Understanding and treating anxiety

Everyone experiences some anxiety from time to time. It can feel like butterflies in your stomach before giving a speech, or the tension you feel when your spouse is angry. This type of anxiety can be productive, keeping you alert and moving you to action in the face of a threatening situation. But if you suffer from severe anxiety or an anxiety disorder, this normally helpful emotion can do just the opposite. It can disrupt your ability to cope with your daily life.



An anxiety disorder can show itself in many different ways. For some it can be a general feeling of persistent and excessive worry. For others, it can be an intense fear of a specific object or situation. Some symptoms people experience are:

- Restlessness or feeling "keyed up"
- Being easily fatigued
- Difficulty concentrating
- Irritability
- Muscle tension
- Sleep disturbance (trouble falling asleep or waking in the middle of the night)
- Avoidance of specific objects or situations

Over time, these symptoms can create distress and impair functioning. They can leave you feeling powerless and out of control, which is why it's important to take some action to address anxiety. Some suggestions are listed below.

Some people who suffer from anxiety may experience panic attacks—a surge of overwhelming fear, apprehension or terror that comes without warning and without any obvious reason. These attacks are far more intense than the feeling of being "stressed out." Panic attacks have a quick onset and are normally short in their duration (around 10 minutes or less).

How do you know if you are having a panic attack? You may experience:

- Palpitations or a pounding heart sensation
- Sweating
- Trembling and shaking
- Sensation of shortness of breath, smothering or choking
- Chest pain or discomfort
- Nausea, dizziness or feeling lightheaded
- Fear of losing control, going crazy or dying
- Chills or hot flashes
- De-personalization (feeling that you are "outside" of your body) or de-realization (feeling as if your surroundings are not real)

Anxiety can be terrifying, frustrating and exhausting. However, it is important to remember that it can be treated and managed successfully. You can regain control again!

Strategies for overcoming anxiety

Here are some of the common ways that people cope with their anxiety:

Relaxation exercises. These types of exercises can play a crucial role in helping people prevent or cope with anxiety. Below are listed a few that you can try on your own. Remember, practice is the key to making these techniques an automatic coping response when struck with anxiety.

1. **Practice Breathing.** This may sound silly, since we all have to breathe to live. However, people experiencing anxiety or panic take more shallow and rapid breaths. Proper breathing should come from the abdominal area not the chest. Focus on the inhale filling up your belly (pushing it out) and your exhalation pushing your belly in. Do this slowly, counting if you wish, and pausing briefly between breaths.
2. **Progressive Relaxation.** Find a quiet space and begin to visualize your body bit by bit relaxing, starting with your left foot and toes. Tense up your toes into a fan and tighten your foot and ankle, hold for a few seconds and then relax. Move up to your calf, knee, thigh etc. Tense. Relax. Repeat on your right side. Move through your entire body.
3. **Mental Imagery.** Close your eyes and picture yourself in a safe, peaceful and stress-free place. Concentrate on the sights, smells and sounds in this place. Stay focused on breathing for five minutes. Concentrate on staying present in your relaxing mental image.

Exercise. This is one of the best prescriptions for anxiety. Whatever you choose to do (walk, run, swim, dance, yoga, bike) it can help relieve stress, reduce tension in your body and help to clear and focus your mind.

Talk to a friend/join a support group. Talking about your feelings and fears in a caring, supportive place is a great coping mechanism. There are many groups in the community that are devoted to helping people share their common experiences and feelings of anxiety.

Remember, you are not alone!

Counselling. Many people choose to work with a counsellor to address their anxiety. Counsellors can help alter the way a person thinks or acts in certain circumstances, bringing about a positive change. With anxiety, often this means helping people gain knowledge about their anxiety patterns. The more you know about what "triggers" your anxiety, the easier it is to manage your reactions. For instance, ask yourself what happened just before your panic attack or feelings of anxiety; what were you doing or thinking at the time?

Counsellors use strategies like this to help people take control over their thought patterns and anxiety instead of being controlled by them. They can also support you as you expose yourself a little at a time to the things that make you fearful, and help you learn to cope with your fears.

Medical treatment. If you experience several of the symptoms previously described or suffer from repetitive panic attacks, you may want to see your doctor. Though not a cure, medication can be helpful in alleviating the symptoms of anxiety. The most common drugs prescribed are anti-anxiety or anti-depressant medication. Work collaboratively with your doctor if taking these medications and ask about possible side effects. Most specialists agree that drug therapy is the most successful treatment, supplemented with other interventions, such as counselling.

Inform yourself. When it comes to anxiety, "knowledge is power." The more you can understand about what is happening to you, the less likely you are to feel that you are "going crazy" and the more likely you are to find solutions to the problem. There are many books and Internet sites out there on this topic.

Tips for coping with panic attacks

All of the above suggestions are effective for preventing or dealing with panic attacks. When you find yourself in the middle of a panic attack, here are a few quick tips to remember:

Accept the feelings and symptoms you are experiencing, they can't hurt you. Reassure yourself that what you feel is time-limited, it will pass and nothing terrible will happen. Don't fight these feelings, "the feelings are distressing but not dangerous" and the more you resist them the longer they may last.

Focus your attention on something concrete. Say aloud the things that you can see, hear or physically feel around you. For example, "I see a blue chair, I hear the air conditioning, and I can feel my feet on the floor".

Breathe. Take slow, deep breaths in through your nose to the count of four and exhale through your mouth to the count of four. Focus on the out breath.

Think about the present. Don't add to your panic by thinking about "what might happen". Focus on the current situation, what is actually happening—an exaggerated response to stress. Be sure to practice positive self-talk "I can do it", "I can handle this" or "the anxiety can only go so high and then it will come down".

Though it’s certainly not easy living with anxiety, by practicing some of the techniques above, and consulting with a medical professional if need-be, you can regain control over your feelings of anxiety, and your life.