

Managing Stress and Anxiety

Below is a summary of tips and tricks for managing stress and anxiety. Some may be familiar, some less so. Don't underestimate the power of apparently obvious things (sleep, exercise), on-going practice of specific techniques (deep breathing, mindfulness), or brief moments of calmness and joy (listening to your favorite music, being in nature). *Think of the techniques summarized here as a bag of tricks.* When you feel anxious, reach into your bag of tricks and try one. If it doesn't work, try another one. No technique will work every time so don't give up on something just because something doesn't work once. Some things will likely have an immediate impact (going for a run, talking to a supportive friend), some will take practice (thought stopping), and some will need to be practiced daily to have a significant impact (meditation).

Over time, as you get to know your anxiety, you will become more efficient at selecting the best technique for the moment. Try to approach your anxiety, and your work with anxiety, with curiosity, rather than dread.

Get to know your anxiety Pay attention to how stress and anxiety manifest because different techniques work for different types of 'symptoms'. These can be grouped into three categories: *bodily / physiological, cognitive and emotional*. Also *pay attention to the intensity*: some techniques will be difficult to apply if your anxiety is high (for example, mindfulness or thought stopping or re-appraisal) and you may first need to do something physical and engage your body, to diminish the physiological arousal (intense exercise, dancing, venting to a friend).

Find out what triggers anxiety and causes stress Pay attention to what triggers anxiety and what increases (and diminishes) your level of stress. These may be specific events happening now and on-going concerns or situations. Anxiety can also result from not acknowledging some emotions or beliefs. Also track how anxiety changes during the day (are you most anxious in the morning, before bedtime?).

The more you get to know what causes anxious feelings, and how your body and mind react to them, the better you will be able to manage them. And remember, as obvious as it may seem, sleep, nutrition (quality protein, omega fatty acids) and especially exercise are the foundations of both physical and mental health. Exercise is particularly effective in helping reduce anxiety, as is time spent in nature. Reduce caffeine intake, don't skip breakfast, keep hydrated, and pay attention to how alcohol or other substances affect your anxiety.

Managing Bodily / Physiological Symptoms

Very common signs of anxiety are physiological: racing heart, rapid breathing, perspiration, clammy hands, tightness in muscles (shoulders, jaw), digestive problems. Most of these are manifestations of heightened physiological arousal. The techniques for reducing arousal include:

Exercise: especially cardio – go for a brisk walk, hike up a hill, run, swim, bike... or vigorously vacuum

Breathing exercises: practice deep abdominal breathing (slowly inhale on the count of 3, exhale on the count of 5), practice the ‘double breath’ (take a deep breath and without exhaling, take another breath, then exhale slowly)

Body scan: lie down on your back and starting with your left foot tense and relax your muscles, moving up the leg, torso, left hand, etc. and ending with your right foot

Yoga poses: even if you don’t practice yoga, you can try some poses that are particularly relaxing (child pose, standing forward fold)

Mindfulness/Meditation: establish a regular meditation practice (15-20’/ day)

The more intense your anxiety feels, the more energy-consuming activity you may need to use. In other words, if you feel extremely anxious, you will likely benefit more from a brisk walk than from a body scan. But it is important to get to know your experience, and try different techniques, to find out what’s right for you.

Managing Cognitive Symptoms / Working with Thoughts

Anxiety often affects the nature of our thinking and the content of our thoughts. We may experience racing thoughts, ruminate about some unpleasant, stressful or anxiety-producing situation or worry about some upcoming event or anticipated danger. Our thoughts focus on stressful, unpleasant, dangerous, threatening events and situations that have already occurred, or which we anticipate will occur. First, notice the intensity of your anxiety: if the intensity is high, first try some of the techniques about to reduce the physiological arousal. Once you feel a bit calmer, try some of the following techniques:

Mindfulness-based thought stopping: Focus on the anxiety-producing thought and accept that your mind produced this thought, label it as a thought (don’t engage with the content), gently but firmly direct your attention to the physical sensations associated with your breath. This attention training takes practice – it will not work at first: keep at it and start with non-anxious thoughts.

Rumination: The thought stopping technique can work with rumination. Another technique to try is to see if there is an emotion or a belief ‘hiding’ under the ruminative thought, and asking to be acknowledged. It could be some vulnerable emotion (fear, helplessness), a sense of shame, or some belief, particularly a belief about the self. Once acknowledged, the ruminative thinking may subside.

Identify cognitive distortions: Sometimes we engage in distorted thought patterns that contribute to anxiety, for example, catastrophizing (imagining worst case scenarios) or personalizing (assuming blame for things that weren’t under your control), black & white thinking. Examine your anxiety-inducing thoughts to see if they fit these patterns, and then examine the validity of your thought.

Worry stopping: First, examine your beliefs about worrying. If you feel that worrying about something will prevent it from happening, it will be more difficult to let go of the worry. Next, see if the worry fits one of the cognitive distortions listed above, and try to ‘argue’ with the thought to demonstrate to yourself that it’s not valid. You can also try to control your worrying by scheduling a worry time; for example, whenever you start to worry, you will say to yourself that your worry time is on Thursday,

between 4-5, and that's when you get to worry. Chances are, that by the time Thursday 4pm arrives, you will be doing something else and forget about the worry.

Thought substitution: Use the worry or anxiety-producing thought as a cue to think some positive thought or direct your mind to some pleasant image.

Concentration practice: Use the anxiety-producing thought as a cue to direct your attention to some sensory sensation (your breath, an image, an object, a particular sensation)

Grounding technique: Scan your environment and focus and label what you see, hear, smell, feel.

Ground yourself in the physical reality and your sensations: the chair you are sitting in, the view from the window, the sound of voices next door, etc.

Recite a poem/sing a song: Use the worrying thought as a cue to sing a song or recite a poem or say a prayer, out loud or just internally. By occupying the verbal centers of your brain with this activity, you will prevent it from engaging with the worry.

Managing and Working with Emotions

Anxiety and fear are closely related distressing emotions. There are a number of strategies for working with distressing emotions. The first thing to remember is to consider the intensity of the emotion: as above, if the intensity is high, first try to do something physical to reduce the physiological arousal. This will make the subsequent work much easier. Here are some techniques for working with distressing emotions:

Curiosity, Acceptance and Non-Judgment: Approach your emotion with curiosity, explore where you may feel it in the body, what other emotions it may be associated with, what thoughts? Don't judge the emotion as 'good' or 'bad', and don't judge yourself as 'bad' for having the emotion. Accept the fact that at this moment, you are experiencing this emotion. Remind yourself that it will not last forever.

Primary or Secondary Emotion?: Explore your emotion to see if it may be a reaction to another emotion. For example, anger can be a secondary reaction to a more vulnerable emotion, such as fear, helplessness or shame. Once we get in touch with the primary emotion, it may be easier to let go of it and move on.

Transform the emotion with an opposite emotion: See if you can try and induce an 'opposite' emotion. If you feel sad, watch a funny film. If you feel helpless, see if anyone can use your help and do something kind for someone else. If you feel shame, practice self-compassion.

Parting thoughts

Take care of the body as much as possible: nutrition, sleep and exercise. If you have a spiritual practice, engage with the practice. Spend time in nature. Spend time with caring, fun and inspiring people. Help others as much as you can. If a particular technique feels too difficult, try another one. Practice the attitudes of mindfulness: be curious about your experience; accept the reality of the present moment; don't judge yourself for your thoughts or emotions, and don't judge the thoughts or emotions either; don't identify with your present emotions or thoughts.