THE 10 BEST ANXIETY MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES*

Anxiety can affect your body, mind and behaviour. Here are some helpful tips for managing anxiety by addressing these three areas.

We suggest you choose a few to start with that seem most relevant to you.

HEALTHY BODY

Physical symptoms of anxiety can include muscle tension, racing heart, dizziness, sweating, and shortness of breath. These can occur unexpectedly and be quite distressing. They can be prevented or reduced by regular self-care and relaxation.

1: Nurture Yourself
   - Eat regular well-balanced meals (e.g. three nutritious meals a day).
   - Avoid or reduce alcohol, nicotine, and caffeine intake.
   - Exercise regularly, particularly with a cardiovascular or relaxation component.
   - Perform regular self-care – such as relaxing activities and regular planned breaks.
   - Have a good sleep routine.

2: Breathe
   Breathing well can slow down or interrupt the anxiety response, and provide a sense of calm, grounding, or relaxation.
   - Practice conscious deep breathing for 1 minute at a time, whenever you are waiting for something (e.g. waiting in line, for an exam to start, when stopped at a traffic light).
   - Try lengthening your exhalation or outward breath – breathe in for 4 seconds and breathe out for 5 or 6 seconds. Practice this cycle a few minutes each day, or whenever you think of it.

3: Be Mindful
   Being aware of our body and surroundings in a non-judgemental way can reduce feelings of anxiety and bring a state of calm.
   - Close your eyes and observe your breathing: notice your body, how the intake of air feels and what sensations you observe.
   - Shift your awareness to what you can hear, smell, and touch, being aware of the environment outside your body.
   - Shift awareness back and forth from your body to your surroundings several times.

4: Use Cues to Relax
   When you are aware that your body is tense or you feel that you cannot let go of worry or stress, use this as a cue to practice more regular relaxation.
   - Try tightening and releasing different muscle groups, to practice relaxing the ones that are most tense.
   - Imagine when you breathe out that any tension in your body is flowing outward, and as you breathe in, imagine it is being replaced by warmth, energy, and peace.
- Think of an image or scene that is relaxing to you, and picture this when feeling tense or under stress.
- Schedule regular relaxing and enjoyable activities – such as massage, warm baths, exercise, or being in nature.

HEALTHY MIND

Anxiety can be accompanied by mental activity that is distressing, distracting and unproductive. This includes worry and preoccupation with fears or imagined negative outcomes. The more you worry, the more it is likely to occur.

5: Be Realistic

Often when people are anxious, they think of the worst possible outcome to their situation, even if this is unlikely to occur. This increases anxiety and its effects.
- Notice if you are thinking the worst about your symptoms or situation.
- Remind yourself that feelings are not facts – just because you dread a certain outcome, does not make it more likely to occur or make your worries come true.
- Employ logic – challenge yourself to think of an outcome or conclusion that is less catastrophic, and more likely to occur in reality. You may need to ask others to help in the start. Write down your response as a future reminder.
- Think of times in the past when your worries have proved false.

6: Interrupt Anxious Thinking

Sometimes it’s hard to use logical thinking, especially when anxiety is high. Temporary disruption of anxious thoughts can help you access your logic and choose what you would prefer to focus on.
- Identify if endless and aimless worry or ‘what if?’ thinking is a problem for you.
- Try some different (and silly) ways to interrupt this negative process such as:
  - Sing your worries to a silly tune, or speak them in a funny cartoon voice.
  - Pick a pleasant thought to focus on or imagine, such as something you look forward to or are proud of doing.
  - Listen to music or an audio book.
  - Intentionally revert your attention back to the task you are performing, reminding yourself that worry is unhelpful.

7: Contain Your Worry

If your worry is hard to control, distracts you from your daily tasks, and consumes your thinking, try some ways to limit the worry and allow yourself a break.
- Identify if your worry is solvable (has an aspect within your control) or unsolvable (outside of your control).
- Use problem-solving to focus on solvable worries. Clearly identify the problem, brainstorm possible solutions, use pros and con lists to decide on the best solution(s), and make an action plan to address the problem.
- For unsolvable worries, use relaxation and other techniques to reduce your negative reaction to the situation.
- Worry well and only once – use a worry journal or diary to list your worries once a day (up to 20mins). When and if those worries re-occur during the day, remind yourself that you have already worried about that today.
• Imagine an empty container to store your worries – picture yourself placing your worries into this, naming them as you go, then mentally put on the lid. Invite a peaceful thought or re-focus onto the task you are working on.

8: Coach Yourself to Approach Situations
Some anxiety is normal in life, but avoiding things in everyday life that we fear only makes anxiety stronger. If we are able to approach valued but anxiety-provoking situations, they become easier over time and with practice.

- Assess your avoidance – be aware of places and situations you avoid due to anxiety but which you would like to approach.
- Rate your fear of these on a 1 to 10 scale (with 1 being low levels of anxiety and 10 being the highest possible anxiety). The goal of coaching is to decrease this fear.
- Assess your self-talk – What unhelpful things are you telling yourself about the situation which increase anxiety?
- List your goals – How is avoidance interfering with these? Write down what you would like to do if anxiety was not in the way.
- Begin to practice in small doses tolerating some anxiety without trying to escape it immediately (you may need some help with this if your levels are high).
- Practice coaching yourself in more useful statements to counter negative self-talk e.g. “I may feel anxious but I am still able to do this.” Think of occasions when you have coped well or when the feared outcome has not occurred. Write them down to help remind you.

HEALTHY BEHAVIOUR

In overcoming anxiety, it is usually not enough to change our thoughts alone. Improving the way we manage stress and approach anxiety-provoking situations can often be the most important step.

9: Reduce Over-Activity
Some people do more when anxious. Whilst high activity can reduce anxiety in the short-term, as you might achieve some goals, it can worsen anxiety in the long-term as you begin to feel over-worked and overwhelmed.

- Check if over-activity is a problem for you:
  - Do you feel the need to be constantly busy?
  - Do you find it hard to slow down or relax and get more anxious when you have unplanned free time?
- Make a list of ideas for back-up activities during unexpected free time, preferably a range of relaxing or enjoyable activities (e.g. go to the art gallery, read a book) with a range of durations. During an unexpected free time, choose one from your list.
- Do not do tasks that are not your responsibility. Sometimes, allow others to contribute to tasks or help you, even if you believe they won’t do it the way you would.
- Practice doing small tasks imperfectly (e.g. intentionally miss a spot when sweeping the floor, or leave out a full-stop in an essay). This will feel uncomfortable, but will help you relax more by reducing your focus on unnecessary details.
- Balance your time – Use a diary, schedule, or pie-chart to track how you are spending time in different areas. Make sure the categories that are important to you are included e.g. sleep, eating, exercise, social/relationships, work, study and so on.
Laugh and have fun – a revolutionary idea, but practice laughing from your belly. Have on hand some things that make you laugh (e.g. funny pictures, messages) for use on stressful days.

10: Make a Plan and Practice
To feel confident and competent using the strategies you have chosen, make a plan to practise these regularly so they can become new, healthy habits.

- Learn about anxiety. It will reduce if you can unlearn the fear through good coping experiences.
- Become well-practiced at quick calming techniques such as deep breathing for use when anxious.
- Set meaningful goals for your life and identify the skills you need to achieve these. Find out where/how you can learn these skills, and build on them through practice. Get help with this if it seems daunting. Start with one small step (the least scary) to approach your goal, and practice this until you feel ready to try the next level.
- Remember that nothing is perfect – setbacks will occur and this is normal. Reflect on what you could learn and do differently in the future. Modify your plan if needed.

Conclusion
These skills require patience and determination. However, once learnt, you can build confidence in overcoming anxiety through your own efforts.

Suggested websites:
www.ecouch.anu.edu.au – online evidence-based self-help
www.beyondblue.org.au/the-facts/anxiety - information, forums and resources