

Coping with anxiety

Everyone feels anxious sometimes — it is normal in stressful situations. It shows itself in physical ways. People describe having a dry mouth and rapid heartbeats, being tense or wound up, feeling shaky or strung out, having a tight chest and difficulty breathing. It is also difficult to concentrate. Although these things are normal at times they can become a problem. If, for example, they ‘take over’, or get out of control. Anxiety often gets started at times of stress — after breaking up with someone or being bullied or abused, for example. Sometimes it continues even when the stress is no longer there. When this happens, anxiety can make life more miserable than it needs to be.

Some people find they have sudden, unexpected waves of anxiety, called ‘panic attacks’. These can be distressing and some people become scared that they are going mad or are having a heart attack. But this is not true.

Panic that comes on only in certain situations is called a ‘phobia’. For example, someone may get strong feelings of anxiety only when shut in a small space or only when eating in front of other people.

If these feelings are a problem for you, the following suggestions will help you take control again.

One, learn to...

slow down your breathing. This may sound really odd, because when you are anxious, you may feel as if you can’t breathe, so you try to breathe more quickly and more deeply. But doing this releases chemicals in the brain that make the anxiety stronger. So the trick is to breathe less, especially when the anxious feelings begin.

Many people find this helpful because they breathe too quickly all the time without knowing it. Amazingly, for some people, just the extra air taken in with a yawn is enough to start an anxiety attack!

Learn to breathe slowly by doing the following for 5 to 10 minutes, twice a day.

1. Breathe out slowly counting in your mind ‘One-hundred-and-one, one-hundred-and-two, one-hundred-and-three.’
2. Hold your breath while you count again.
3. Breathe in to the same slow count.

Then try to breathe slowly whenever you remember.

Two, try...

drinking less coffee if you possibly can, because caffeine can increase anxiety. Eating a big a breakfast will help your body cope with stresses during the day.

Three, take...

exercise when you can. Exercise that makes your muscles work hard is a good stress and anxiety buster. You need to do it at least three times a week.

Four, do something about...

drug use, if necessary. Withdrawal can cause severe anxiety and other unpleasant effects. On the other hand, people sometimes use illegal or legal drugs, and alcohol, to reduce feelings of anxiety or painful thoughts and memories. Then, when the drugs are taken away, the anxiety appears again. If you are still feeling very anxious after two weeks of no drugs then ask for help from health care staff.

Five, learn to...

relax. This does sound like the opposite of exercise, but both work for lots of people. You will need to find somewhere quiet where you will not be disturbed. There are two main ways to relax — meditation and relaxation — and they both take practice. Try them to see which you prefer. Then practise for about 20 minutes every day.

Meditation: In meditation or yoga the body is calmed by focusing your mind. It is best to find someone to teach you, but if you cannot, try this simple meditation:

1. Sit on a chair or bed, keeping your back straight, with your hands in your lap.
2. Close your eyes and breathe slowly through your nostrils.
3. *Feel* the air as it flows in and out of your nose and *listen* to the sound.
4. Keep as still as you can until the time is up.
5. If your thoughts wander, just bring them back to your nose.

Relaxation: Teaching your muscles to relax. You will need that quiet place and time, and somewhere to sit.

First, practise slow breathing for a few minutes. As you breathe out imagine the tension flowing out of your body.

Second, try to think only about what you are doing. If worries drift into your mind while you are relaxing, don't try to stop them, just let them float gently across and out of your mind without reacting to them.

Third, relax the muscles of your body, as listed below. Do this by tensing them for 7–10 seconds, then relax them for 10 seconds. Don't tense the muscles so hard it hurts, and don't *try* to relax — just stop tensing and let the muscles relax themselves. The order of relaxing is: hands, head, body, legs, like this:

1. Hands: Clench one fist, then relax. Then do the other hand.

2. Lower arms: Bend your hands down at the wrist, as if trying to touch the underside of your arms, then relax.
3. Upper arms: Bend your elbows and tense your arms. Feel the tension in your upper arms, then relax.
4. Shoulders: Lift your shoulders up as if trying to touch your ears with them, then relax.
5. Neck: Stretch your neck gently to the left, then let your head fall forward, then stretch it to the right, in a slow rolling motion, then relax.
6. Forehead: Raise your eyebrows, then relax.
7. Eyes: Screw up your eyes, then relax.
8. Jaw: Clench your teeth (just to tighten the muscles), then relax.
9. Tongue: Press your tongue against the roof of your mouth, then relax.
10. Chest: Breathe in deeply, hold it, then breath out and relax.
11. Stomach: Push your tummy in to tighten the muscle, then relax.
12. Upper back: Pull your shoulders forward with your arms at your side, then relax.
13. Lower back: Lean your head and upper back forward, curving your back and tensing the lower back, then relax.
14. Buttocks: Tighten your buttocks, then relax.
15. Thighs: Push your feet firmly into the floor, then relax.
16. Calves: Lift your toes off the ground, then relax.
17. Feet: Gently curl your toes down so that they are pressing into the floor, then relax.

Take some slow breaths while you sit still for a few minutes enjoying the feeling of relaxation. At other times, try relaxing muscles when you notice they are tense.

Six, talk...

to anyone you feel happy to trust - perhaps a friend, Buddy or Listener, or member of staff. Are there worries you have not sorted out that are bothering you and making you anxious? It is most useful if the person helps you work out what *you* think is best to do, instead of giving you his or her ideas.

Seven, telephone or write to....

one of the following organisations:

- *No Panic*, 93 Brandsfarm Way, Telford TF3 2JQ
Helpline: 01952 590545 (10am–10pm). Information line: 0800 783 1531
- *The Prison Phoenix Trust*, PO Box 328, Oxford, OX1 1PJ. Tel: 01865 798647. The Trust teaches meditation and yoga in prisons and supports prisoners in practising regularly.
- *Triumph over Phobia* (TOP UK), PO Box 1831, Bath BA2 4YW
Tel: 01225 330353 (office)

Structured self-help groups for people with phobias or obsessive compulsive disorder.

- *Stresswatch Scotland*, 23 Campbell Street, Kilmarnock KA1 4HW
Helpline: 01563 574144 (10am–1pm, Mon Tues, Thurs, Fri). Office tel: 01563 570886
Advice, information; 35 local groups for people with panic, anxiety, stress, phobias.

Eight, read...

one of the following books if the library can get it for you:

- *Living with Fear* by Professor I Marks, McGraw-Hill
- *Self Help for your Nerves*, Claire Weekes
- *Don't Panic: Overcoming Anxiety, Phobias and Tension*, Andrew Page

The library may also be able to get *audiotapes* for you on topics such as relaxation, assertion, self esteem, from: Talking Life, PO Box 1, Wirral L47 7DD. Tel: 0151 632 0662. Fax: 0151 632 1206.

Finally, ...

You may find that these suggestions make all the difference but, if things are still bad, you should ask for help from a doctor or a mental health worker — they are not just there for people who are ‘mad’.

Mental health workers may be able to offer counselling or ‘anxiety management’ groups that will help you to understand and control your anxious feelings. The methods they use may be similar to those described in this leaflet - for example breathing control, relaxation and help with solving problems. Many people do need some extra help from others, especially if they have been avoiding feared situations and painful thoughts for a long time.

Occasionally, the doctor will prescribe tablets. These may be:

- tranquillisers. These are usually prescribed only in severe cases and for a short time.
- Anti-depressants are sometimes given, especially if someone feels depressed as well as anxious. These may take two weeks or more to work properly. They do have side-effects, but they are not addictive and are usually given over quite a long time.
- Beta blockers are sometimes used to control a fast or irregular heartbeat and other bodily effects of anxiety.

Your doctor will explain what he or she is giving you and why, but remember that tablets do not solve problems or cure anxiety in the long run. We all have to solve our problems ourselves. So, even when medication helps, it is still important to try to do other things to overcome your anxiety.