

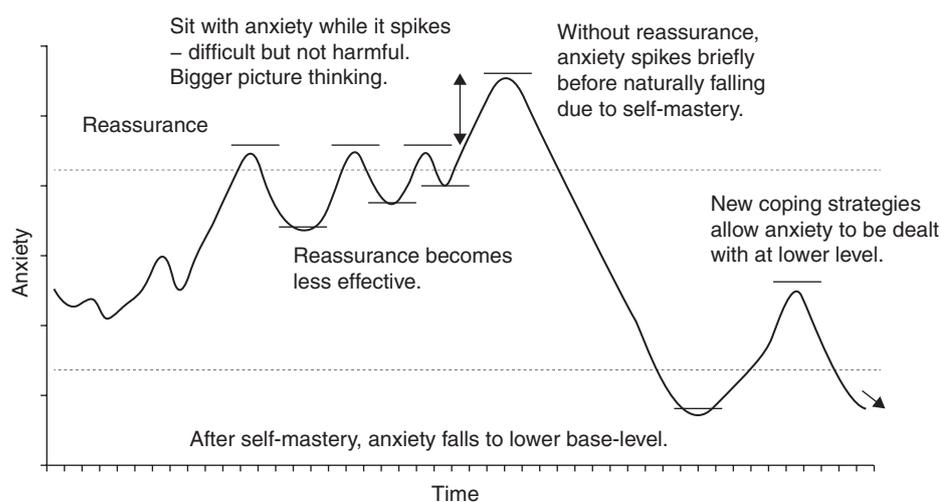
## Worksheet 5.3: The reassurance trap and rolling with resistance

When anyone gets anxious there is a physiological response that makes us feel stressed. We manage this by using different strategies to calm ourselves down. The problem with using reassurance as a strategy to help close others is that they don't learn to reassure themselves, and have to constantly rely on others to feel better. When someone masters their fear by learning to reassure themselves, the level of anxiety returns to a much lower level than if they had received reassurance. The next time a similar fear surfaces, they will be better equipped to deal with it themselves

Carers can easily get caught up in continued and prolonged discussions with their loved ones about food, weight and shape and can be sucked in either to the reassurance trap or a furious argument that only serves to reinforce the ED behaviours. It takes courage to break out of this reassurance trap and to sidestep resistance and to keep calm.

The chart illustrates what happens when carers reassure over a period of time, and then change their behaviour to break out of the reassurance trap. Over time the reassurance becomes less and less effective, and Edi's level of anxiety gradually rises. When the carer breaks the cycle, both Edi's and the carer's anxiety will spike. Edi will be uncomfortable at losing the reassurance, the carer will be anxious that the experiment might not work out, and also anxious to see Edi's anxiety spike. This anxiety spike might be momentary, or it might go on for some time. However, research tells us that it is usual for Edi to quickly start to learn to self-soothe and this will result in Edi's anxiety levels falling to a much lower base level. With continued support, as time goes on Edi will learn new coping strategies to deal with high anxiety situations. If reassurance

The reassurance trap



**Figure 5.5** The reassurance trap

is happening the carer must learn to ask themselves 'does the reassurance I am giving produce the desired effect?'

- How do you respond at the moment if your loved one seeks reassurance about food, weight and shape (FWS)?
  
- How could you respond in a way that might help Edi to learn to self-soothe? Example: 'You know the answer to that question, it isn't helpful for me to keep reassuring you.'
  
- What could you say if you can see that Edi is upset and/or even more argumentative? Example: 'I can see you are upset, I know this is really difficult. Let's not get into an argument as it never helps. A hug might be better.' This is a useful phrase to roll with resistance when emotions are running sky high:

By using phrases such as these you can sidestep the conversation while expressing empathy. Over time this will serve to give Edi the power and belief that they can reassure and soothe themselves. Make up phrases you could use at home. The aim is to stop the conversation while expressing empathy.