Dealing with worries and uncertainty

1. Replacing negative self-talk with realistic messages allows you to see your challenges more accurately.
2. Completing unfinished tasks helps direct your energy away from your worries and provides a sense of accomplishment.
3. Allow yourself some time each day to worry. Try to push delay worrying thoughts when they pop into your head at other times during the day.
4. Problem-solving is an active way of thinking through the challenges you're facing and putting in place strategies that will help you deal with them.



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### Resources for managing feelings of worry and stress

- <http://www.cancer.ca/en/cancer-information/cancer-journey/living-with-cancer/stress/managing-stress/?region=on>
- <http://www.cancer.ca/en/cancer-information/cancer-journey/recently-diagnosed/emotions-and-cancer/?region=on>

### Challenging negative self-talk:

- <https://www.cancerandwork.ca/tools/unhelpful-thought-patterns/>
- <https://www.anxietybc.com/adults/challenge-negative-thinking>
- <http://www.cmhaff.ca/positive-attitude>

### Problem-solving techniques and goal setting:

- <https://www.cancerandwork.ca/survivors/workplace-wellbeing/change-your-thoughts-feelings/fill-out-changing-unhelpful-thoughts-worksheet>