

## **PLAYING THE 'WHAT IF...?' GAME ( WHAT IFFING )**

*This pamphlet has been produced by Clyst Vale Community College's  
Counselling Service.*

*This is not intended to be a definitive guide, but does hope to provide information about  
anxiety to families or a young person.*

We all play this game at some point, it can help us prepare for events and make life a bit easier. For example, we might ask 'what if... it rains today?'. This can be helpful, we might pack an umbrella or a light raincoat before we leave the house.

But some people can get 'hooked' on what iffing, and this can lead to them becoming very anxious, worried and even start to experience panic attacks ( see our guide on panic attacks ). Someone who is a big 'what iffing' may find they have difficulty sleeping, or feel anxious and worried a lot of the time.

### **UNWANTED THOUGHTS**

We don't always play 'What if...?' because we want to. Sometimes we can become lost in a world of worrying 'what ifs'. It can be difficult to stop playing. Our brains can start to work overtime, trying to anticipate what might happen next.

This kind of thinking can become a habit, often an annoying one! 'What ifs' can start to fill our mind even if we don't want them to.

### **LIVING IN A TIME ZONE**

Healthy people flit from three different time zones as they go about their daily routines.

#### **The past:**

People who keep thinking about things that have happened to them in the past can start to become depressed. The problem with always living and thinking about the past is – you can't change it! You might find yourself wishing you had done something different, said no instead of yes, or re-living a bad decision or experience.

#### **The future:**

This is often the case with people who play the 'what if?' game a lot. If you play this game too much you are living in the future. Living in the future often leads to a person becoming very anxious and worried, and perhaps even suffering panic attacks, about things that haven't happened yet. The problem here is there will always be another 'what if' question to ask yourself and to worry about!

#### **The 'here and now':**

This is considered to be the healthiest time zone to live in. When you live in the here and now you are usually less worried, less depressed and more able to enjoy life. People who live in the here and now are more able to accept their past and are not over worried about the future. One of the Clyst Vale counsellors can help you spend more time in the here and now.

### **WHY DO WE BECOME HOOKED ON 'WHAT IFFING'?**

There are two main reasons:

- a. When we start to worry, and get wound up, our body can think it needs to prepare for danger. It reacts by releasing a hormone called adrenalin. This hormone has a big effect; it gets muscles ready for action, makes us become sweaty to help cool working muscles, and even affects how we breathe. Over-breathing can make us dizzy, light headed or even have difficulty in taking our next breath. We can get used to this 'buzz', a bit like taking a drug. We can miss not feeling like this. Each time we 'what if' we can get a boost of adrenalin.
- b. The mind can get into bad habits, or get 'stuck' on a set of thought rails that always seem to make us think about something we don't want to have in our heads. It's a bit like having a thought lay down a groove. Each time we use that thought, the groove gets a little bit deeper – until it can get so deep it's difficult to get out of.

### **BIGGER AND BIGGER 'WHAT IFS'**

People who play this game a lot tend to think about bigger and badder 'what ifs' as they play. This can make them feel very worried and miserable.

### **HOW DO I STOP PLAYING THE 'WHAT IF?' GAME?**

If you are someone who plays this game too much, remember we all play this game a bit every day, you may need help to stop playing. The Clyst Vale counsellors can help you stop playing.

### **FINDING THE EVIDENCE...**

One of the ways you can help yourself is to start to challenge your own 'what ifs'. So, if one of your 'what ifs' is about the roof falling down on top of you, you need to give yourself a talking to next time you have that thought. Say to yourself 'where is the evidence?', tell yourself 'it hasn't happened, I'm standing here and it hasn't happened!'. Then say to yourself 'I don't need to worry about this.' You might need to do this lots of times. Each time you have the thought, challenge it.

### **SENDING YOUR THOUGHTS AWAY**

You can also try to stop your thoughts, and change the subject in your mind. Tell yourself 'I'm not going to think about this!' and then think about something you like and enjoy instead.

If we go back to the idea thoughts can become grooves, when you change your thoughts on purpose, it's a bit like dumping something in the groove to help raise it. If you do it enough, you'll have a way of getting out of the groove more easily.

### **GETTING HELP**

If you recognise yourself as a 'what iffer', or know someone who is a 'what iffer', get in touch with the Clyst Vale counsellors and we will help.

People who play the 'what if' game too much can learn how to break the pattern and begin to enjoy life again.