

# **Anxiety & Anxiety Management**

## **What is anxiety?**

*'Anxiety is a normal healthy reaction. It happens to everyone at times of danger or in worrying situations. There is a perception of threat or danger to either your physical or psychological wellbeing. When you are anxious your bodily system speeds up. In certain circumstances this can be a definite advantage. It means that you are ready for action and enables you to respond more quickly if necessary. Moderate amounts of anxiety actually improve your performance, spurring you on to greater achievements. However, anxiety becomes a problem when it interferes with our performance or our everyday lives. This is when it becomes necessary to learn how to control it and learn effective ways of managing it.'* (Trevor Powell, 2000).

## **What are the Symptoms of Anxiety?**

Shortness of breath, agitation, thought racing/ruminating, tingling in fingers/extremities, dizziness, heart racing/palpitations, dry mouth, clammy hands, feelings of mind leaving the body, short temper, over reaction to sounds, visual disturbances, changes in diet, difficulties sleeping, general unease, inability to relax, headaches, tiredness & lethargy, shaking/trembling, tightness of chest, depressive symptoms.

## **What might be the causes of Anxiety?**

- The most common factor is stress as a result of life events including both negative and positive experiences
- Bio-chemical factors in the body
- Anxiety can have its foundations in physical illness/problems and can include: asthma, diabetes, thyroid, urinary tract infection, angina and heart problems, menstrual issues, constipation, reaction to medications, food reactions.
- Family background and susceptibility to anxiety
- Traumatic events
- Embarrassing and/or humiliating experiences
- People who grew up around anxious role models may view the world as hostile and dangerous

## **ANXIETY TRIGGERS & MAINTENANCE**

There is usually an activating event which triggers off an anxiety reaction which may lead to an anxiety difficulty. Anxiety can be maintained and made worse by our view of the event and what our thoughts are telling us. In turn this affects our behaviour and what we do and how we interact with others. It is therefore important to understand what might have been the trigger(s). For some people there is no apparent trigger, as anxiety can build up slowly through time and people have developed some avoidant strategies to hide it. For some it has always been there in the 'background.' Often an anxious/stressful situation can make anxiety worse. However, all anxiety can be managed and overcome with the right kind of help and support.

## **MANAGING ANXIETY**

### **Basic Mental health Strategies**

**Diet:** People who are anxious use an enormous amount of physical and emotional energy and they need regular patterns of eating to help them cope better and to relieve their symptoms. Some people eat less and some more

**Relaxation Techniques** can be used with the aim of calming the emotional response. This involves breathing exercises, muscle relaxation and guided imagery as well as your own ways of relaxing.

**Exercise:** Regular exercise helps to work out and use up the adrenalin that is built up in the body; it relaxes muscles and distracts and increases the production of positive chemicals in the brain. On a regular basis vigorous, aerobic exercise has proved to be effective in managing all aspects of anxiety.

**Sleep:** People who are anxious may have difficulty keeping asleep. Follow some good sleep hygiene principles which include; regular bed and waking up time, preparing for sleep by doing non-stimulating activities and relaxation, writing lists for the following day.

**Social connection:** Withdrawal from others and places is a symptom of anxiety and it is therefore important that you retain social contact with people and places.

**Pleasurable activities:** Do things or re-discover old things which give you pleasure and will help you to distract from your anxiety.

**Dealing with thoughts and feelings:** To stop/reduce ruminating thoughts some people find writing out their thoughts and feelings and talking to other people a helpful way to relieve anxiety.

## **RELAXATION TECHNIQUES**

### **Breathing Techniques.**

When breathing is rapid and shallow, in the case of anxiety, only the upper part of the lungs are used and this results in too much oxygen entering the bloodstream, leading to hyperventilation. Habitual over-breathing means the oxygen-carbon dioxide balance is disturbed and results in the physical symptoms of anxiety. The slower a person breathes out the more beneficial it is because this stimulates the para-sympathetic nervous system which controls relaxation of the muscles.

*The following breathing techniques and ways of relaxing need to be rehearsed regularly and applied when anxiety or panic signs are first appearing, to be most effective.*

**Breathing exercises can include:**

**Normal breathing:** Breathing gently and evenly through the nose

**3-3-5 Technique:** Breathing in for 3 seconds, filling the lungs completely-holding it for three seconds-breathing out for 5 seconds, exhaling slowly and fully

**3-3-7 Technique:** Breathing in for 3 seconds, filling the lungs completely-holding it for three seconds-breathing out for 7 seconds gradually by opening and closing the mouth, exhaling in small bursts

**Managing Hyperventilation: Paper Bag Technique:** This breathing technique increases the amount of carbon dioxide in the blood stream by restricting the amount of oxygen that enters the lungs. It is useful in controlling a panic attack and reversing hyperventilation. A bag is held tightly over the

nose and mouth and the person is asked to breathe slowly and regularly over into the bag until:

- anxiety begins to subside
- breathing becomes easier

A similar effect can be achieved through cupping hands around the nose and mouth.

### **Gradual Muscle Relaxation**

Concentrate on your muscle groups and tense each one in turn and slowly let go.

### **Visualisation/Guided Imagery**

Imagine you are in your favourite place and go on an imaginary journey. Alternatively you can look at a picture/photograph of a relaxing scene and imagine you are there.

### **Soothing Activities**

- Listen to some music you find relaxing.
- Have a good soak in a bath and use relaxation techniques
- Wrap yourself in a warm blanket and surround yourself with cushions
- Read a good/favourite book

## **THOUGHTS & ANXIETY**

Thoughts are really powerful in the triggering of anxiety and its subsequent management. The person may fear a situation because of what has happened in the past. How we think can often determine how we feel and what we do.

*Some ways of dealing with these thoughts might be:*

**DISCARD:** Consciously tell yourself, 'This thought is not what I want right now, is it really important to waste my time with?'

**POSTPONE:** If you are worrying about something in the future it might be best to put it to one side for now. One day can have enough trouble of its own! Ask yourself, 'Do I really need to think about this right now?'

**PROCESS:** Think it through for a limited time, from different angles; writing it out helps to order and offload your mind. Come to a resolution and/or solution for now. Then leave it alone. Go back re-read and add later.

### **CHALLENGE:**

- What alternative views are there?
- What is true and not true about this thought?
- What is the effect of thinking the way I do
- What is the worst possible outcome?
- How likely is this to happen?

### **THE 'STOP' TECHNIQUE**

Give your thoughts time to rise and then clap your hands and shout out loud, 'STOP!' Then go off and do something to distract you.

## **DISTRACTION & OTHER TECHNIQUES**

**FACING THE FEELINGS:** The one thing we want to do with difficult feelings is run away from them; it is not always the best solution, long-term. It is important to face up to how you are feeling. Allow your feelings of anxiety to arise for a while, experiencing them for what they are. Reassure yourself and regulate your breathing whilst going through them. Some people find looking at something and concentrating helpful; sitting in a chair and holding onto the arms until the feelings subside. Anxiety symptoms do pass. When they do move on to do something constructive; an interest/activity, talk to a friend, go for walk, create something etc...

**WHAT IF I SHAKE?** You might be shaking because of the imbalance of gases in your body, through over breathing. The best way to counteract this is to shake out your hands or legs until the shaking stop. If you feel dizzy sit down and regulate your breathing.

**GRADED EXPOSURE:** Deliberately test yourself in anxiety provoking environments, for a short time. Do this until the anxiety subsides, lengthening your exposure each time. The more you do this the easier it will become. Use breathing techniques and reassure yourself whilst doing this.

**NAMING & ACKNOWLEDGING:** This helps to take the power out of the anxiety. When you are starting to feel anxious say out loud, 'I am feeling nervous/ anxious but this is normal and I can get through this.' When feeling anxious because of a new situation or meeting new people, you can always admit to the person you are feeling anxious or nervous.

#### **DEALING WITH AN ANXIETY/PANIC ATTACK**

No-one has ever died from a panic attack or high anxiety state alone. The worse thing that could happen, would be for the person to faint or hurt themselves as they fell. Try not to fight the feelings as this just intensifies the anxiety/panic

#### ***Remember the following:***

- Slow breathing down
- Concentrate on something you can see
- Sit down
- Try de-breathing exercises to control/manage hyperventilation:
- Affirm with positive thoughts and self-reassurance

#### **SEEKING HELP**

You may need to gain some professional help (Health Professional; Nurse, Social Worker, OT, Counsellor, Psychologist) to manage and overcome your anxiety. This person will help you with developing some coping strategies (including those outlined in this leaflet) and help you understand the factors in your anxiety.

#### **MEDICATION**

Anti-depressant medication has been shown to be effective in reducing effects of anxiety. You can also obtain some short-term anxiolytic medication. Medication is only part of the solution in managing anxiety. Talk to your GP and/or a health professional who can advise.

#### **REFERENCES**

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