

Managing Worries

Begin with the Basics

Before you do anything else, you need to eliminate some physical causes of anxiety:

Skip the Following:

Stimulants: Stimulants are anxiogenic: they create anxiety. If you're suffering with anxiety, it makes sense to avoid them. The most common stimulants are caffeine and nicotine. There are lots of other stimulants including theobromine (chocolate) and theophylline (green, black and white tea) and herbs such as ginseng. Any "energy drink" and many diet drinks contain stimulants. If you're using a stimulant daily, particularly if you are using nicotine, you may need to talk to your doctor about how to reduce your stimulant use in a way that will be manageable for you. Certainly, if you are being prescribed stimulants by your doctor, for weight loss or ADD/ADHD, you need to have a discussion about your anxiety symptoms and alternative ways to address those symptoms.

Substance use: If you're drinking alcohol or using marijuana to self-medicate, you may be worsening your anxiety over time. Alcohol and other sedating substances may give a temporary feeling of relaxation, but anxiety will often be worse once the substance wears off. In addition, marijuana use can produce intense anxiety and paranoia in some users.

Sedentary Lifestyle: Our brains evolved across thousands of years. Most of that time, we lived in a world full of physical threats. Our brains and bodies are still wired to face physical threats. So when a worry comes to mind, our body releases the chemicals needed to fight or run away. Unfortunately, most of us have fairly sedentary lives so we don't end up using those chemicals. Each time a new worry comes to mind, the chemicals build up inside, causing our heart to race, our muscles to tense, and hyperventilation. One of the best ways to combat anxiety is to exercise intensely. This will break down those chemicals and flush them out of your system.

Social Media: One of the biggest triggers for anxiety in our modern world is the constant exposure we have to social media. Social media triggers anxiety in several ways: by exposing us to frightening or discouraging news articles, by triggering upward comparison (feeling others' lives are better than yours), by showing us what we're missing out on, by triggering physical insecurities, etc. Two good ways to consider cutting back: On your phone, you can download the app "App Detox". It lets you limit your own app use. On your computer, you can download the browser extension "FB Purity" for Facebook.

But don't forget to...

Sleep more: The average American is not allowing enough time for sleep. Allow yourself at least 8 hours for sleep. Some people may need 9-9.5 hours. If anxiety is getting in the way of sleep, it's time to talk to a therapist about how to break that cycle.

See your Doctor! Finally, you should have a yearly physical with blood work to rule out possible physical contributors to your anxiety including anemia, nutritional deficiencies, hyper/hypoglycemia, hyperthyroidism and other hormonal causes of anxiety.

Write down worries.

When we worry just in our mind, it tends to be more overwhelming. Our brain tends to react to our thoughts just like it reacts to reality, filling our body with the neurotransmitters and hormones needed to handle an emergency. This flood of "fight or flight" chemicals makes our heart beat

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faster, our mind race and our muscles to tense up. Feeling the physical sensations of fear makes our worries seem even more real. Making a list of your worries helps the worries seem more manageable. After you've made a list of your worries, try some of the techniques listed below:

Turn your “What if” into “What could I do?”

As you make a list of your upsetting worries, for each worry identify a list of things you can do to address the feared outcome.

What if I say something stupid at the party?

I could apologize.

What if I lose my job?

I could apply for unemployment.

I could look for new jobs.

I could downsize and move in with family.

What if my anxiety gets worse?

I could call a friend.

I could go for a run.

I could get more treatment than I'm getting.

Challenge the Worry

There are several ways in which we can challenge a worry.

Challenge #1: Realistic?

Challenge #2: True?

Challenge #3: Helpful?

Challenge #4: Would you say it to a friend?

So, take the thought “What if this plane crashes?” The first test is whether or not that's **realistic**. Yes, planes do crash but the likelihood of this is about 1 in 7 million. So, it's unlikely. The second test, is it **true**? Is the plane currently in a downward spiral towards the ground? If not, then your worry is not currently true.. Is this worry **helpful**? Is thinking this thought going to help you survive a plane crash? No, it's just going to make your time on the plane really unpleasant. Finally, would you turn to a **friend** beside you on the plane and say “What if this plane crashes?” No, probably not, because it would make your friend feel worse.

Worry Planning

When we're really feeling anxious, we tend to worry full-time, running a constant negative monologue in the back of our minds. This keeps our body in constant fight or flight mode which makes the worries seem even more true and threatening. The idea behind worry planning is that when worries come to mind, you tell yourself “I'll think about that during my worry time.” Keep a notebook nearby and jot down quick notes when a worry comes to mind, to be engaged with during worry time. Then, dedicate a half hour, once or twice a day, to really engaging with those worries in a meaningful way. And, when it's not your worry planning time, practice engaging in the moment.

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Anger vs. Anxiety

Anger and anxiety produce very similar effects in our body (racing thoughts, increased heart rate, muscle tension, obsessive thinking). I've found that, when people won't own what's making them angry, they often feel anxious. And, when people try to suppress their fears, they are often easily irritable. If you're anxious, it's a good idea to double check to see if there is any anger you might be suppressing. Has anyone violated your boundaries recently? Anyone taking you for granted? By understanding what is making you angry, and finding a respectful way to deal with your anger, you may find that your anxiety is reduced. On the flip side, if you're feeling irritable, it's a good time to see what anxieties you might be ignoring.

Wear Out the Worry

One counterintuitive strategy for worries is to say your worry over and over until your reaction becomes less intense. If you're afraid of getting cancer, instead of reassuring yourself that you won't get it, you say to yourself "I may get cancer." The first time you think it, you may have a strong reaction to that thought. But saying it repeatedly tends to lessen the intensity of the response, moving you towards a place of acceptance. You may even find yourself getting bored with the thought.

Label and Let Go

No matter how many techniques you use to combat anxiety you will still find some "what if" thinking coming up. The key is to get better at identifying the thinking. When you notice you're beginning to go down the path of worry, label it: "I'm starting to worry" or "That's a worry thought" or "That's anxiety talking." Tell yourself you can let that go, because it's not helpful or productive. Try to redirect yourself towards something more positive or just whatever practical task is at hand. If the worry keeps nagging at you, sit down and address it in writing.

Feels True vs. Is True

One of the ways our brain judges if something is true or not is whether or not it feels true. Unfortunately, when we worry our body begins to feel fearful, making frightening thoughts feel more true. Remind yourself: "This thought feels true, but it isn't true." Then, work on ways to get your body feeling more calm so that your calm thoughts will feel more true. Ways to calm your body include intense exercise, hot baths, yoga, meditation, long walks, talking with friends, hugging a loved one, holding a pet, having a warm (caffeine-free!) drink, getting a massage, working in a garden, volunteering to help someone else, doing something simple and productive (e.g. folding laundry, scrubbing floors), etc.

Grounding Yourself

Our thoughts tend to be in the past or the future. Our senses are always in the moment. We can only smell, taste, feel, hear and see what is happening right now. By engaging in sensory experiences, we can pull ourselves out of our thoughts. Going outdoors is often more grounding than being indoors. Take your shoes off and walk on the grass, or on pebbles or

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sand. Take a hot shower (or a cold one, it would be really hard to worry while also standing in a cold shower!) Tune into the smell of your shampoo or soap. Eat something intense, like spicy cinnamon gum/candy, strong mints, sour pickles, salsa or a curry. Intense exercise is grounding (if you're working hard enough, your attention will be drawn to the sensation of working hard not to your thoughts.)

Managing Nighttime Worries

If you're up at night worrying, you're not alone. Worries are often worse at night. There are several reasons for this. One, we're generally alone at night and that makes us feel more fearful.. We have fewer distractions at night than in the day. Also, importantly, serotonin, a calming neurotransmitter, is at a lower level at night.

If you tend to be kept up at night by worries, I suggest you create a spot in your house, ideally outside of your bedroom, where you can go when you're worried at night. This could be a room in the basement or living room. At that spot, put lighting that is low and indirect but enough for you to see to write. Put a box or basket there with a "worry kit" including a warm blanket, a paper to write your worries, and some calming distractions (knitting, coloring book, soothing book to read, laundry to fold.) Do not use any electronic devices, as the light that they emit will make it harder to go back to sleep. Write out your worries, then shift into doing something soothing until you feel tired enough to go back to sleep. If you're really anxious, you might find a warm bath helpful at night or even stepping outdoors to look at the stars.

When to Get More Help

If you've followed all the steps above and are still having significant anxiety, then it's reasonable to take the next step towards help. For those with insurance, insurance covers psychotherapy sessions. You can call your insurance company to get a list of therapists who take your insurance. If you are uninsured, the U.S. has a series of community mental health centers across the nation who accept uninsured clients and provide an income-based fee.

You may wonder if it's appropriate for you to try **medication for your anxiety**. Medication can be a helpful tool with anxiety disorders. To decide about medication, it's best to go to a licensed mental health professional for an evaluation. Some general guidelines that I consider when referring someone for medication:

- 1) You've already eliminated stimulants, are exercising regularly and eating a reasonable diet but your anxiety is unimproved.
- 2) You have a family history of OCD, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, alcoholism, or other anxiety related conditions.
- 3) You've had repeated episodes of anxiety that you've been unable to improve with lifestyle changes and psychotherapy.
- 4) Your symptoms represent a real impairment in life functioning, such as loss of appetite, severe insomnia, frequent panic attacks, and/or considerable avoidance of normal life activities.