

## Dealing with Anxiety

Much of this material is from an article by Margaret Wehrenberg, Psy.D.

### *10 Best-Ever Anxiety-Management Techniques*

*These methods can provide you with tools for getting on top of anxiety. The goal is to find what works for you, but none of them will work for you if you don't work hard to learn them. We think that they are helpful enough to be worth the effort! Talking about and practicing some of these methods together within our group will make them easier to understand and personalize.*

**The body feels anxiety with symptoms like heart-thumping, racing pulse, dizziness, tingling, shortness-of-breath, tension of jaw and neck, often accompanied by a sense of doom or dread.**

#### **Method 1: Manage the Body**

Eating well, avoiding caffeine, alcohol, nicotine, and sugar and exercising will increase the effectiveness of other anti-anxiety techniques; failing to do so, can decrease the effectiveness of these techniques.

**Suggestion:** Keep a food/mood diary to link panic and anxiety to eating patterns.

**Suggestion:** Time your exercise to help improve your sleep: five to six hours before you would like to begin your night's sleep.

#### **Method 2: Breathe**

When stressed or anxious, people tend to breathe shallowly, but breathing this way intensifies the feelings rather than having a soothing or calming effect. Learning how to engage the abdomen by contracting your stomach muscles when breathing, which some people call deep or diaphragmatic breathing, will help to reduce the anxiety.

The method involves breathing slowly into the belly and exhaling slowly; the belly should expand. One of the easiest ways to learn this kind of breathing is while lying on your back or on your stomach, both of which enable you to feel your belly fill with air.

Practice, practice, practice is the only way to integrate this kind of breathing into your way of being and daily life so that when you feel anxious, this skill is fairly easy to access.

**Suggestion:** Practice it anytime you are engaging in an activity that requires waiting or does not require much thought: boiling water, washing dishes, washing clothes, holding on line for a phone call, waiting in line at the store, etc.

#### **Method 3: Mindful Awareness**

When we are anxious, we tend to be very aware of all the physical symptoms of that anxiety in our bodies. By learning to engage in mindful awareness we can master the skill of shifting attention both to those bodily sensations and then away from them.

**Suggestion:** Practice the shift of your attention to and away from the body can help you to more naturally use it when you notice you are becoming anxious. This enables you to feel more in control of your body's responses.

#### **Method 4: Don't Listen When Worry Calls Your Name**

Believe it or not, your brain gets so used to being anxious that it is always looking for something to latch on to and make you feel worried. The subject of the worry is not even important to your brain; it just wants to create the physical state of anxiety. It will settle for most anything, trivial or potentially serious. The goal is to ignore the voice of worry and substitute a cue for relaxation.

Refusing to worry is not the same as refusing to recognize a threat or concern and engage in problem solving. This is not meant as a recommendation to ignore actual threats. If you encounter a gorilla on the street, by all means, panic and retreat really fast! Even when we have a good reason to be anxious about something, however, the intense feelings of dread and panic do not help us to problem solve (except in the case of the gorilla).

**Suggestion:** Say to yourself, "This is my anxious brain creating my anxiety," and begin deep breathing or muscle relaxation to reduce the physical and emotional sensations of anxiety.

#### **Method 5: Knowing, Not Showing, Anger**

Sometimes people would "prefer" to experience anxiety rather than to experience anger. When this is the case, then exploring and dealing with these issues can then become part of your therapy.

**Suggestion:** The next time you start to feel anxious, either make either a mental or paper list of what factors in your life might be making you feel angry at that precise moment.

#### **Method 6: Have a Little Fun**

Laughter and playfulness are wonderful cures for anxiety. They just don't come easily when you are in a full-blown anxiety attack. Part of learning to be good and kind to yourself is being determined to try to balance out the anxiety in your life with some pleasure. You want to teach your brain to prefer laughter to pain.

**Suggestion:** Make a list of the little things that used to make you laugh or smile with pleasure: a favorite YouTube video, a song, a funny or fond memory. It doesn't matter what it is. If those cat videos do it for you, go for it!

#### **Method 7: Turning It Off**

Sometimes even an anxious brain finds a problem that needs to be dealt with immediately. When you encounter such a concern, turn your attention and problem solving skills (NOTE: problem solving skills, NOT obsessive thoughts or self-blame) to that particular situation. When you find yourself going from concern to concern, worry to worry, it's time to take a break.

**Suggestion:** Stop and make a written or mental list of all your current sources of anxiety. Decide if there are any immediate constructive steps you can take to deal with any of them. If there are, write those down next to the issue as your action plan.

Next, make a list of all your other worries, those you really can't do anything about right now, and put that list in a drawer. Add to it if necessary during the course of the day. Make notes about each one and anything you don't want to forget about your worry. Then leave the list in the drawer, at least until the next day. When you take it out and read it over, decide if there was any harm done by removing yourself emotionally for a while and giving your mind permission to rest and calm down.



### **Method 8: Practicing Thought Stopping/Thought Replacing**

One of the most effective ways to deal with anxiety is to learn to stop negative thoughts or worries in their track and replace them with neutral or positive thoughts. It is an effective strategy but one that requires lots and lots of practice and commitment. We can practice this together.

### **Method 9: Worry Well, But Only Once**

Sometimes we encounter worries that need some attention. This technique involves setting aside a time limited period to devote to a particular worry or source of anxiety and exploring it from every perspective, but especially looking at all the concrete ways in which you can approach it and affect it.

Step 1: Worry through all the issues.

Step 2: Do anything that must be done at the present time.

Step 3: Set a time when it will be necessary to think about the worry again.

Step 4: Write that time on a calendar.

Step 5: Whenever the thought pops up again, say, "Stop! I already worried!" Direct your thoughts to a non-worrying area.

**Suggestion:** Develop a list of topics or ideas to think about that are involving but not worrying. Keep it in a place where you can easily find it so you can refer to it when you need it. Maybe you want to think about the latest plot twist in one of your favorite TV programs or a book you are reading. Sometimes we need to take the time to remind ourselves of the topics we enjoy thinking about and don't cause us any anxiety.

### **Method 10: Learn to Plan Instead of Worry**

Instead of worrying,

Step 1: Identify the facts of your problem

Step 2: List problem solving options

Step 3: Pick one of the options

Step 4: Write out a plan, changing it if necessary with new information or dates of completion

Whenever this concern arises again, you can reassure yourself that you have dealt with it and are working on it to the full extent of your ability at that time.