

COPING WITH ANXIETY AND PANIC ATTACKS: Some Cognitive-Behavioural Self-Help Strategies

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal and useful emotion when we feel under threat: it puts us on the alert and gets our body ready to cope with the danger. It saves your life if you run to make it across the road because a car is speeding too fast towards you!

However problems arise when the threat is in our minds rather than a real physical danger, and when our thoughts and behaviours reinforce our anxiety instead of helping it melt away. Some people live in a state of constant low level anxiety, which is exhausting.

Anxiety involves our thoughts, body reactions and behaviours. It does not mean you are “crazy”, it is a common psychological problem – and it can not lead, in itself, to death or mental illness.

Some common symptoms of anxiety are :

Worrying a lot	Loss of self-confidence
Self-consciousness	Inability to relax
Constant feeling of dread	Irritability with others
Loss of concentration/focus	Forgetfulness
Fear of criticism/rejection	Nightmares
Fear of being alone	Fear of being with people
Sleeplessness	Loss of sexual interest
Avoidance of anxiety-provoking situations	Always “wound up”, “on edge”
Afraid to face the day	

Anxiety is tiring and demoralising to live with but the good news is that there are tried and tested ways to tackle it which this article will give you. With a willingness to learn and practise the coping methods, you can free yourself from anxiety for good – even if you have “always been this way”. It’s not written in your genes or your stars!

The Science Bit

You may have heard of the “Fight/Flight” response. If you were walking in the jungle and a tiger appeared you would have a huge anxiety reaction in mind and body. Under threat your Sympathetic Nervous System kicks in to prepare you to fight or flee (run away) – the so-called “Fight/Flight” response.

Adrenaline and noradrenaline are now pouring through your system; your digestion shuts down because your energy is more useful to you being used to save yourself; blood is diverted from hands, feet and skin and gets pumped to your major muscle groups, especially the legs; your heart beats faster; your breathing speeds up increasing the oxygenation of your blood; your liver releases stored sugar into your bloodstream to give you more energy;

you sweat more, your peripheral vision fades out as all your focus is on the threat factor, etc. Your body is now ready to fight or run away from the tiger.

In extreme (life-threatening or highly traumatic) situations, the body has a third option which is “freeze”. Thankfully most people never experience it but if you have, remember that it is a natural, built-in evolutionary response and you couldn’t help it – it happens when your anxiety level shoots up to sky-high. Following all the advice in this helpsheet should help you with the after-effects of such an experience.

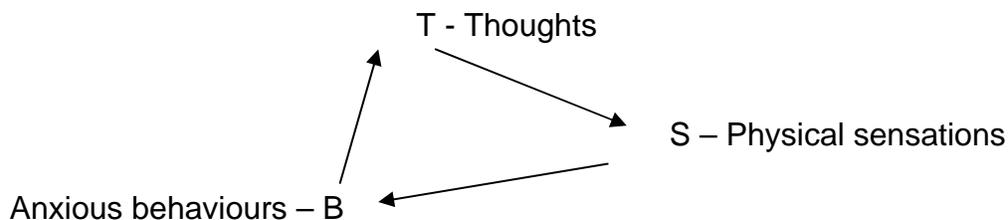
Here are some of the physical sensations you may notice when you are anxious, or having a panic attack, which are a result of these rapid changes in your body, even when there are no tigers around!

Palpitations/racing heart	Trembling	Weak knees
Dizziness	Chest pains	Pins and needles
Hot/cold	Nausea	Light-headed
Muscle pains	Diarrhoea	Short of breath
“Keyed up”	Feeling of unreality	Weak bladder
Visual disturbances	Tension	Problems swallowing
Dry mouth	Sweating	Stomach pains

These symptoms are very unpleasant but will eventually disappear on their own, with the help of the Parasympathetic Nervous System. The PNS is your built-in calming down mechanism. You can assist the P.N.S. to kick in more effectively and calm yourself down more quickly, with simple coping methods. If you don’t assist it, it will kick in anyway, which is why panic attacks do eventually subside – but why not help it along if you can?

How to Combat Anxiety

Anxiety is a vicious circle of anxious thoughts (T), anxiety sensations(S) and anxiety-maintaining (even anxiety-increasing) behaviours (B).



In the cognitive-behavioural model, (and assuming no encounters with tigers) the origins of an anxious mood lie with thoughts – even thoughts that we are not aware of having! (This is why your experience might be that the first thing you notice is your heart thumping or your palms sweating but in fact your body is reacting to your mental anxiety, conscious or unconscious). Anxious thoughts will lead to anxiety reactions in the body, which are then reinforced by what we think, and what we do or fail to do behaviour-wise. An anxious person biting their nails and stressing can get stuck in a vicious circle. “Oh no I’ve got to do a presentation in front of twenty people tomorrow, I know I’m going to mess it up!” Such

thoughts can lead to shakiness, feeling hot and nauseous, made worse by pacing the room, putting off preparation of the presentation, drinking a fourth cup of coffee, leading to more panicky thoughts about how untogether you are!

To fight this vicious circle, you need to break into it on a Thoughts level, a physical Sensations level and a Behaviours level. Remember – **TSB**.

T - Challenging your Anxious THOUGHTS

There are various common patterns of anxious thinking that you can spot and challenge:

- 1) All or Nothing Thinking : i.e. you're either "brilliant" at something or "rubbish" at it. If you make a mistake, you're "a total failure".
- 2) Overgeneralising : i.e. if you didn't get on with people at a party once, you tell yourself "I never get on with people at parties". "I always fluff it".
- 3) Crystal ball-gazing : i.e. assuming you can see into the future – "I'll only get a Third and then I won't be able to find a decent job".
- 4) Ignoring the Positive, i.e. dismissing any success or good qualities you have, rationalising that they "don't count" for some reason – or not even noticing them in the first place. "Being a good mate isn't going to get me a decent job".
- 5) Mind-reading, i.e. believing you know what others are or will be thinking – "they think I'm stupid/useless/a prat"; "she'll think I'm really immature".
- 6) Catastrophising, i.e. immediately worrying about the worst case scenario – if you have chest pains you worry that you're having a heart attack; if you've got a headache you worry that you've got a brain tumour.

How to Challenge Such Thoughts

- a) Notice if they fall into one of the above patterns of anxious thinking. Be honest.
- b) Ask yourself – what's the evidence to support this thought? And what's the evidence against it? What would be a fairer thing to be saying to myself?
- c) Ask yourself – what are the chances of such and such happening? Force yourself to be realistic here. If you've been anxious for years but have never actually fainted from it, the chances are you're not going to start now.
- d) What would you say to your best friend if they came out with your thoughts? Now say that to yourself.
- e) Tell yourself that you CAN cope, you CAN handle it – don't undermine yourself and don't underestimate your determination, resilience and ability to learn new coping skills. You are not weird or inadequate; you are simply coping with anxiety.

FIND A POSITIVE THOUGHT TO REPLACE EVERY ANXIOUS THOUGHT AND MAKE AN EFFORT TO BELIEVE IT!

S - Calming Your Physical SENSATIONS

Essentially you are trying to stop anxiety symptoms escalating, and to reinforce your natural bodily calming-down mechanism (the P.N.S.). There are two simple and effective ways of

intervening on a body level and they work even better done together: they are abdominal breathing, and relaxation.

Abdominal Breathing

Whether you are generally in an anxious mood or especially if you are having a panic attack, the chances are that you are hyper-ventilating (breathing too quickly). This upsets the all-important balance of oxygen and carbon dioxide in your blood, leading to some of the unpleasant symptoms of anxiety and panic already mentioned.

- 1) You need to SLOW DOWN your breathing. Aim for a maximum of 10-12 breaths per minute (time yourself) whenever you are at rest. Try to pause between breaths. Also try to breathe out for at least as long as you took to breathe in. If it helps, count 'in' for 5, 'out' for 8 and 'hold' for 2. You will also breathe more slowly if you breathe through your nose instead of through your mouth.
- 2) You need to breathe deeply, into your belly (abdomen), taking air steadily right down into the bottom of your lungs, so that your stomach pushes out. Anxious breathing tends to lift up the chest only – the air never gets further down the lungs and the diaphragm muscle doesn't move. It sits underneath your lungs. When air is taken all the way to the bottom of your lungs the diaphragm gets pushed down, which then pushes your stomach wall out. Look down and you'll see this happening! The diaphragm then helps you to expel all that air, squeezing it up right from the bottom of your lungs, as you breathe out. This is a much more efficient way of breathing, as well as helping to calm you down!
- 3) Try this exercise:

Put one hand lightly on your chest and one just above your belly-button. Take 10-15 slow deep breaths in a row and try to get your stomach moving in and out with your chest staying still, or very nearly still. This takes practice! Once you can keep your chest still, you can do "3-6-9" breaths. Imagine each of your lungs as a building with three floors that you are going to fill with air whilst counting to 9. Breathe in to three filling the top floor, into 6 filling the middle floor, and up to 9 filling the ground floor of both your lungs. (Your stomach should now be sticking out because all that air is forcing down the diaphragm muscle underneath your lungs). Now breathe out from 9 to 1 imagining that you are emptying first the top floor (9,8,7) then the middle floor (6,5,4) and finally the ground floor (3,2,1). Do this 4 more times.

Do this exercise 2-3 times a day until it feels easy and natural. The more you do it, the more likely it is that you will breathe more deeply at other times of the day when you're not even trying to. That is excellent for keeping your anxiety level down.

Time your breaths per minute to check against your previous total. Hopefully you will have knocked off at least 3 breaths from when you started. Then put breathing and relaxation together in a simple way as follows:

- 4) Sit or lie down and allow yourself at least 10 minutes. Relax all parts of your body as much as possible (this will be much easier if you have been doing the progressive muscular relaxation procedure which follows). Now take 10 slow steady breaths, counting the in-breaths up to 10 and saying “relax” or “calming down” to yourself with each out-breath. So “one, relax, two, relax” and so on. When you get to 10, count back down to 1. Repeat. Some people like to visualise the numbers and the word “relax” to keep them focused.

Thoughts will probably distract you at first but persevere and your concentration will improve. If you can do this twice a day, every day (even on good days) you should notice an overall reduction in your anxiety level within a week or so.

Progressive Muscular Relaxation

Twenty minutes to half an hour of progressive muscular relaxation every day is also a great way to reduce anxiety and stress. It is body based and you use your breath too, so it really absorbs your attention (giving your mind a rest). Here’s how:

- 1) Sit or lie down wherever you can be undisturbed, warm and comfortable. Bed is fine – in fact some people do this to help them sleep.
- 2) Let your breathing settle into a slow, steady rhythm. Beware of your tummy rising and falling, but don’t make an effort to breathe really deeply – when you’re relaxed you naturally take less full breaths. Allow yourself to pause comfortably in between breaths.
- 3) You are now going to tense and relax various bits of your body in tune with your breath. Keep your breathing the same throughout. Try not to hold your breath! The in-breaths are for tensing/clenching muscles and out-breaths are for relaxing those same muscles. Practise using your hand: breathe in whilst clenching your fist; as you breathe out relax your hand as much as you can. Repeat. Try to get a good contrast between tense, hard fist and relaxed, soft hand.
- 4) Apply this to the rest of your body, starting with your feet (scrunch them up), moving to calves, knees and thighs (stiffen the whole of your legs), to buttocks and pelvic floor, to stomach (pull right in or push right out), to chest (push up and out), shoulders (hunch up to your ears) to arms and hands (stiffen arms and clench fists) to your face (scrunch up every tiny muscle you can find). Don’t forget to relax after each tensing up! REPEAT EACH TENSE-AND-RELAX TWICE AT LEAST. Each one takes the time of your in breath followed by out breath.
- 5) Now check through your whole body for any bits that are still not totally relaxed, and if there are any, do them again. In particular check your stomach, neck and shoulders, and face.
- 6) When you are feeling completely floppy and heavy, keep breathing slowly and let go into it. Enjoy feeling at peace and completely relaxed for as long as you have time!

Tips

- a) With this exercise, practice improves your ability to remember the routine, pull it all together and eventually your body is programmed to relax more quickly.

- b) Don't worry about "overlap" with the different parts you are tensing. It is pretty impossible to clench your buttocks but not your thighs or your arms but not your shoulders! Extra goes will help to release the residual tension.
- c) Try saying things to yourself with the out-breaths like "relax", "release", "soft", "loose", "heavy" etc.
- d) When you relax your face, check your forehead, jaw, lips and tongue, and eyelids for tension.
- e) Soft calming music in the background helps your brain to get the message.

NOTE: For a small minority of people, physical relaxation seems to actually make their anxiety worse. So if you try it and you feel panicky at the end, you may be one of those people. Recommended for you is the tensing bit but not doing the releasing bit. Feel your muscles tightening and bracing, stop and then tense again. Or you could do sit-ups or push-ups, and/or push your feet or your back against a wall to feel your leg muscles working. Lifting weights is also good. Don't over-exert yourself and if you are uncertain how to perform these exercises correctly, seek professional advice. You may still benefit hugely from the deep breathing though!

B - Challenging Your BEHAVIOURS

Here is a list of behaviours that either maintain or worsen anxiety – do you recognise yourself?

Drinking more alcohol	Pacing/fidgeting	Avoiding being alone
Smoking more	Driving aggressively	Avoiding people
Avoiding situations, e.g. parties, seminars	Spending too much money	Eating badly (junk food)
Procrastinating	Not prioritising sleep	Not exercising
Drinking too much coffee/ cola drinks	Doing several things at once	Working too many hours
Bottling up feelings	Taking stimulant drugs	Criticising yourself
Not finishing anything	Not eating regularly	Biting your nails etc.

A lot of people do six or seven of these things continuously! If that's you, take two or three constructive steps at a time, starting with steps that you believe you can succeed in. Choose from the following categories:

Anxious people can be de-stressed by:

- 1) A Healthier Lifestyle. Eat regularly, including breakfast (even if it's only a banana) to keep blood sugar levels steady. Avoid junk food and lots of sugary/fatty snacks. Limit alcohol and caffeine intake (that includes Coke/Pepsi) so your body doesn't have to cope with the stimulation-come down seesaw. Reduce or better still stop smoking (it feels calming but physiologically puts your body into a stressed state). Get a balance of work, play and rest time and try to keep regular sleep hours (see below for rectifying insomnia). Build at least 20-30 minutes of moderate exercise per day into your life –

even if it's just walking briskly round the block. You probably know all this stuff already. Just do it – it really does help!

- 2) Time and Resources Management. Plan ahead. Allocate time for work and recreation – don't procrastinate and then have to do loads in a mad rush just before a deadline. Prioritise – and don't use prioritising to completely avoid the necessary but boring stuff. Build it in, in small doses. Be realistic about your time available and try to finish one thing before moving on to the next. Don't over-commit yourself – you don't have to be Superman/woman to be an OK person. Live according to your means because big debts are anxiety-provoking millstones (we're talking credit cards especially). If you are in money trouble, acknowledge it and seek advice – SSS would be a good first port of call.
- 3) Emotional Support and Release. Don't bottle up your feelings; pent-up emotions feed anxiety, even emotions like anger and sadness. Talk to friends, family, anyone else you trust, a counsellor. Isolating yourself will not help. Nor will constant ruminating in your own mind on everything you're scared of or miserable about, with no answers and no end point. Try to let yourself cry when you feel the need and if you're angry but there's no one to vent to, lift weights, go for a long stomping walk, clean the kitchen and bathroom or dig the garden. Some people shut themselves in their car for a good scream. Others beat up their bed or smash eggs into the bath! Anything that does not hurt you or others is fine; and doing these things as well as telling others how you are feeling is fine.

Expressing your feelings is important, and afterwards so is identifying what you need from something, someone or some others. Use your support network and use others' encouragement to request or make the changes that would help you. If you haven't got a good support network, devote time and attention to building one up (this may take a few months but will be worth it). You can also be a best friend to yourself though: don't criticise yourself for your feelings, take yourself through a problem-solving process with pen and paper, and set goals with realistic time targets. Ask yourself "if my best friend was in this state, what would I be saying to him/her?" and say those things to you.

- 4) Facing Up to Difficult Situations. If your anxiety is tied to particular situations such as giving presentations or going out on dates, the only way you can learn to deal with these is not by avoiding them but by gradually facing up to them. If you avoid doing something because you're anxious about it, you're going to feel even more anxious next time it presents itself because you've given yourself "evidence" that you "can't cope with it". You can! The key is in the preparation which is all about anxiety management. Build up to the situation by imagining it in your head, and when you notice yourself feeling anxious "freeze-frame" and do some breathing exercises and physical relaxation. Then keep on imagining it (still breathing calmly) and unfold the whole scenario, freeze-framing when necessary, seeing yourself coping with the fear and getting through successfully. If you do this regularly and boost it by positive, confident thoughts ("I know I can cope with my fear", "I can treat this as a challenge and do well" etc.) you will eventually desensitise yourself so that you don't feel anxious as you rehearse the scenario in your mind.

Now is the time to tackle the real-life situation – armed with positive thoughts and physical coping strategies – having prepared once more by doing a visualisation of yourself coping well with the difficult situation shortly before you enter it.

Remember in most difficult situations you can do your calming breaths and relax your body, in front of people or by going to the toilet/outside/into a quiet room. You can reduce your anxiety “on the job”! It’s amazing that others around you won’t notice, but they won’t.

Pat yourself on the back afterwards for getting through it and praise yourself for what you did well. Maybe it was still difficult, but you do know how to tackle it now and practice makes perfect. Repeated exposure to the situation is the ONLY way you’ll learn to take it in your stride. If you did leave and not go back into the situation, don’t give yourself a hard time but concentrate on preparing really well for the next time.

We have now tackled the TSB (Thoughts, Sensations, Behaviours) that feed anxiety. Make these coping strategies a part of your everyday life and you will be rewarded by a noticeable reduction in your anxiety levels, whether you are permanently or only sometimes anxious.

Dealing with Panic Attacks

Panic attacks are extremely unpleasant but not dangerous. They can occur when you are in a dreaded situation, or when you are just sitting at the kitchen table, or even when you’re asleep! The best tactic is to try to head it off when you feel yourself starting to get panicky, by

- a) Distracting your attention (talking to someone, counting backwards in 3’s from 50, naming some football teams, noticing every tiny detail of your fingernails, doing the crossword, counting all the red cars that pass etc.)
- b) Positive, reassuring thoughts: “This is only anxiety”, “I know how to make this feeling go”, “I am stronger than my anxiety,” etc.
- c) Taking the time to take a few long, slow deep breaths whilst consciously relaxing your whole body.
- d) Doing something comforting – ask for a hug, or a back rub, or have a bubble bath.
- e) Talking directly to the panic, getting annoyed with it: “not you again! You can just forget it, I’m not having this, you’re not winning, now just go away” (or words to that effect).

However, if you don’t catch it until you are really in it, you need to face up to it and focus all your attention on reducing your panic, rather than trying to carry on writing or shopping or chatting or whatever.

- 1) If you are in one of your “anxiety-provoking situations” try to calm down on the spot. If this is not possible, retreat from the situation until you have controlled your panic. Then immediately go back – this is very important, even if you don’t carry on in the way that you had planned. If you just leave, you will have “run away” in your mind and this could set up an avoidance pattern.

- 2) If you are with someone you trust, tell them what is happening to you. Get a hug if it helps.
- 3) Don't freeze on the spot – walk around a bit to discharge the energy of the panic. You can do this even with “jelly legs”.
- 4) Don't gulp air – breathe slowly through your nose and make sure you breathe out for as long as you breathe in. Even better, do “7-11” breathing.
- 5) If you're feeling light-headed, try cupping your hands over your nose and mouth as you breathe. This will make you breathe in extra carbon dioxide, which helps.
- 6) Observe all the panic symptoms you are experiencing and explain them to yourself as the body's anxiety reactions, e.g. “these chest pains are because my chest wall muscles are tensed up”; “this nausea is because my digestive system is shutting down temporarily”; “I'm dizzy because panic leads to constriction of the arteries to my brain”. If you have read any books about anxiety you will be able to understand every single sensation. Challenge any catastrophising thoughts you have!
- 7) Think positive, coping thoughts to yourself: “I know I can deal with this panic”; “This isn't going to stop me”; “I know exactly what to do”; “I'm going to relax my body and get through this”.
- 8) Try to do simple breathing exercises whilst relaxing all your muscles.
- 9) Notice your physical environment. Ground yourself as you wait for the panic to subside by describing your surroundings to yourself in your mind.
- 10) Allow plenty of time to feel calmer – up to 20-30 minutes if you have had a severe panic attack. Don't panic more because you are not back to normal after 5 minutes! Your body is doing its best and you are helping it but coming through a panic attack takes time.

Note: If you have panic attacks but don't think of yourself as an anxious person, try all the anxiety management methods outlined in this article anyway. Panic attacks don't come along for no reason – you could even be anxious about something positive in your life like a new relationship or moving house.

Coping with Insomnia

There are certain fairly obvious steps you can take that you may or may not have already tried, such as not drinking coffee after 4.00pm; avoiding or reducing your alcohol intake at night; not eating big meals at night; changing the temperature of the room; wearing ear-plugs if noise is a factor; sleeping separately from your partner for a while if they keep you awake; having a hot milky drink before you go to bed. Some people prefer camomile or other “night-time” herbal teas or herbal sleeping tablets. Experiment with all these measures and if you are still restless try the following:

- 1) Always go to bed and get up at regular times, even if you're tired in the morning. If you're a late riser, try getting up earlier on a regular basis. Never nap in the day.
- 2) If you are still awake after 20-30 minutes in bed, get back up and do something restful until you feel really sleepy. Only then return to bed. Repeat if necessary.
- 3) Try to “wind down” after 8.00 - 9.00pm. Aim for a long, gentle slide towards your night's sleep. If you have to do academic work, allow an hour at least between

stopping that and getting into bed. Ideally stop watching TV at least half an hour before going to bed as well – it is often over-stimulating.

- 4) Some people benefit from a routine before bed. If you have a bath or shower, don't make it really hot as that stimulates you physically.
- 5) If you work, eat, analyse your relationship, watch T.V. etc. from your bed – stop. Unless something like that is part of your “bedtime routine” (which work shouldn't be!) then keep your time in bed for relaxation, sleep and sex only.
- 6) Do breathing and relaxation exercises before you get into bed, or even when you're lying in it.
- 7) If your mind is spinning the same worries round and round, try writing them down in another room and promising yourself that you will come back to them the next day. Leave them and get back into bed. (Of course the next day you will be challenging your worries and replacing them with positive, coping thoughts!)
- 8) If you are getting stressed about not falling to sleep, that will arouse you physically and distress you emotionally. Try not to get angry or anxious about it but accept that it will take time to re-train your body into good sleeping patterns. You are doing everything you can and it will be worth it in the end!
- 9) Some people swear by lavender scented candles and aromatherapy oil which you can sprinkle on your pillow or put a couple of drops in your bath. It has natural sedative qualities.

Remember your G.P. can prescribe sleeping tablets on a short-term basis, but they stop working after about 3 weeks of regular use. The above guidelines have helped thousands of sleepless people and you will not be the exception!

BOOKS TO READ

Some of these books are in the Counselling Service Library and may be borrowed through the Counselling Service Administrator or through your counsellor

Coping Successfully With Panic Attacks by Shirley Trickett

Coping with Anxiety and Panic by Jordan Lee

The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook by Edmund Bourne

Feel The Fear and Do It Anyway by Susan Jeffers

Overcoming Anxiety by Helen Kennerley

When Panic Attacks by Aine Tubridy

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