

MANAGING ANXIETY



When you have the symptoms of anxiety you may start to wonder if there is something wrong with you. You may even think you are going crazy. You might feel alone in your struggle against anxious moods, but the reality is that many people experience them. It is estimated that 1 in every 5 experiences significantly anxious mood at some time in their life. Anxiety can affect any kind of person.

You are not alone!

Anxiety presents itself in many different ways...

The desire to control people and events		Difficulty getting to sleep		Feeling agitated or angry	
Defiance and other challenging behaviors		Having high expectations for self, including school work & sports		Avoiding activities or events (including school)	
Pain like stomachaches and headaches		Struggling to pay attention and focus		Intolerance of uncertainty	
Crying and difficulty managing emotions		Over-planning for situations and events		Feeling worried about situations or events	

Understanding Anxiety

Feeling fear is a natural part of being human. It is a survival instinct. If we were faced with a ferocious bear, we would be afraid! This is important because when we are afraid, our body activates a series of processes to protect us. In the case of a bear attack we would run for our lives or become sufficiently 'pumped up' to physically defend ourselves or we freeze ("disappear").

The experience of anxiety is very similar to the experience of fear - the main difference is that anxiety happens when there is no real danger.

Imagine the anxiety you might have walking down a dark street. You may feel anxious that something is lurking in the dark even though there is nothing there. The anxiety is caused by *believing* you are in danger, not because you *actually* are in danger.

Therefore, the experience of anxiety and fear are basically the same except that in the case of anxiety, there may not be any actual danger - you just think there is.

Fight/Flight/Freeze Response

When a person is in danger, *or believes* that they are in danger, a number of changes occur. This response has been named the **fight/flight/freeze** response. As previously explained, when confronted with danger we will typically flee from the situation or stand and fight or freeze so that the

danger passes us by. The main purpose of the fight/flight/freeze response is to protect you. It is therefore important to **remember that the experience of anxiety is not in itself harmful.**



When a person's fight/flight/freeze response is activated, three major systems are affected. These are the physical, cognitive (thinking) and behavioural systems.

Physical System

When we believe that we are in danger, our whole physical system undergoes some major, **temporary** changes designed to enhance our ability to either run away or stand and be ready to fight.

1. An increase in heart rate - enables blood to be pumped around the body faster, so that oxygen gets delivered more promptly to muscles.
2. A redistribution of blood - away from places where it is not needed (such as skin, fingers and toes) towards the places it is likely to be needed (large organs and muscles). If "the bear" attacked us we would be less likely to bleed to death, as the blood will be with the vital organs. This physical change results in the skin looking pale and feeling cold, and also in the experience of cold, numb and tingling fingers and toes.
3. Faster, deeper breathing - provides tissues with extra oxygen to prepare for action. This can give you breathlessness, choking or smothering feelings, tightness and pain in the chest, and sighing and yawning. One of the main side effects of this increase in breathing is that the blood supply to the head is actually decreased. This is **not** dangerous but can produce unpleasant symptoms, including: dizziness, light-headedness, blurred vision, confusion, feelings of unreality and hot flushes.
4. An increase in sweating - causes the body to become more slippery, making it harder for a predator to grab, and also cools the body to prevent overheating.
5. Widening of the pupils of the eyes - lets in more light, may result in blurred vision, spots before the eyes, or just a sense that the light is too bright. This change enables the person to more effectively use their sight to identify any hidden dangers such as something lurking in the shadows.

6. Decreased activity of digestive system - so more energy can be diverted to systems related to fight or flight. You might notice a decrease in salivation, a dry mouth, nausea, a heavy stomach or even constipation.

7. Muscle tension - muscle groups tense up in preparation for fight/flight/freeze and this can result in aches and pain, trembling and shaking.

Behaviour System

As already mentioned, the main behaviours associated with fear and anxiety are to either fight or flee or freeze. Therefore, the overwhelming urges associated with this response are those of aggression and a desire to escape or hide. Often this is not possible, so you may express the urges through behaviours such as foot tapping, pacing or snapping at people.

Cognitive (Thinking) System

As the main objective of the fight/flight/freeze response is to be alert to danger, your attention may become focussed solely on that. Concentration on anything else can become extremely difficult. This is a normal and important part of the fight/flight/freeze response.

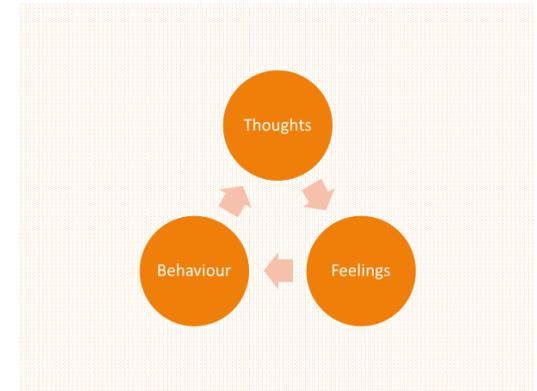
Sometimes an obvious danger cannot be found so we start to look inside ourselves for an explanation. Without an obvious reason, you may conclude that there is something mentally or physically wrong with you.

Returning to normal

Once the immediate danger has passed, the body begins to relax. The heart and breathing rate slow, temperature lowers and muscles to relax. The systems do not return to normal straight away. Some tension continues for a very good reason. In primitive times, if a wild animal confronted us it would be foolish to relax and be off guard as soon as the animal began to back off. Therefore, some effects of the fight/flight/freeze response remain for some time and only gradually taper off. This helps to understand why people can feel anxious for ongoing periods of time with no obvious stress.

Anxiety works in a cycle. How you **think**, affects how you **feel** which affects how you **behave**.

For example, if you **think** “I won’t be able to cope in school”, you will **feel** nervous, scared and you will **behave** accordingly by avoiding school or by panicking. The behaviour then becomes evidence so you will **think** “see I knew I wouldn’t cope” and **feel** even more nervous and **behave** more panicky..... and so on!



If you change the thoughts to more positive ones, that will make you feel more positive and behave more positively! For example if you **think** “I don’t want to go to school but I can do it” you will **feel** more capable and **behave** more determinedly. You will cope with the day and have positive evidence to feed into the loop.

There are two basic thoughts underlying your fears:

1. This is going to go wrong
2. I won’t be able to cope when it does

Try rethinking your anxiety in terms of these two things. For example, your fear is “I’m going to pass out in a panic attack if I go to school”.

Ask yourself:

- How likely is this to happen? What is the evidence?
- IF it does, what would the consequences really be? How long would they last? How would you handle it?

Challenge your negative thoughts

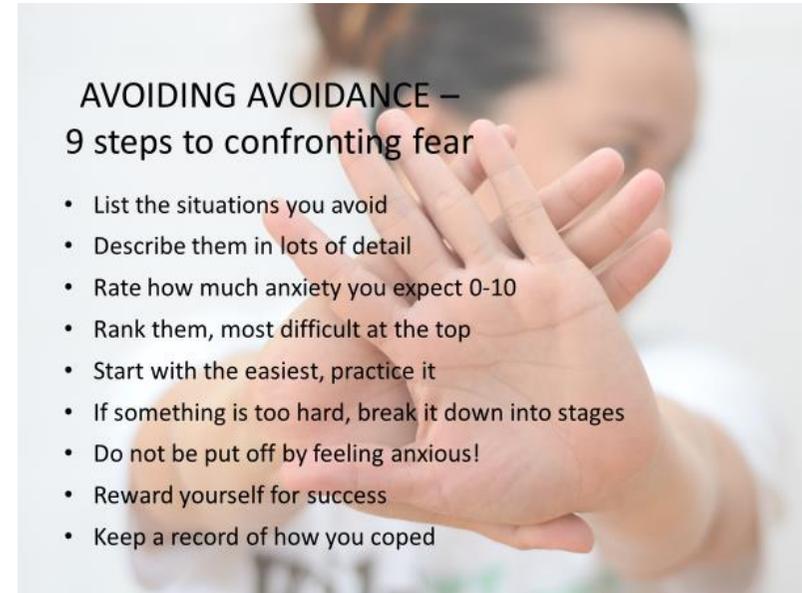
Ask yourself these questions when you think negatively...

- Is there any evidence to support what I'm thinking – how do I KNOW it is true?
- Is there any evidence against what I'm thinking?
- What alternate perspectives are there?
- What would I tell a friend if s/he was saying this about her/himself?
- Is this a thought based on logic or fact?
- Am I being too hard on myself? Would I ever say these words to anyone else?

FACING YOUR FEARS

It can be tempting to avoid what scares us but this can actually make the anxiety worse. It gives us the message that we're only ok *because* we avoided the scary situation. Next time you have to face it you will feel anxious again and it will be even worse.

Here are some tips :



**AVOIDING AVOIDANCE –
9 steps to confronting fear**

- List the situations you avoid
- Describe them in lots of detail
- Rate how much anxiety you expect 0-10
- Rank them, most difficult at the top
- Start with the easiest, practice it
- If something is too hard, break it down into stages
- Do not be put off by feeling anxious!
- Reward yourself for success
- Keep a record of how you coped

Make sure you are setting realistic goals when you are pushing yourself to try things that scare you. Make them small enough that they are achievable – then you will have positive feedback for yourself and will feel more confident about trying again. Push onto the next stage when you are ready.

Remind yourself of the things you **can** do and that you are doing.

Frame things positively. For example, instead of worrying that you don't get enough sleep, look at what you **can** manage. If you can't get to sleep until 4am, remind yourself that the negative thoughts do switch off eventually and you do sleep and you do cope the next day with only a few hours. It might not be the best way or a long term way to live but you **are** coping. You can build on this!

Don't use words like ALWAYS and NEVER – they give your brain the message that things are fixed and can't change. Say OFTEN or SOMETIMES instead.

IMPATIENCE

- Change is a slow process
- Don't feel disheartened if it doesn't happen quickly
- Focus on every positive change, however small.
- Ask others for feedback – not always easy to see it yourself

BAD DAYS

- It is normal – you will feel discouraged, don't give up!
- You are not back to the start every time.
- Judge your progress over a number of weeks – this will put a bad day into perspective





TRANSITIONAL OBJECTS

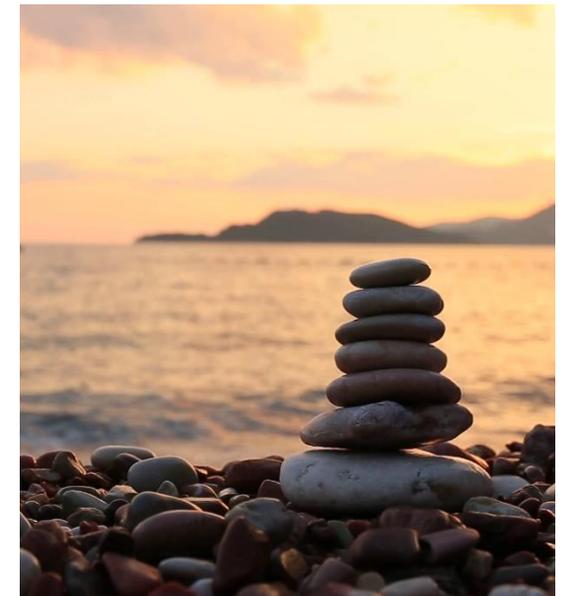
If you are worried about missing someone who supports you when you are anxious, find a way of carrying them with you. Perhaps you have a pebble or other small thing which reminds you of them, something that smells of them. Keep this in your pocket.

When you are feeling anxious you can feel this in your pocket and think of what that person would be saying to you to reassure you or distract you. Maybe you could get this person to write something encouraging on a piece of paper you keep with you.

IMAGINE YOUR HAPPY PLACE

Create the image of your favourite place in your head. You could use a fantasy place if you'd rather – a tropical beach perhaps.

Imagine it in as much detail as possible, go through your senses to make it really clear. Use a small thing you can keep in your pocket like a pebble or toy while you do this. Squeeze the pebble when you are feeling anxious as a key to getting back into your “happy place”



COPING STATEMENTS

Write some coping statements and keep them in your pocket. Having them handy really helps because when you feel overwhelmed it can be hard to think of them without seeing them.

COPING STATEMENTS



- 1. Preparing for a stressful situation**
 - What do I have to do
 - Don't be negative, think rationally
 - Worrying won't help
- 2. Handling a stressful situation**
 - I can meet this challenge
 - One step at a time
 - Take a deep breath
- 3. Coping with the feeling of being overwhelmed**
 - When fear comes, just pause. Breathe.
 - I expect fear to rise, it will pass
 - Use a coping technique
- 4. Reinforcing statements**
 - It worked – I did it!
 - It wasn't as bad as I expected
 - I controlled the anxiety



5. Or make some about your personality:
- I am brave
 - I am strong
 - I am tidy
 - I know how to talk to people
 - I am creative
 - I have good ideas
 - I am proud of what I've done

CALMING TECHNIQUES – here are a few suggestions of things that can help when your anxiety is building. There are lots of things like this on the internet, find one that suits you and practice it.

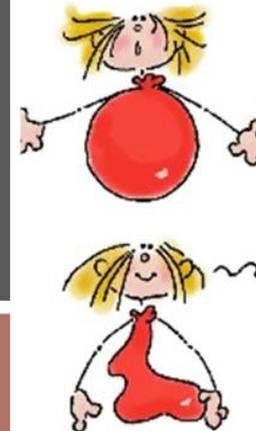
STOP TECHNIQUE

- Say **STOP** aloud or under your breath
- Breathe deeply
- Deliberately tense your shoulders then relax them
- Stay quiet for a few seconds then carry on with what you were doing. Move slowly and smoothly.



COPING STRATEGIES

Breathing exercise



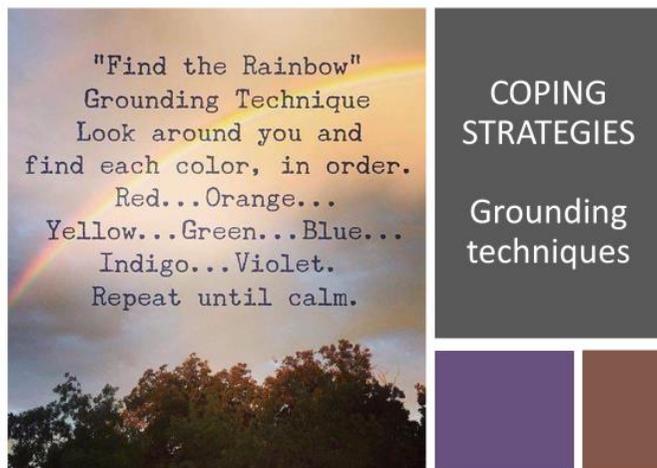
- Imagine a balloon in your belly
 - inflate on the in breath
 - deflate on the out breath
- **7-11**
 - Breathe in for 7 counts
 - Breathe out for 11
 - Make the out breath longer



"Find the Rainbow"
Grounding Technique
Look around you and
find each color, in order.
Red...Orange...
Yellow...Green...Blue...
Indigo...Violet.
Repeat until calm.

COPING
STRATEGIES

Grounding
techniques



SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Starving the Anxiety Gremlin

The Anxiety Survival Guide for Teens

My Anxiety Handbook

USEFUL APPS

Virtual Hope Box (collect favourite things in 4 areas – distraction, inspiration, relaxation, coping)

Clear Fear (help with anxiety)

No panic (help with anxiety)

Mindshift (info for anxiety, coping tools)

SAM Anxiety Management (tools and suggestions, mood tracker)

Optimism (mood tracker and diary)

Daylio (mood tracker and diary)

Calm (breathing exercises and meditation)

Headspace (breathing exercises and meditation)

Insight Timer (breathing exercises and meditation)

Bellybio (interacts with your movements, helps calm breathing)

Happy Healthy (think about diet, sleep, activities)

Five ways to Wellbeing (connect, be active, take notice, learn, give)