

ANUx - SP | Managing Anxiety Part 2

Hi, I'm Jen. And I work as a counselor in the counseling center here at ANU. I'm going to talk for a few minutes about managing anxiety. I'll be discussing some strategies that can be helpful when you find yourself caught up in anxious thinking.

When we experience anxiety, our thoughts often become focused on worrying about the future, ruminating on the past, or becoming preoccupied with fear or imagined catastrophic outcomes. These thoughts can become very intense and distressing, and it becomes difficult to break away from them.

One of the difficulties of anxious thinking is that it becomes very sticky, and the more we worry or ruminate, the more likely it is to happen.

If you think of anxious thinking as a skill that your brain is practicing-- and that makes a lot of sense-- the more you practice, the better you are at it, and the more natural it becomes. This is why it's important to have some strategies that will work for you to manage anxious thinking. Give your brain less practice of being anxious and more practice at managing anxious thoughts.

I'm going to outline a few skills that might be helpful to you, and I invite you to try them out. Remember, everyone is different, and it's important to find the strategies that work best for you.

The first strategy is to step back and evaluate your thoughts. Do this realistically. When we're caught in anxious thinking, our brains focus on the worst possible outcome, even when that outcome is very unlikely to occur.

If you notice your thoughts are getting stuck on the worst possible outcome or you can't see a solution that isn't catastrophic, well done, because the first part of this strategy is to notice that your thoughts are stuck in this cycle.

Once you have noticed the thoughts, remind yourself that feelings aren't facts. Just because you dread an outcome, doesn't mean it's going to come true.

Now try and think of times in your past where you've also been worried about a catastrophic outcome, and then, it didn't happen. There have probably been many of these times, but it can be hard to remember when your brain is stuck in anxious thinking.

Now try and use logic against your anxious thoughts. Brainstorm other possible outcomes that are more likely or less catastrophic. This can be tricky so sometimes, it's helpful to work with someone you trust to come up with lots of ideas.

It can also be helpful to imagine that a friend has come to you with this worry or problem. What other outcomes could you suggest to them?

Sometimes, when anxious thinking is very strong, it can be hard to engage in logical reasoning with your thoughts. If this is happening, the second strategy of interrupting anxious thoughts, might be helpful. The goal of this strategy is to provide a short disruption to the anxious thinking cycle, give your mind a break, and reduce the level of distress, and provide more capacity to engage in challenging strategies, like the first one I talked about.

Some ideas that might be helpful to interrupt anxious thinking are listening to your favorite songs. Listening to a podcast or an audio book. Engaging in a controlled breathing or meditation exercise. Visualizing being in your favorite place. Reading a book. Eating or drinking something you enjoy, and focusing on the sensations of the taste, smell, and texture that it brings. Catching up with friends. Or watching a movie.

Whatever activity you choose, try and focus your whole attention on it, even if only for a minute or two. If you find your mind wandering back to anxious thoughts or back to worry, that's fine. Notice it's done that, and intentionally refocus your attention back to the activity.

Remember, that the aim is not just to give your mind a little break, but to also, practice focusing your attention on something else. And the more you practice, the better you'll be at it.

Another strategy that might be helpful is containing your worry. This one's a little counterintuitive, but the aim is to commit time, focus, and attention to your anxious thoughts. Anxious thinking can be a way of your brain trying not to forget something it considers important or trying to problem solve through a difficulty. By committing time to thinking about it, instead of avoiding the thoughts, we can reassure ourselves that we've given the matter appropriate attention.

Some of the things to try in this strategy are active problem solving. So identify if it's something that is solvable-- that is, within your control-- or unsolvable-- outside of your control. If it is solvable, engage in some time thinking about all the possible courses of actions. The pros and cons to each. And then, pick the action you'll try and develop a plan to implement it.

For unsolvable worries or persistent anxious thinking, try scheduling in a time to worry about it. Pick 20 minutes where you commit wholeheartedly to worrying intensely about the issue. You might like to write the worries down in a journal or on slips of paper that you place in a small container or a box. Or even just imagine each worry going into a jar one after the other, giving it your full attention as each word comes to your mind.

If you try this technique, set a timer for the allocated time. And when it's over, close the journal, put the lid on the box, or mentally screw a top on the jar. Remember to do something pleasant afterwards to mark the end of your work time.

When your brain tries to engage you in worrying about this issue again, just remind yourself that you've already

worried about it, and have already given it the appropriate amount of attention.

These have been some strategies that might be useful to you and managing anxious thinking, and I hope this talking tip has been helpful. You can access this tip in a PDF format on the website. And don't forget, that if you think you might benefit from face-to-face talking with a counselor here at center, call us on 52-442 to make an appointment.

Thanks for listening, and bye, for now.