

Anxiety Symptoms/Responses

Anxiety affects millions of adults in the United States. The body's natural response to real or perceived danger is to prepare for "fight" or "flight." Fight or flight feelings and body sensations include:

- Increased heart rate
- Quick, shallow breaths
- Increased adrenaline
- Feeling of 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. 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 often begin as thoughts or perceptions. 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 real or 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 strategies you can use to reduce physical symptoms of anxiety include:

- Relaxation breathing
- Challenging unhelpful thinking
- Engaging in enjoyable/distracting activity
- Physical exercise

It will take practice to feel comfortable using these techniques and to notice a decrease in your symptoms. Remember, your anxiety took some time to build up, and it will take time and practice for it to go down.

Deep breathing exercise

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

Inhale: Concentrate on keeping your chest as still as you can (or as possible). Imagine you are trying to use your belly to hold up a pair of pants that are slightly too big.

Exhale: Allow your stomach to fall as if you “melt” into your chair. Repeat the word “calm” as you do this.

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 10 minutes daily until the breathing feels comfortable and you develop good skills at becoming relaxed.

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 Unhelpful Thinking Cycles

Certain ways of thinking can lead to increased physical symptoms of anxiety. In addition to practicing diaphragmatic breathing it is important to question and change patterns of thinking to decrease the anxiety symptoms.

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 word choice can make a big difference in how you feel about a situation or person. The way we react to or think about a situation determines our moods. Our thoughts influence our moods, so by altering how we think in response to situations we can alter our mood.

Here are some simple ways to question your thoughts:

1. Question the negative/worrisome thoughts you are having. *Is the thought accurate?*
 - a) Provide evidence *for* and *against* the truth of the thought
 - b) Challenge the likelihood that an event will occur
2. Then ask yourself if the thoughts are helpful. Some negative thoughts are accurate, but repeatedly thinking of them can make you feel worse, rather than better.
 - a) How can I change how I think so I can feel better?
3. 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?”
4. Thought stopping.
 - a) Notice when you are engaging in self-talk that is not helpful.
 - b) Stop. Ask yourself if the thought is helping you or hurting you.
 - c) If the thought is hurting you, engage in a distracting activity. This may be a good time to exercise, call a friend, read a book, or practice deep breathing.

Use the Anxiety Monitoring Form to track your symptoms of anxiety and the relaxation techniques that you use. You may be surprised to see how much control you have over your anxiety.

Recommended Reading

- Feeling Good, David Burns
- Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers, Robert Sapolsky
- The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook and Coping with Anxiety, Edmund J. Bourne
- Mind over Mood (Workbook), Dennis Greenberger and Christine Padesky