

Anxiety Coping Skills

Patient Education Module

Introduction - Anxiety can be both a blessing and a curse. A little bit of anxiety can give us an edge and push us forward to accomplish our goals. Too much anxiety can paralyze progress and incite panic. Too much anxiety can make you focus on a flurry of negative, doom-filled thoughts. Such severe anxiety affects about 19 percent of Americans. In fact, anxiety disorders are among the most common psychological disorders. Consider how anxiety affects your life. Three of the most common characteristics of someone with an anxiety disorder are perfectionism, relying on others for approval and need for control. Whether you suffer from a diagnosable disorder or experience anxiety occasionally, anxiety can wreak havoc on your self-image and daily quality of life.

We have all been there. The good news is, there is something you can do to control anxiety - something more effective than the usual advice to “be positive” or just “stop thinking so much.” The latest research on anxiety suggests innovative, even odd, techniques for coping successfully with recurrent worries and anxiety. Most people can get a grip on things if they take a few minutes to develop a different relationship with their thoughts and feelings. Below is a list of strategies that will help you take control of worry and anxiety.

1. Realize anxiety is natural. Anxiety is the *normal* response to perceived danger – the body and mind rev up in readiness for fight or flight by producing adrenaline. This is a natural, beneficial response to stress. Without adrenaline, we can't perform at our best. It is this response that has allowed humans to survive in the world for millions of years.

Concern about what others think it's natural, too. Humans evolved as a social species. We depend on one another to survive. Fear of negative judgment helps ensure harmony in the "pack." What inflates these feelings to overwhelming proportions is probably nature and nurture. Anxiety runs in families. Certain genes create an overly sensitive alarm system. If your parents were highly critical but wary of outsiders – or if you had early humiliating experiences – this could have laid the groundwork for social anxiety.

2. Distinguish fact from fiction. Worrying is fiction. It is an anticipation of things going wrong in the future. Since the future doesn't exist, except in your imagination, then worry about a future event is a fiction. Learn to live in the moment and not worry about things that have not even happened yet. Take care of today and tomorrow will take care of its self.

One example of a fiction would be: “I have high blood pressure, I'm going to get a heart attack.” This reaction jumps to an extreme conclusion. However, it does bring up a factual concern. Instead of jumping to an extreme, you should say, “I have high blood pressure and if I want to avoid getting a heart attack, I will need to change my eating habits and get some exercise.” While worrying involves fiction, concern is fact-based and addresses today. When you act on your concerns, you prevent worry and anxiety.

When we are anxious, we tend to see the world as very threatening and dangerous. However, this way of thinking can be overly negative and unrealistic. One strategy for helping you to manage anxiety involves replacing “anxious” or “worried” thinking with realistic or balanced thinking. This strategy involves learning to see things in a clear and fair way, without being overly negative or focusing only on the bad. However, it takes time to shift anxious thinking, so be patient and consistently practice these skills.

3. Do not exaggerate. Everyone has an interior monologue – a constant stream of thoughts that affects mood and energy. Social anxiety feeds on thoughts that exaggerate danger, foresee dire consequences and attribute negative judgments to others. Thoughts like, "This meeting will be a disaster" or "I feel nervous, and it shows" sow seeds from which the whole nasty experience – racing heart, cold sweat – grows.

4. Thinking this way is just habit. And, like most habits, it can be changed. Tune in to your thoughts. What are you telling yourself when you feel nervous about entering a room, giving a presentation at a meeting, or approaching a salesclerk? Keep a diary to record each situation, your thoughts and level of anxiety you experience. Anxiety producing thoughts are almost always distortions and exaggerations – everyone is staring at me... I always sound like a fool... If I make a mistake, I'll never live it down. The antidote isn't positive thinking but realistic thinking. Examine your anxiety producing thoughts critically and correct them.

5. Your "nerve medicine" is not helping. When benzodiazepines were first introduced, over fifty years ago, they were considered to be wonder drugs. At present, medical science has discovered that this is no longer the case. Recent studies have shown that benzodiazepines actually cause more harm than good and should not be used to treat anxiety or sleeping disorders. Benzodiazepines work by slowing down the activity of the central nervous system and the messages going between the brain and the body. Because of tolerance, benzodiazepines stop working once they have been used for a long period of time. In fact, the only thing that they do, after long-term use, is prevent benzodiazepine withdrawal. There is evidence that reduction or withdrawal from benzodiazepines can lead to a reduction in anxiety symptoms.

High doses of benzodiazepines can result in over-sedation and may produce an effect similar to alcohol intoxication. Feelings of jitteriness, excitability, reduced alertness, and headache are often experienced as the effects of large doses wear off. A very high dose of benzodiazepines can cause: slow, shallow breathing, unconsciousness, coma, or death (more likely when taken with other depressants such as alcohol and/or opiates).

Some of the *long-term effects* of benzodiazepines include: memory loss, dementia, difficulty thinking clearly, anxiety, depression, lack of motivation, skin rashes, weakness, fatigue, drowsiness, weight gain, sexual dysfunction, difficulty sleeping or disturbing dreams, irritability, paranoia, aggression. A recent study published in the British Medical Journal suggests that benzodiazepine use may promote the development of Alzheimer's disease.

Sleep architecture can be adversely affected by benzodiazepine dependence. Possible adverse effects on sleep include induction or worsening of sleep disordered breathing and loss of recuperative sleep. Consequently, lack of sleep will make anxiety worse. . A marked increased risk of cancer was found in the users of sleeping pills, mainly benzodiazepines. Due to these increasing physical and mental symptoms from long-term use of benzodiazepines, slowly withdrawing from benzodiazepines is recommended for many long-term users.

6. Recognize false alarms. That fear of your house burning down because you left the iron on has never come true. That rapid heart beat doesn't mean you're having a heart attack; it's your body's natural response to arousal. Many thoughts and sensations that we interpret as cues for concern—even

panic—are just background noise. Think of each of them as a fire engine going to another place. You've noticed them; now let them pass by.

7. Make peace with time. When you're a worrier, everything can feel like an emergency. But notice this about all your anxious arousal: It's temporary. Every feeling of panic comes to an end, every concern eventually wears itself out, every so-called emergency seems to evaporate. Ask yourself, "How will I feel about this in a week or a month?" This one, too, really will pass.

8. Try relabeling. Symptoms of anxiety and excitement are almost identical. If you feel revved up and think, "I am getting anxious," it creates a destructive spiral. But if you think of it as "getting excited," you'll feel more prepared and capable.

9. Breathe away anxiety. One of the worst things about anxiety is the feeling that once it starts it will build uncontrollably. You may notice that when your body is tense, you hold your breath. Focusing on breathing is a common but effective technique for calming the nerves. Where is your breath now, and where is your mind? Bring them together. Listen to the movement of your breath. Does your mind wander somewhere else? Call it back. Concentrate only on breathing in and out, beginning and ending, breath to breath, moment to moment.

Calm Breathing: Breathing slowly and deeply from your abdomen eases anxiety. To practice, while lying in bed, rest your hands on your abdomen. Breathing deeply through your nose to a count of four, let your abdomen rise as you inhale. Your chest should remain still. As you breathe out – two a count of four – your abdomen should flatten. Slow your breathing to eight breaths per minute. After you become accustomed to this kind of breathing, practice it while sitting, standing and eventually in the course of your daily activities. Soon it will feel easy and natural. Then, whenever you start feeling anxious, be aware of your breathing. If it is shallow and rapid, consciously shift to slow abdominal breathing.

Muscle Relaxation: another helpful strategy is learning to relax your body by tensing various muscles and then relaxing them. This strategy can help lower overall tension and stress levels. It also helps you to be more aware of when you are feeling stressed.

10. Shift your focus. Anxiety turns your attention inward. You notice your heart racing. You worry that your hands are shaking. This is certain to increase your anxiety. *Instead*, focus your attention on the task itself, whether it's emphasizing key points in the presentation or meeting someone for the first time. If you're talking to someone, attend closely to what he or she is saying. Think about how he or she might be feeling and rather than what to say next. If anxiety continues to build, focus on neutral factors... The color and texture of the carpet... The feel of the papers you're holding in your hand. Such a shift in focus will interrupt the anxiety cycle and let you attend to the business at hand.

11. Be willing to experience discomfort. Some things are worth doing even if you're anxious. You will be amazed at what you can do while still feeling a lot of unpleasant sensations. Sometimes people will notice your anxiety; other times, they won't. Either way, you will feel better about yourself if you go ahead and act. Do what you value.

12. Tolerate uncertainty. This is a tough one. Most people like things to be clear-cut, to know where things stand. Unfortunately, life does not always cooperate. You must eventually face the ugly truth that you cannot control everything. Not everyone will like you. Not everyone will approve of your every actions. Sometimes your best bet is to go with the flow and learn the gentle art of acceptance.

13. Stop People-pleasing. Relying on others for approval can also lead to anxiety. To stop this over time, pay attention to how you interact with others and the times you people-please. For instance, when do you say yes to someone when you really want to say no? Heighten your awareness and then slowly start to change your behavior. Before attending a function where you'll likely people-please, think about how you're going to react, and do what you're comfortable with. Here's the problem with people-pleasing: There's good news and bad news. The good news is that people don't really give a damn; and the bad news is that people don't really give a damn.

14. Practice yoga. Anxiety usually involves racing thoughts, recurrent worries and a revved-up body. Yoga can help manage all these symptoms by calming both your mind and body. Just the acts of focusing on your breath and mediating have a soothing effect. One yoga practice isn't superior over another. Studies show that it depends on the anxiety. If there's significant trauma, research shows that gentle, restorative, feel-good poses are best. If there's tension in the body, practicing strong poses or poses that take longer can dig into the deep pockets of tension in the body. If there's trembling and an increase in heart rate, a flow yoga practice helps to release the revved-up anxiety. You can take yoga classes or you can practice yoga at home.

15. Set up some structure. Idle time often leads to over-thinking and over-magnifying. In other words, if you are not stimulated or busy, you are apt to zero in on trivial things and obsess over them.

16. Tackle distorted thoughts. You might not realize just how much thoughts can feed anxiety. Black-and-white, all-or-nothing thinking is one example: You see yourself as being successful at 100 percent – and a total failure at 98. Your level of perfectionism defines your self-worth. People who struggle with anxiety tend to talk in absolutes, using words such as always, never, should, must, no one, and everyone. Should implies that there is a right way to do things, a manual on how to do life. It doesn't exist. With the exception of obeying the law and not willfully harming another person, everything in life is negotiable. Therefore, rigid thoughts are unrealistic. So are insecure thoughts that constantly raise questions such as “what if?”

Fortunately, you can change these thoughts. You cannot be anxious if you don't allow insecurity-driven thinking to steer your life. Think of your thoughts as a wheel, if you turn this wheel, you generate sparks – sparks of anxiety, “What if I fail?” “What if I get sick?” If you stop turning the wheel...the insecurity-driven thoughts stop. Identify these distorted thoughts and consider how much stress they cause you, then, try to replace the thoughts with something more balanced. Keep practicing; over time, the balanced thoughts become automatic.

17. Relinquish control. Many of us try to control life in an attempt to feel less vulnerable and insecure. We are insecure about our own abilities to “handle life” now, as it unfolds, moment to moment. Trying to control life isn't natural, and bracing yourself for potential danger creates both psychological and physiological

stress, which only depletes us and leads to anxiety. So the key is to realize and accept that you cannot control life.

18. Revise your reactions. While we cannot control the world, we can control our reaction to it. It is empowering to realize that you do not have to be a victim of life. Realize that you are responsible for your happiness and your life. You *can* change yourself.

19. Take your hand off the horn. You constantly check the weather before a big outdoor event. You replay that clumsy comment you made, wishing you could take it back. And, yes, you honk your horn in traffic. When you desperately try to take command of things that cannot be controlled, you are like the swimmer who panics and slaps at the water, screaming. It gets you nowhere. Instead, imagine that you are floating along on the water with your arms spread out, looking up to the sky. *It is a paradox, but when you surrender to the moment, you actually feel far more in control.*

20. Trust yourself. Self-trust is the ability to believe that you can handle what life throws at you. Trusting yourself means dismantling insecurity and taking the risk of trusting ourselves. If you are anxious, your trust muscle has atrophied, and your insecurity has become muscle bound. Strengthen your muscle by taking small risks. For worriers, a minor risk might be to say, "I'm going to risk believing that I can do a good job." As you practice this acceptance, your trust muscle will grow, and you will begin to recognize that life can be handled more spontaneously, as it unfolds, rather than abstractly, in your mind, before anything ever takes place.

21. Face your fears. One of the most important steps in managing your anxiety involves facing your fears; this is called exposure. If you have been avoiding certain situations, places, or objects out of fear, it will be important for you to start exposing yourself to those things so that you can get over your fears in the long run. However, it is usually easier to start with something that is not too scary and then work up to the things that cause a great deal of anxiety. Start by making a list of feared situations, places, or objects, such as saying "hi" to a co-worker, entering a crowded grocery store, riding the bus, or anything else that you are avoiding. Once you have made a list, try and arrange them from the least scary to the most scary. Starting with the situations that cause the least anxiety, repeatedly enter that situation and remain there until you notice your anxiety start to come down. Once you can enter that situation (on numerous occasions) without experiencing much anxiety, you can move on to the next thing on the list

22. Building on Bravery

Learning to manage anxiety takes a lot of hard work. If you are noticing improvements, take some time to give yourself some credit: reward yourself! How do you maintain all the progress you've made? Practice! Practice! Practice! In a way, learning to manage anxiety is a lot like exercise - you need to "keep in shape" and practice your skills regularly. Make them a habit! This is true even after you are feeling better and have reached your goals.

Do not let your worries and anxiety stop you from living a full, productive life.

