

ANXIETY DISORDERS

Understanding Anxiety

We all worry or feel anxious at times. In fact, a certain amount of worry may be helpful. It can push us to evaluate our choices and be alert for danger. However, if worries persist and become so overwhelming that they disrupt day-to-day life, it may indicate an anxiety disorder. Talk to your doctor or a mental health professional if you're concerned that you might have an anxiety disorder.

Types of anxiety disorders

- › **Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD).** A person has ongoing, excessive worry about everyday situations or activities. The anxiety is hard to control. It causes problems in daily work and social settings. Physical symptoms include edginess, fatigue, difficulty concentrating, irritability, muscle tension, and sleep problems.
- › **Panic disorder.** The key symptom is recurring, unexpected panic attacks. These are instances of extreme fear that start abruptly and build to a rapid peak. The physical symptoms can feel life-threatening: pounding heart, trembling, shortness of breath, sweating, sensation of choking, chest pain, nausea, and dizziness. There can be a sense of looming danger and a strong desire to escape. It may be in response to a certain situation or occur for no reason.
- › **Social anxiety disorder (social phobia)** is an extreme fear of being embarrassed, humiliated, judged or rejected by others in social situations. A person will try to avoid worrisome situations, such as meeting new people, public speaking, or eating in public.
- › **Phobias. Specific phobias** are an exaggerated, irrational fear of particular situations or things. The person can't control this reaction. Examples include flying, heights, spiders, and closed-in places.
- › **Agoraphobia** is a fear of being in situations where escape would be hard or embarrassing if panic symptoms set in. Common examples include open spaces, public transportation, and being in a crowd. In extreme cases, the person can't leave their home.
- › **Separation anxiety disorder.** A person is excessively anxious about being separated from loved ones, beyond what is appropriate for their age.

Related conditions

- › **Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)** is having recurring upsetting thoughts, impulses, or mental images (obsessions) that one can't control. And having behaviors that one feels they must repeat to control the anxiety from these thoughts (compulsions).
- › **Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)** involves reliving a traumatic event through nightmares, hallucinations, or flashbacks long after the trauma is over. A person may try to avoid all things associated with the event. Symptoms include negative emotions, such as guilt, anger, and shame, difficulty sleeping, irritability, difficulty concentrating, extreme alertness, or jumpiness.
- › **Acute stress disorder** is a reaction to a traumatic event. Symptoms are similar to PTSD, but occur very soon after the event – about three days to one month.

Reference: American Psychiatric Association. (2017). What are anxiety disorders? Retrieved from <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/anxiety-disorders/what-are-anxiety-disorders>

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STRATEGIES & RESOURCES

Understanding Anxiety

Understanding your unique challenges is the first step in gaining control over them.

Notice your anxiety

Use your phone or a notebook to keep an anxiety journal for several weeks. Jot down notes when you feel anxious. Include:

- › The situation(s) – what was happening?
- › Level of anxiety (ranked 1-10)
- › Physical signs and symptoms
- › Thoughts triggered by the situation

Recognize your response patterns

How do you react to your anxious thoughts and feelings? “Safety behaviors” may involve working harder or trying to avoid or escape from stressors. You may turn to more than one of these responses. They may reduce your anxiety, but may be stopping you from moving past it. Can you see any constructive responses? Add to your notes.

Identify your triggers

After a week or so, review your notes to see if you can detect any patterns. Are there certain anxiety triggers that keep stopping you from doing things you want to do or cause distress in your life? What do the situations have in common? Can you identify any triggers?

Which strategies might help to reduce anxious feelings in the moment or to change your response over time?

“Bottom-up” strategies

- › Take slow, deep breaths
- › Use progressive relaxation
- › Try calming visualizations

“Top-down” strategies

- › Challenge distorted thoughts
- › Use tactics to reclaim control
- › Learn mindfulness meditation

New response strategies

- › Take small steps outside your comfort zone
- › Experiment with dialing back your “safety behaviors”
- › Try self-compassion
- › Get professional support and guidance

Resources

Anxiety and Depression Association of America

www.adaa.org/understanding-anxiety

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)

www.nami.org/Learn-More/Mental-Health-Conditions/Anxiety-Disorders

Mental Health America

www.mhanational.org/conditions/anxiety

CalmClinic

www.calmclinic.com/anxiety-guide

Guided mindfulness practice

Available online from the UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center¹

<http://marc.ucla.edu/mindful-meditations>

Your EAP is always available. Phones are answered 24/7.

EAP services are confidential. There’s no cost to you for these services. The EAP can be used by your dependents and anyone living in your household.

If you ever feel you’re in crisis, call and ask for immediate help.

Call 911 if you feel you’re at risk of hurting yourself or others.

¹Mindfulness Meditations created by Diana Winston for the UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center (MARC).© 2015 The Regents of the University of California. All Rights Reserved.

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MIND AND BODY RELAXATION

Understanding Anxiety

Bringing a sense of relaxation and calm to your physical body sends a signal to your brain that it doesn't have to stay keyed up and on alert. Once the brain gets this signal, it releases "stand down" brain chemicals, which helps quiet anxious thoughts and feelings. This can help you feel more peaceful and in control. Following are examples of some techniques that may be helpful.

Breathing exercises

Breathing exercises are one of the simplest ways to relax. Breathing slowly and rhythmically makes your body feel like it does when you are already relaxed. This sends a message to your brain to calm down. It also relaxes you by clearing the mind of other thoughts, as you focus on your breathing. Here are several different breathing exercises.

Belly breathing

Belly breathing is quick and easy. It's a good one to start with.

- › Sit in a comfortable position.
- › Put one hand on your belly just below your ribs and the other hand on your chest.
- › Take a deep breath in through your nose, and let your belly push your hand out. Your chest should not move.
- › Then exhale through your mouth, letting your belly hand go back in.
- › Do this 5 to 10 times. Take your time with each breath.

4-7-8 breathing

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This exercise also uses belly breathing to help you relax. You can do this either sitting or lying down.

- › To start, put one hand on your belly and the other on your chest as in the belly breathing exercise.
- › Take a deep, slow breath from your belly, and silently count to 4 as you breathe in.
- › Hold your breath while you silently count from 1 to 7.
- › Breathe out slowly as you count from 1 to 8. Try to get all the air out of your lungs by the time you reach 8.
- › Repeat 3 to 7 times or until you feel calm. (Count can be reduced proportionally if you feel uncomfortable.)

Pleasant words

Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose. As you slowly and gently exhale, say a chosen word or phrase to yourself. For example: "Peace," "calm," "I am OK.") Repeat 3–5 times.

Be sure to check with your doctor before starting any new activity or exercise routine.

Progressive muscle relaxation

This technique relaxes the body by first contracting, and then releasing, each of the main muscle groups of the body. This point-counterpoint procedure helps you relax more deeply and quickly than just releasing the muscles.

To do progressive relaxation you can create your own audio file to help you go through all the muscle groups, or you can learn the procedure from the table below and work through them from memory.

Find a quiet, calm place. Get in a comfortable, fully supported position. For each muscle group:

- › Breathe in and tense the muscle group for 4 to 10 seconds. Tense hard, but not to the point of cramping.
- › Then breathe out while you suddenly and completely relax the muscle group. Don't relax it gradually.
- › Rest for 10 to 20 seconds, then move to the next group.
- › You may feel sleepy after this exercise. To "wake up" your body, count backwards from 5 to 1. Then move fingers, toes, hands, and feet. Finally, stretch your entire body. Be sure you are alert before you drive or do other activities.

Muscle group	What to do
Forehead	Raise eyebrows as high as you can.
Eye area	Close your eyes as tightly as possible. (Remove contact lenses if wearing.)
Cheeks and jaw	Press lips together tightly.
Neck and shoulders	Pull shoulders up towards ears and tighten neck muscles.
Arms	Hold arms away from the body, lock elbows, and tense forearms and biceps.
Hands	Make a tight fist.
Chest and back	Take a deep breath and hold it, then breathe out.
Stomach	Suck stomach muscles into a tight knot.
Thighs and buttocks	Clench together.
Lower legs	Flex your feet up, as if trying to touch your shins.
Feet	Point your toes away and curl them downward.

Source: Healthwise Staff. (2017). Stress relief and relaxation. Retrieved from <https://www.cigna.com/healthwellness/hw/medical-topics/stress-relief-and-relaxation-af1003spec>

Mental visualization

Mental visualization, also called guided imagery, is a method in which you use your imagination to direct your thoughts to a peaceful, relaxing place. Because of the way the mind and body are connected, when you use your senses to imagine a scene, you feel and react as if you were actually there. For example, if you are imagining a meadow in the morning, you might feel the crisp, cool morning air. As the sun rises, you feel the warmth on your face. You see the dew sparkling in the sunlight, hear birds chirping and smell the wildflowers. As you go through this imagery, your mind and body respond as if it were real - they relax.

To try guided imagery, follow these steps.

- › Find a comfortable place to sit or lie down. Close your eyes.
- › Start by taking a few deep breaths to help you relax.

- › Picture a setting that is calm and peaceful. This could be a beach, a mountain setting, a meadow or any other that is pleasing to you.
- › Imagine your scene, and try to add some detail. For example, is there a breeze? What does the sky look like? Is it clear, or are there clouds?
- › It often helps to add a path to your scene. For example, as you enter the meadow, imagine a path leading you through the tall grass to the trees on the other side. As you follow the path farther into the meadow you feel more and more relaxed.
- › When you are deep in your scene and feeling relaxed, take a few minutes to breathe slowly and feel the calm.
- › When you are ready, slowly take yourself out of the scene back to the present. Tell yourself that you will feel relaxed and refreshed and will bring that sense of calm with you.
- › Count to 3, and open your eyes.

It may help to have an audio recording to follow. You can make one of your own, buy one, or find one online.

Mindful meditation

There are many kinds of meditation. One is called mindful meditation. It can help you relax because you are not worrying about what's happened in the past or what may occur in the future. You are just being in this very moment, where everything is okay. The idea is to note what you experience without judging or trying to change it.

After you practice this meditation a few times, you may find it easier to be mindful and relaxed in everyday life, even when you are not meditating. Here is how it works...

- › Sit in a comfortable position, either in a chair or on the floor, or you can lie down. You can either close your eyes or look down, keeping your gaze a few inches in front of you on the floor.
- › Pay attention to your breathing. This is a good way to focus your attention on what is happening right now. Don't try to change your breathing. Just notice how it feels in your lungs and chest.
- › If your mind wanders, don't worry about it. Just notice your thoughts and then let them go, and bring your focus back to the present moment and your breathing. You may do this over and over again during a meditation session. That's okay.
- › During your meditation, you may feel certain emotions, such as anger, impatience, sadness or happiness. Don't try to hold on to or get rid of these feelings. They are part of your experience of the present moment. Notice them, then gently redirect your focus back the sensations of your breathing.
- › Keeping your attention on your breathing will help you stay focused in the here and now, and not get lost in thoughts of other places. For example, if you feel impatient to finish the meditation, see if you can focus on the feeling of the impatience rather than thoughts of why you're impatient, such as all the things you need to do today. Where do you feel the impatience in your body? Does it feel tight? Does it affect your breathing?

Try for about 15 minutes per day of this simple focusing and redirecting exercise. With repeated practice, you can "rewire" your brain to take a more measured and calm perspective.

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