

Anxiety: How to Cope with It

What is anxiety?

Have you ever felt the butterflies in your stomach before a big performance or speech or test? That's anxiety. Put simply, anxiety is fear. Anxiety is normal. It's normal to feel scared before a big event. Anxiety can show up as a variety of body signals: elevated heart rate, excessive sweating, cold hands, diarrhea or those butterflies in your stomach. It can also show up as difficulty sleeping, difficulty concentrating, and jumbled thoughts. These symptoms are telling you that you are feeling threatened and they are your body's way of telling you to "get ready".

Why is anxiety sometimes overwhelming?

Anxiety is normal. It's normal to feel somewhat scared prior to a big event. In fact, that anxiety is even helping you to prepare to meet the challenge at hand. Research has clearly demonstrated that having some anxiety enhances performance. However, if the anxiety gets too high it can actually decrease performance. This happens because the person feels overwhelmed by the anxiety. Athletes and other performers learn to regulate this anxiety so that they can have just the right amount. If they don't have any they won't perform up to their potential ... but if they have too much it will interfere with performance. The same is true for you. Learning to keep your anxiety from overwhelming you is the key. Unchecked anxiety can easily become overwhelming given the right high-pressure situation.

What kinds of situations normally make people anxious?

Taking a test, giving a speech, performing in public, confronting your parent, boss, professor or roommate, getting married, receiving an award ... almost any situation where "public demands" are put on you can make you anxious. By the way, the situations don't have to be "negative". Anxiety also can occur in "positive" situations - for example - a wedding, receiving an award, etc.

Why do some people get more anxious than others do?

There are a variety of factors that seem to be involved here. In general, people with more self-confidence and higher self-esteem get less anxious than other people. They seem to get less "scared" when facing threatening situations. Another factor seems to be a person's comfort in being "out of control". The more comfortable you are with being out of control or not knowing how things will turn out (for example - a test), the less anxiety you will have. A third factor seems to be heredity. It appears that the tendency to experience overwhelming anxiety may run in families. Research shows that about 20% of the population reacts to threatening situations with more anxiety than the rest of the population. So if you have a parent who struggles with anxiety you may also be prone to the same. Finally, some people are less likely to be affected or overwhelmed by anxiety because they have learned ways to react to, and control, normal anxiety when it arises. They have learned strategies for controlling anxiety and hence they don't get overwhelmed.

Why is anxiety called the "hidden disorder"?

Anxiety is sometimes called the "hidden disorder" because people often are ashamed to admit that they have it and thus they don't tell anyone about it until it becomes overwhelming. The fact is that anxiety is very treatable. It responds well to psychological and/or medical treatment - and often quickly. The success rate is very high. The hard part is admitting it's a problem. Once you do, your chances of fairly rapid recovery are very good.

Are physical problems ever related to anxiety?

It has been stated that perhaps as much as 70% of all visits to physicians are stress or anxiety related. Yes, many physical problems are often related to stress. Headaches, insomnia, TMJ, irritable bowel syndrome, skin rashes, high blood pressure, heart problems ... to name a few ... are often caused by anxiety. And they also often respond very well to interventions aimed at reducing anxiety.

I have a friend who drinks a lot to control his fear of social/romantic situations ... is this normal?

Unfortunately, yes. Many people use alcohol and other drugs to control anxiety. Marijuana is a very common one that people use. It does often calm you down and make you worry less while you are high, but the anxiety just returns when you're not high. The same is true with alcohol and other drugs. However, this can become a vicious cycle. Using drugs more and more to control the anxiety can lead to other problems (e.g. missing classes, not studying) that eventually have a very negative effect on your life. Drugs are a short-term, not very effective way to deal with anxiety; they usually only compound the problem. The same can be true for smoking cigarettes, and other compulsive type behaviors - e.g.; TV-watching, computer addiction, etc. that give temporary, but not long-lasting, relief from anxiety and stress.

Does too much anxiety ever lead to depression?

Yes, it can. Anxiety and depression are very much related. If anxiety goes unchecked, you will eventually feel overwhelmed. This can lead to an intense feeling of helplessness, which often ends up as depression. In a sense, if your body/mind cannot deal with all the anxiety, it will eventually "shut down" (i.e. get depressed). Often, part of the treatment for depression is learning new ways to deal with anxiety. Once the anxiety is under control the person feels less depressed.

Can medication help?

Sometimes. There are many prescription medications that can help a person deal with the symptoms of anxiety. Anti-anxiety drugs can be helpful in controlling the acute, or immediate, anxiety symptoms, but some can be addictive and therefore could be dangerous if used long-term. Other drugs, such as anti-depressants, can also be used to treat anxiety. These seem to be helpful in more severe cases of anxiety (e.g., social phobia) ...but they can have undesirable or serious side effects if not taken properly or withdrawn from properly. You should only use anti-anxiety or anti-depressant medications under the care of properly trained medical personnel. You do not need to look to medication as the only, or even the first line of, treatment for anxiety. Counseling or psychotherapy can be so effective with many anxiety problems that you might find that you do very well without using any medications. However, for some serious symptoms, or those that last over a long period of time, the best treatment may be a combination of medication and psychotherapy. Any qualified therapist should be able to help you decide whether or not to seek medication for your anxiety problems.

What can I do on my own to deal with my anxiety?

- **First**, accept anxiety as normal. Everyone has anxiety even though it may not appear that way. Being human and being alive means you will have anxiety. Being completely free of anxiety should not be your goal. Your goal should be to manage your anxiety so that it doesn't run your life.
- **Second**, learn and practice preventative strategies: get enough sleep, eat healthy food, reduce caffeine intake, exercise, or meditate. All of these reduce your susceptibility to being overwhelmed by anxiety.
- **Third**, when facing new or threatening situations, PREPARE, PREPARE, PREPARE! The more preparation you have done, the less anxious you will be. The basketball player at the free throw line with 2 seconds left and the game on the line is less anxious because she or he has shot thousands of free throws in practice. The same is true with a math test. The more you have prepared (by doing a lot of practice problems correctly) the less anxious you will be. Research clearly shows that the more you prepare the less anxious you will be and the better you will perform.
- **Fourth**, learn some ways to reduce your anxiety when it does arise: take a few deep breaths, visualize success or a relaxing place, learn to relax your muscles, learn to think positively instead of negatively.
- **Fifth**, work at building your self-esteem or self-confidence. If you have a history of having been criticized or abused emotionally or physically, you will be more likely to experience overwhelming anxiety. People who have been abused need to be proactive in re-building their self-esteem. There are many ways to do this. You can do this on your own by reading books, practicing, going to workshops, etc. Or you may want to see a counselor who can help you with re-building your self-esteem. Either way, as your self-esteem grows, your anxiety will reduce.
- **Another point to remember** is that the more frazzled or unhappy you are feeling with your life the more likely you are to be overwhelmed by anxiety. Remember that anxiety is normal. If we don't work at regularly de-stressing, the anxiety builds up ... and then is more likely to spill over when those high anxiety times hit. It's important to keep your anxiety "drained down".
- **Finally**, learn to have faith. As someone so aptly said: "being general manager of the universe is hard and exhausting work!" We simply cannot control everything. All of us need to learn to do what we can do ... and then have faith that things will work out for the best. This does not mean being passive. It means being very active in doing what we can do to control a situation (e.g. shooting 1000 free throws in practice) and then trusting the universe when the high-pressure situation arises. Some people learn faith from their spiritual or religious training ... others learn it in others ways.

Thought Stopping

Exams, people, dogs, cars, authority figures, crowds, snakes, large classes) do not make you feel anxious - *your thoughts do*. Change your thoughts and you can change your feelings. Simple?

Well, not really - if it was that simple, we would be able to do it all the time. Truth is, our responses to events become conditioned and like any habit, we respond without even being aware of a preceding thought.

In order to stop thoughts our first task is to become aware of them. We have to slow down and begin to pay attention to our drift into anxiety. Then we have to implement thought stopping and/or alternate thoughts.

Thought stopping is a skill that requires commitment and practice, practice, practice.

Here are some quick tips to help you begin to control your thoughts:

- **Do not waste time wondering why you think negatively.**
- **Develop some simple words, phrases or actions that help change the direction of your thoughts.**

Words and Phrases

- » *Stop!*
- » *I can cope.*
- » *I am okay.*
- » *I have done it before, I can do it again.*
- » *Okay, just slow down. You will be alright. You are going to be okay.*
- » *This will pass - give it time.*
- » *Just relax.*
- » *I can accept this - it is unpleasant, not dangerous.*

Actions

- » *Talk to someone.*
- » *Breathe deep and slowly.*
- » *Carry a lucky charm - touch it.*
- » *Visualize a peaceful scene.*
- » *Focus on external happenings - the wind, the sun, birds, noises.*
- » *Sit down. Touch the earth. Touch a tree.*
- » *Look at the ants working.*
- » *Turn up the radio. Sing out loud. Hum a tune.*
- » *Perform physical work.*

Keep Practicing. Don't wait for a major crisis to occur before you start to practice.

Prevention is Better Than Cure

- Exercise - Yoga, Aerobics, the gym
- Gardening
- Walking/Hiking
- Spending time alone
- Developing social relationships
- Caring for pets
- Volunteering
- Finding a hobby
- Eating right
- Sleeping well
- Learning to say no
- Managing your time better - getting organized
- Planning ahead