

Coping with Anxiety: A Tip Sheet



Let's Get Physical! Changing the Body Channel



Breathe. Taking a few slow, full, deep breaths signals safety, and calms the anxious brain and body. You may wish to count your breaths down from ten to one.

Get moving. Aerobic exercise is a powerful antianxiety intervention. Experiment with other forms of exercise - yoga, stretching, or strength training.

Relax your muscles. Focus on one muscle group at a time. Tense each one, hold the tension for a number of seconds, and then release it. Allow the muscle to relax. Notice the difference.

Ground yourself in the here-and-now. Focus on sensory awareness. Identify three things that you see, three things that you hear, and three things that you feel in your body.

Sooth your senses. Use touch, sound, and smell. Consider massage, a warm bath, aromatherapy, or listening to music.

Good night. Prioritize sleep. Practice good sleep hygiene: Aim for getting up and going to bed at the same time every day. Develop a bedtime routine. Avoid high levels of physical or emotional stimulation close to bedtime. Design a physical environment conducive to sleep: Minimize lights and sound; make sure the temperature is not too hot. Avoid drinking close to bedtime.



It's the Thought That Counts: Changing the Cognitive Channel



Change common anxious thinking patterns. Are you overestimating threats and/or underestimating your coping abilities? What's the worst thing that can happen? What will you do if it does? What's the best thing that can happen? What's the most likely thing to happen?

Challenge anxious thoughts with the three C's: Catch it, check it, change it. Identify the thoughts, then examine them. What evidence supports them? Are they the only way to interpret yourself, others, and the situation? If someone you cared about believed them, would you agree with them or take another perspective? When you aren't feeling the way you are now, do you think the same way? Three weeks or years from now, how much will you believe this thought, and what difference will it make?

Choose your mental focus. When thoughts that make you anxious come to mind, substitute another. Focus on a task at hand, engaging more fully in whatever you are doing. Prepare a list of substitute thoughts, possibly around a pleasant or productive activity.

Break out of rumination. When you keep going over the same thought again and again, ask yourself: Do I have a better understanding of myself or my situation? Do I feel better? Am I any closer to solving a problem? If the answers are all no, change your focus.

Use imagery. Take a "mental vacation." Imagine a place that is pleasing and relaxing for you. Focus on what you see, hear, feel, and smell.

Attitude is everything. Cultivate the following:

Acceptance. All of us humans experience uncertainty and threat and, at times, naturally and inevitably, feel anxious and afraid. Accept your feelings with compassion for yourself. Make room for them.

Compassion. What would happen if you thought of and treated yourself as someone you love and care for? How would you talk to yourself? What, exactly, would you do, or do differently?

Curiosity. You don't know what will work best to ease your anxiety. Wouldn't you like to find out? Experiment, and learn from your results.

Understanding. Feelings are feelings; nothing more; nothing less. They are painful at times, but they aren't dangerous and don't necessarily mean that anything is wrong.

Let go. Sometimes when you're anxious, there's a problem you can solve. Sometimes, there isn't anything you can do. This is a time for letting go. Imagery may help. Imagine putting your stressors in a large container, "worry box," or dumpster. Say good-bye to them, one at a time. Imagine releasing them as helium balloons.

Meditate. Choose a word or short phrase that is calming and soothing to you, and, as you sit comfortably, recite it to yourself each time you exhale.



What Do I Do? Changing the Behavioral Channel



Get 'em out. List worries with words or pictures/symbols. You may find that this helps you see them clearly and puts you in a better position to evaluate them and respond to them more effectively.

Problem solve. Can you do something that might solve the problem, improve the situation, and/or help yourself feel better? Brainstorm, alone or with others: Generate as many ideas as possible, the more outlandish, the better. Later, you can see which are best, but don't cut off the creative process.

Go for mediocrity. Perfectionism all too often leads to anxiety, avoidance, and/or depression.

Break it down. Instead of feeling overwhelmed by a daunting task, take a small step, and give yourself credit for it.

Avoid avoidance. Anxiety leads to avoidance, a short term "fix" that strengthens and reinforces fear. Take action. Instead of worrying about a challenging task, get it over with.

Distraction. Involve yourself in something engaging. Consider things you can do on your own, places you can go, or people you can talk to about other things.

Don't go it alone. How can you best recruit and utilize your support system?

Clarify and act on your values and goals. What is important to you? What matters most? What makes life meaningful? Even under stress, when you're likely to experience painful feelings, you can still act on your values. Choose to be goal-oriented instead of mood dependent.

Coping card. What has worked to bring you closer to your goal state of calming anxiety, even partially and/or inconsistently? List those strategies somewhere handy (eg on a card, on your phone.) The more stress we're under, the more we need our coping resources, but the harder it is to identify and access them. The coping card helps you do just that.