



Coping Strategies

There are some general strategies that anyone can use to help manage their anxiety. Although it is always a good idea to seek professional help if you have an anxiety disorder, especially in more severe cases, help is not always readily available. Even if you do decide to seek help, there are still a number of things that you can do on your own to better manage your anxiety.

Although there are specific strategies aimed at helping people cope with different types of anxiety problems, these are some general strategies that can help anyone who is experiencing problematic anxiety:

1. Learning about anxiety
2. Learning to relax
3. Challenging anxious or worrisome thoughts
4. Facing fears

Step 1. Learning about anxiety

This is a very important first step because it helps you understand what is happening to you when you experience anxiety. Remember that knowledge is power, and just knowing why you are feeling anxious is a good step toward managing your anxiety.

What you need to know about anxiety:

- Anxiety is normal. Everyone experiences anxiety at some point in time. For example, it is normal to feel anxious when on a rollercoaster or before a job interview.
- Anxiety is adaptive. It helps us to prepare for real danger (such as a bear jumping out of the woods) or performing at our best (for example, it motivates us to get ready for an important meeting or presentation). When we experience anxiety, it triggers

our “fight-flight-freeze” response and gets our body ready to defend itself (for instance, our heart beats faster to pump blood to our muscles so we have the energy to run away or fight off danger). Without it, we would not survive.

◦Anxiety can become a problem when our body reacts when there is no real danger. It can be helpful to think of anxiety as a smoke alarm. A smoke alarm can help protect us when there is an actual fire, but sometimes the alarm goes off when there isn't a real fire (e.g. burning toast in the toaster). Like a smoke alarm, anxiety is helpful when it alerts us to real danger. But when it goes off when there is no real danger, then we may want to fix it. We don't want to take the batteries out of the alarm in case there is a real fire, but we do want to fix the alarm so that it doesn't go off every time we make toast.

Step 2. Learning to relax.

The second step involves learning to relax. Two strategies can be particularly helpful: calm breathing and muscle relaxation.

1.Calm Breathing: This is a strategy that you can use to calm down quickly. We tend to breathe faster when we are anxious, which can make us feel dizzy and lightheaded, and even more anxious. Calm breathing involves taking slow and gentle breaths. Breathe in through the nose, pause, and then breathe out through the mouth, pausing for several seconds before taking another breath. For more information, see [How to do Calm Breathing](#).

2.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. For a detailed description of muscle relaxation, see [How to do Progressive Muscle Relaxation](#).

Step 3. Challenging anxious/worrisome thoughts

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 practise these skills. For more information on identifying and challenging anxious and worrisome thoughts, see [Realistic Thinking](#).

Step 4. Facing Fears

The final and most important step 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. For more information please see Facing Your Fears – Exposure.

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?

Practise! Practise! Practise!

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.

Don't be discouraged if you start using old behaviours. This can happen during stressful times or during transitions (for example, starting a new job or moving). This tendency is normal, and just means that you need to start practising using the tools. Remember, coping with anxiety is a lifelong process.