

## **Understanding why suspicious thoughts persist and why they cause distress**

Suspicious thoughts are usually caused by a combination of factors. We're dealing with a stressful situation, and this has an impact on the way we feel: we might become anxious or depressed, for example. When we feel like this, we notice things that normally we'd not give a second thought to but that now seem odd or confusing. When we try to make sense of these odd events, we jump to the conclusion that other people are out to harm us. How we react to suspicious thoughts helps determine how long those thoughts last and how badly they affect us. Our suspicious thoughts are likely to be more prolonged and distressing the more we react by:

- Believing that our suspicions may be true;
- Behaving as if our suspicions are true;
- Feeling anxious;
- Feeling down.

Research has shown that it's these four responses that determine how long our suspicious thoughts last and how badly they affect us.

Four key responses

### **1. Believing that our suspicions may be true**

It's one thing for us to remember the suspicious thoughts that popped into our head that day, but once we start believing them, or thinking that they may be true, the following two consequences tend to follow:

- We start to notice the things that seem to confirm our suspicions and fail to notice the things that don't. Psychologists call this the belief confirmation bias.
- Because we believe our suspicious thoughts, we stop considering alternative explanations for events.

What before had seemed to be harmless banter now seems like malicious gossip all aimed at you.

### **2. Behaving as if our suspicions are true**

Three common ways that in which we change the way we behave:

- We adopt safety behaviours
- We act differently when we are other people
- We don't try to sort out difficult situations

### 3. Feeling Anxious

Suspicious thoughts can be caused by our emotional response to stressful experiences. Of all the emotions, anxiety is the one that seems to be most closely linked to the development of suspicious thoughts. The feelings of threat and danger they provoke in us are so strong that they make us anxious. After all, the purpose of anxiety is specifically to alert us to possible danger. And these new feelings of anxiety only intensify our suspicious thoughts, which then in turn increase our anxiety — and so on. It's yet another vicious cycle: anxiety breeds anxiety.

### 4. Feeling down

Feeling down is – just like anxiety – an emotion that can both help cause suspicious thoughts and be a major factor in keeping them going. Suspicious thoughts can frequently make us feel sad and miserable. And the lower we feel, the longer our suspicious thoughts are likely to stick around.

