

Anxiety

Challenging Anxiety

Anxiety affects approximately 19 MILLION adults in the United States alone. 1 out of every 6 people will experience uncomfortable anxiety at some time during their lives (that is nearly 45 million people)! The body's natural response to danger is to prepare for "fight" or "flight". When the sympathetic nervous system activates to emergency situations, you may experience feelings and body sensations such as:

- Increased heart rate
- Quick, shallow breaths
- Increased adrenaline
- Impending doom
- Increased muscle tension
- Increased perspiration
- Light headedness
- Chest pains

These physical responses usually occur as components of anxiety. It is important to recognize that these reactions are your body's normal response to a perceived danger. However, with anxiety, your body is responding to situations in which you are not physically threatened. None of these physical reactions can harm you—they are designed to keep you safe.

Anxiety begins in the cognitive (thinking) part of the brain. Physical symptoms ALWAYS begin as thoughts or perceptions based on your personal beliefs. You may experience the following kinds of thoughts:

- Uncontrollable worry
- Fear, apprehension
- Feelings of impending doom
- Negative thoughts you cannot stop
- Negative thoughts about yourself, the future, or past events

The thinking part of the brain can activate the physical "danger" response even when there is no immediate threat of danger. The physical and cognitive aspects of anxiety feed into each other to continue the negative cycle of worry and physical discomfort. Fortunately, there are several ways to alleviate the physical and cognitive discomfort of anxiety. Some typical behavioral exercises you can use to reduce physical symptoms of anxiety include:

- Relaxation breathing
- Physical exercise
- Engage in enjoyable/distracting activity
- Noticing and being curious about it negative or distorted thinking

It will take practice to feel comfortable using these techniques, and to notice a decrease in your symptoms of anxiety. Remember, learning to feel anxious took time learning to feel more calm will take time. Soon, use of relaxation techniques and new ways of responding to anxious thoughts and sensations will become natural.

Diaphragmatic Breathing Exercise

1. Sit in a comfortable position, legs shoulder width apart, eyes closed, jaw relaxed, arms loose.
2. Place one hand on your chest, one hand on your stomach.
3. Try to breathe so that only your stomach rises and falls.

Inhale: Concentrate on keeping your chest relatively still. Imagine you are trying to hold up a pair of pants that are slightly too big.

Exhale: Allow your stomach to fall as if you are melting into your chair. Repeat the word “calm” to provide focus as you are practicing the exercise.

Do not force the breath, let your body tell you when to take the next breath.

4. Take several deep breaths moving only your stomach in and out with the breath.
5. Practice 3-5 minutes 2-3 times. The more you practice, the faster your progress will be.

Note: It is normal for this type of breathing to feel a bit awkward at first. With practice it will become more natural for you.

Challenging Negative Thoughts

Negative thought cycles perpetuate the physical symptoms of anxiety. In addition to practicing diaphragmatic breathing it is important to learn new ways to respond to negative thought patterns to decrease the experience of anxiety.

Examine your thoughts for key words:

- must, should, have to (unrealistic standards for yourself and others)
- never, always, every (“black and white” thinking)
This kind of thinking does not allow room for alteration, compromise, or change. Using these words casts blame, and they are judgmental.
- awful, horrible, disaster (catastrophic thinking)
This kind of thinking encourages the sense of despair and doom.
- jerk, slob, creep, stupid (negative labels)

Changing your choice of words makes a big difference in the way a situation or person is perceived. The way we react to a situation is the determinant of our moods, not the situation itself. Our thoughts influence our moods, so by altering the way we respond to them we are able to alter our mood.

Here are some simple ways to challenge your thoughts:

1. Question the negative/worrisome thoughts you are having. ***Is the thought valid?***
 - a) provide evidence *for* and *against* the truth of the thought
 - b) Challenge the likelihood that an event will occur.

2. Challenge the need to “fix” all problems, do all chores, or take care of things *immediately*.
Ask yourself, “What is the worst thing that will happen if does not happen?”

3. Change the negative thought into a positive self-statement.
For example: Instead of, “I am never on time, I am such a loser”, say “Ok, so I am not always on time, but I am not always late either. Sometimes I am running behind schedule, but that does not mean I am a loser”.

4. Play with the negative thought:
 - a) Try saying the opposite of the thought. For example, “I am always on time, I am a complete winner”.
 - b) Try saying the thought very slowly and then quickly, softly and then loudly.
 - c) Try singing the song to the tune of happy birthday.

Recommended Reading

- “The Mindfulness and Acceptance Workbook for Anxiety”, John Forseyth and George Eifort
- “Why Zebras Don’t Get Ulcers”, Robert Sapolsky
- “The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook” and “Coping with Anxiety”, Edmund J. Bourne