

A Crash Course in Anxiety Reduction

Few things are more painful than constant fear, worry, or panic attacks. In severe cases we recommend seeing your physician for medical help. This brief paper suggests several ways to reduce fear without a trip to the doctor.

“Get Ready to Do Battle With Anxiety” (write out the answers to these questions)

- A. What will be the benefits of less anxiety?
- B. If you are successful what will that look like?
- C. What positive emotions do you want to feel more often?
- D. What negative feelings do you want to avoid?
- E. When your inner voice says, “This is too hard, give up!” what are you going to say back to it?
- F. “I want to _____.”
- G. “I would like to _____.”
- H. “I am able now to _____.”
- I. “It would be helpful if _____.”
- J. “I need to _____.”
- K. On a scale of 1-10 how important is it to you to make these changes?
- L. On a scale of 1-10 how willing are you to make these changes?
- M. On a scale of 1-10 how confident are you that you can make these changes?
- N. On a scale of 1-10 how ready are you to commit to making these changes?
- O. If at the last moment you change your mind what excuses do you think you’ll give?
- P. Develop rebuttals to those excuses by saying to those excuses, “Yes, I’m (tired, afraid, lazy), nevertheless _____.”

“Be still, my beating heart.” Anxiety makes our body react with a pounding heart, dizziness, dry mouth, perspiration, and butterflies. These are normal responses because your brain is getting your body ready to fight off danger. Here are some self soothing exercises.

- A. Tell yourself over and over, “Physiological arousal is temporary and not harmful or dangerous. I don’t need to be afraid of these symptoms.”
- B. Deep abdominal breathing. Put your hands on your stomach and as you inhale deeply your hands should move out. This means your diaphragm is drawing in air all the way to the bottom of your lungs. Slowly exhale to a count of 5. Increased oxygen calms us down.
- C. Take a brisk walk. If you’ve got time, work out in a gym, take up jogging, or do vigorous exercise that “forces” your body to process all the adrenaline that’s making you feel agitated.
- D. Visualize a “happy place.” I know this sounds corny but doing so gets your mind off your fears and helps you refocus on calming environments. Watch a feel good movie, listen to inspiring music, visit a calming friend. If you’re a Christian visualize heaven, God, the cross.
- E. Progressive muscle relaxation. Scrunch up all your facial muscles for 10 seconds, then relax. Tense up your neck and shoulder muscles for 10 seconds, then relax. Tense up both of your arms for 10 seconds, then relax. Do this with all your muscles from your head to toe.
- F. Increasing tolerance of these symptoms. The ultimate goal is not to ever have a rapid heart beat but rather to stay calm and accept it when it happens.



“Identify your ANTS (automatic negative thoughts).” Our emotions are the result of our thoughts and some thoughts are guaranteed to lead to anxiety. Identify your Automatic Negative Thoughts (ANTS), reject them, and replace them with thoughts that lead to serenity. The number of ANTS is endless so we can’t list them all. Here are some of the most bothersome.

- A. “Worry is helpful.” (Really? What good does worry do?)
- B. “Worry can’t be controlled.” (Um, yes it can).
- C. “If I don’t worry I won’t be prepared when bad things happen.” (We suggest you actually get prepared for whatever bad thing may happen, then you won’t need to worry).
- D. “If ___ happens it’ll be a catastrophe!” (We suggest you say, “If _____ happens then I’ll take these actions _____”).
- E. “If I think something bad will happen, it will.” (Our brains do not control the universe).
- F. “Of all possible outcomes I know the worst will happen.” (This is a self fulfilling prophecy).
- G. “There are no positive signs of safety.” (Focusing only on the negative while ignoring the positive is a recipe for worry!)
- H. “If I feel at risk I must be at risk.” (Feelings can be misleading).
- I. “If I don’t get 100 I’ve failed.” (Where’d such perfectionism come from?)
- J. “Failing means I’m a failure.” (Failure means you’re creative, risk taker, trying something new).
- K. “If one person doesn’t love me no one loves me.” (Where’d that idea come from?)
- L. “I succeeded but it was a fluke.” (Why can’t you give yourself any credit?)
- M. “___ didn’t speak to me; they must not like me.” (List six possible reasons why they didn’t speak to you, and six optional responses you can make).
- N. “Things must go my way.” (That’d be nice but is it realistic?)
- O. “I am inadequate.” (List all the things you have accomplished).
- P. “I must please (fix, console, correct) everyone.” (No wonder you’re anxious!)
- Q. “Anxiety means I don’t have enough faith.” (Let’s not add guilt to your anxiety).

“Challenge those ANTS.” Choose one of the above ANTS (or add your own) and answer the following questions to counter that automatic negative thought.

- A. Aside from how you feel, what is the evidence that what you fear will happen?
- B. What’s the evidence that it won’t happen?
- C. If the bad thing happens, what would it really mean to you and how would you cope with it?
- D. If the bad thing happens, what would still be good in your life?
- E. What are the advantages of thinking that ANT?
- F. What are the disadvantages?
- G. What might some other people say about this?
- H. What part of this do you have control over?
- I. What would be a more helpful Positive Thought to replace the ANT? If you get stuck ask your counselor to help you find Positive Thoughts that’ll bring peace.
- J. What plans could you put in place if that feared event takes place? (Plans make worrying less important).

“Face your fears.”

- A. Realize that mental fears are merely thoughts in your head, not real events.
- B. Trying to avoid all worrisome thoughts only makes them stronger.
- C. Accept the fact that your brain is generating adrenaline; don’t let it run the show.



- D. Minds have a mind of their own!
- E. Don't let emotions dictate your actions.
- F. List all the times you took action even though you didn't FEEL like it.
- G. With the help of a coach, do the thing you're afraid of.
- H. By slowly exposing yourself to the worrisome fear you build up a tolerance against it.
- I. Name a time when you did something that was scary at first but later became easier.
- J. If we never have anxiety it means we never do anything new, unusual, or challenging.
- K. Write down what your thoughts are in your most panicky moment and show your counselor.
- L. If you fear flying: identify other places you avoid (driving, elevators, busses, subways) and slowly expose yourself to those enclosed spaces.
- M. If you fear losing control while driving: list all the things you do have control over while driving (adjust mirrors, count by 5s, sing, adjust radio, etc.).
- N. If you fear being embarrassed, criticized, not liked, judged, or humiliated in public places: challenge the ANTS about what you think people are thinking about you.
- O. Instead of worrying that others think poorly of you, what can you do to help others think positively about themselves? (Being an encourager makes us more confident).
- P. Do a role play with a counselor: they play the part of you, you play the part of the ANT.
- Q. If you fear your spouse will do something terribly wrong: imagine the absolute worst thing they could do, accept this as a real possibility, list the consequences if they actually did the feared thing, how would you cope with those consequences, and list all the things that would still be good in your life if the worst happened.
- R. If your spouse is anxious: resist the temptation to become their anti anxiety drug. Reassuring them 100 times a day will not give them the opportunity to overcome their fears (plus it'll wear you out). Instead say, "It sounds like your anxiety is giving you a hard time today. I'm sure you'll handle it fine."
- S. Prepare for the worst, expect the best, take what comes.

“Learn to live with uncertainty.” We often bring anxiety upon ourselves by demanding we know all and control all. Sadly, we live in a universe that is unpredictable.

- A. Challenge your inner need for absolute certainty. Compute the odds of some rare event actually happening (asteroid hitting Whatcom Co.).
- B. Write out a story of the Worst Case Scenario. Be as vivid and detailed as possible. Then read it five times a day until it either bores you to tears or you realize it's occurrence is absurdly unlikely.
- C. Reduce the time you spend obsessing about things you can't control. Set a timer and worry like mad for 5 minutes a day. Then 4, then 3, 2, 1, and then none!
- D. Keep a running list of things you're thankful for. Replace the menu of negative thoughts with a menu of positive thoughts.
- E. In your mind dress up your inner voice in a clown suit. Take a mocking approach to those inner bullies; they're not the boss of you.
- F. Observe your thoughts from a distance. Don't judge them, observe them.
- G. Accept that these unpleasant thoughts are there without trying to change them. Learn to endure the discomfort. If we can't make the bad thoughts go away, increase your tolerance of them.
- H. Embrace the physical sensations. Don't avoid, deny, or punish yourself for having them. Some troublesome symptoms are like a bad knee, you just learn to live with it.

