

Understanding and Coping with Anxiety and Panic

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What is anxiety? Anxiety is a common human emotion that ranges from mildly uncomfortable to extremely distressing. At its worst, it may include intense panic for several minutes, or longer. Clinically, it becomes a problem when it interferes with day-to-day functioning, and/or causes a high level of distress over time.

Low to medium levels of anxiety are “normal” and even helpful in some situations. For example, being anxious when driving in heavy traffic helps us remain alert and cautious so we are more likely to drive safely and to look out for other drivers being careless. If we are nervous about a job interview, some degree of anxiety can help us put forth our best effort to interact in a professional and friendly manner. Low to medium levels of anxiety are useful to prepare us to take action, or to pay extra attention for situations that might need a quick response. If a person becomes nervous standing near the edge of a high cliff, that is a helpful emotional and physical response that may protect them from harm in that situation. To a certain degree, being on the look-out for possible danger keeps us safe. In another example, being nervous in a new social situation is helpful because it gives us energy to interact with a variety of new people. And since nervousness gives us needed energy to successfully respond to certain challenges or tasks, nervousness can be viewed as a useful state of mind. In fact, nervousness can then become something we approach willingly as something that benefits us, rather than as something to be avoided and controlled at all costs (also known as avoidance). Anxiety and panic grow when people try to avoid them.

As human beings, our nervous system is literally built to be on the look-out for problems and to problem solve. Our eyes and ears, for example, constantly send us information about the degree of safety and danger in our surroundings. But sometimes our nervous system signals us there is an emergency when there actually is none. People can perceive a big threat when there is actually only a small threat. High anxiety, or panic, can be like an emotional false alarm. And because those false alarms are just as distressing or scary as a real alarm, people sometimes develop unhealthy habits to try very hard to avoid those feelings or situations associated with high anxiety. Persons with high anxiety or panic may believe they do not yet have the skills to cope with high levels of anxiety that can become exhausting over time. In fact, high anxiety can sometimes lead people to feel hopeless and depressed over time.

Physically, high anxiety and panic occur when the hypothalamus (a structure near the middle of our brain) perceives a situation as stressful. The hypothalamus signals our pituitary gland to release a hormone (ACTH), which tells the adrenal gland to quickly release epinephrine

(adrenaline), norepinephrine and cortisol. These electrical and chemical communications stimulate an increased heartbeat, rapid breathing, higher blood pressure, increased sweating, wider pupils and higher sugar availability for energy. This is the stress response. But, there needs to be a perception of an urgent situation first that triggers the stress response. Therefore, our perceptions of what is urgent, threatening or scary (also known as our self-talk, thinking, perceptions and beliefs) are very important targets for interventions to treat anxiety.

Persons with moderate or severe anxiety might worry excessively about health, finances, employment, relationships, embarrassment and other people's opinions.

High Anxiety Symptoms

muscle tension
very nervous, on edge
restlessness
poor concentration
cannot relax
easily fatigued
irritable
very worried
emotionally tense

Panic Symptoms

rapid heart beat
sweating
trembling or shaking
shortness of breath
chest pain or discomfort
nausea
dizziness, lightheadedness
fear of losing control
fear of dying

Reach out for help. If you suspect you have a broken arm, you would ask for help by going to a medical facility for assessment, care and treatment. If you suspect a part of you is “broken” emotionally, it makes sense to reach out to ask for care and treatment that can be easily available and very helpful. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, approximately 30% of all persons in the U.S. will experience one form of an anxiety disorder over their lifetime. In other words, high anxiety conditions are fairly common, and it is healthy and reasonable to temporarily lean on others for support while learning new coping skills. It's OK and common to feel some degree of embarrassment about your symptoms, but remember that your healthcare providers are caring and non-judgmental people who are ready to help.

Knowledge is power. Seek out information about anxiety and panic, and various treatment approaches, from credible sources. Ask questions. Learn about the various factors that contribute to anxiety, but focus mostly on treatment approaches. Approach the topics of anxiety and panic, don't avoid them. The more you know, the less scary or

mysterious anxiety will be. The more you know, the more empowered and confident you will feel about options to improve your condition.

Be aware, however, that it is not required to have a clear explanation about what might have caused your anxiety in order to benefit from treatment interventions. These interventions can be very helpful without ever being certain as to what “caused” the anxiety or panic. Also, be careful not to think that if the one cause of anxiety was eliminated, so would the problem. There is usually a combination of factors involved, and it is not possible to simply remove them and the problem.

Possible Physical Factors

- heredity
- neurotransmitters (brain chemistry)
- medical conditions related to hormone or glucose problems, or adrenal glands or thyroid dysfunction
- medication side effects
- substance abuse
- stress from medical conditions

Possible Behavioral Health Factors

- unusual stress
- traumatic experience
- unhealthy thinking patterns
- avoidant behaviors
- withdrawal from usual supports
- few or no enjoyable activities
- few or no opportunities to practice more effective coping skills
- substance abuse
- an over controlling belief system

To help grow your knowledge about coping with anxiety, **try at least one** of the reading suggestions below, and feel free to discuss what you read with your healthcare providers.

Suggested Resources & Readings

- 1) “Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway,” by Susan Jeffers (2017). The book is also available in a special abridged quick read edition.
- 2) Ted Talk video, “How to make stress your friend,” by Kelly McGonigal (2013).
- 3) “The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook,” 6th edition by Edmund J. Bourne (2015).
- 4) Search Youtube for Pixar Piper Video. There are several versions, choose the 6:14 minute version of the video. The theme is facing fear and adversity.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=loxXZcB1IXU>

- 5) “10 Simple Solutions to Worry. How to Calm Your Mind, Relax Your Body & Reclaim Your Life,” by Kevin L. Gyoerkoe and Pamela S. Wiegartz (2006).
- 6) “Don’t Sweat the Small Stuff (and it’s all small stuff)” by Richard Carlson (1997)
- 7) Mastery of Your Anxiety and Panic: Workbook. Treatments that Work, by David Barlow and Michelle Craske (2006).
- 8) “The Ten Best Ever Anxiety Management Techniques Workbook” by Margaret Wehrenberg (2012)
- 9) “Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life” by Stephen Hayes (2005)
- 10) “The OCD Workbook,” 3rd edition by Bruce Hyman and Cherry Pedrick (2010)
- 11) “The Mindfulness and Acceptance Workbook for Anxiety: A Guide to Breaking Free from Anxiety, Phobias, and Worry Using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy,” by John Forsyth and Georg Eifert (2008)
- 12) Ted Talk video, “How I beat stage fright,” by Joe Kowan (2013).
- 13) “Mindset. The New Psychology of Success,” by Carol Dweck (2007).
- 14) “Feel the Fear, and Do It Anyway,” by Susan Jeffers (2006)
- 15) App – “Calm”
- 16) App – “Breethe”
- 17) App – “Moodnotes”
- 18) App – “Headspace: Meditation & Sleep”

“Nothing diminishes anxiety faster than action.”

Walter Anderson

Treatment Approaches

The three treatment approaches covered in this handout for anxiety related problems.

1. **Cognitive-Behavioral Treatments.** These approaches focus on self-calming strategies, healthy vs anxious thinking habits, desensitization and exposure experiences, problem-solving, and practical considerations for reducing stress.
2. **Acceptance and Commitment Therapy** emphasizes changing your outlook and relationship with anxiety. In short, the goals are to stop the unsuccessful pattern of fighting against anxiety and/or panic, while learning to accept all parts of yourself and move persistently toward meaningful aspects of your life (i.e., living a valued life).
3. **Medication.** The two general categories of antianxiety medications are short-acting medications (such as benzodiazepines) to temporarily reduce symptoms, and longer-acting medications that gradually reduce symptom intensity.

It is worth pointing out that there are no treatment approaches that “cure” severe anxiety or panic, because as you recall from page 1, anxiety is very normal and necessary as human beings. However, it is quite possible to limit the effects of severe anxiety and live a more engaged and fulfilling life.

Cognitive-Behavioral Treatments

1. **Belly breathing** is an effective self-calming skill. (It is also known as diaphragmatic breathing, abdominal breathing, deep breathing, meditation breathing and tactical breathing).

In a quiet place, close your eyes and sit up straight with good posture in your chair. Place one hand low on your stomach to feel the belly breathing you are about to practice.

Visually imagine that you have a balloon in your stomach. Breathe as if you are only breathing through the balloon in your stomach. Breathe in through your nose and visually imagine the balloon inflating. Feel your hand rise as you inflate the balloon. Pause very briefly, then exhale through your mouth and completely deflate the balloon. Pause very briefly at the end of your exhale. Again, breathe slowly in through your nose, visually imagining the balloon inflating. Pause briefly. Slowly exhale through your mouth, visually imagining the balloon completely deflating. Feel your hand slowly sink into your stomach as you completely empty the balloon of all the air. Continue this breathing cycle.

Pay attention to the physical sensations of inflating the balloon and deflating the balloon. Feel your hand on your stomach slowly rise and slowly fall. Find a relaxing pace and breathing rhythm that are comfortable for you. When breathing through your belly, your shoulders should not rise. Remember to completely exhale and empty all air from the balloon. Repeat this very simple breathing process for 5 minutes.

Distracting thoughts will come into your mind. That's okay, because that's just what the human mind does. It thinks. Simply re-focus your attention back to your breathing, while gently brushing aside all other thoughts. Repeat this re-focusing over and over as needed during this 5 minute period.

To help yourself remain focused on just the belly breathing, try adding a visualization. Using your imagination, visualize the relaxing air you are breathing into your stomach is blue in color. Visualize breathing in blue relaxing air into the blue balloon in your stomach. When you exhale, imagine you're breathing out all your anxieties and worries in red air. Visualize as clearly as possible breathing out red air. In blue. Out red. Imagine feeling more relaxed after each exhale.

2. **Visualizing relaxing scenes** is another anxiety management skill that can be improved with practice. Start this self-calming experience with a minute of belly breathing, then select a peaceful calm scene for yourself, such as a beautiful tropical beach, or a relaxing stroll through the woods.

To deeply immerse yourself in the relaxing setting you choose, visually imagine the detail of what you see in that relaxing setting. For example, visually imagine the various colors of the ocean water in your beach scene. Look at how blue the sky is. Imagine the colors of the white sand. Next, imagine what you physically feel in that beach setting. Imagine the physical sensation of the warm sunshine on your skin. Imagine the feel of a gentle breeze. Imagine the feel of warm sand between your bare toes. Next, imagine the sounds in that beach setting. Imagine as clearly as possible the sound of ocean waves in the background. Imagine the sound of seagulls in the distance. Next, imagine the taste of salt air on your lips. Imagine the smells associated with the beach scene. Be in that beautiful setting by gently going through each of the sensations associated with that place. Imagine in detail what you see, what you feel, what you hear, taste and smell. When distracting thoughts arise, re-focus as often as needed on the sensory experiences in that relaxing place.

Visualizing peaceful scenes is a cognitive skill (i.e., concentration) that improves with practice. Even if you start with a 1-minute visualization, increase by 1 more minute over the course of days, then add another minute, and so on, over the course of weeks. This will be another tool to add to your “toolbox.”

3. **Progressive muscle relaxation** is another “tool” to add to your toolbox of self-calming skills. In short, this technique involves flexing or tensing a specific muscle area continuously for 7 to 10 seconds and then relaxing that same muscle area for 7 to 10 seconds. This tensing and relaxing is repeated at a leisurely pace for a total of 3 times for each muscle group, while paying attention to physical sensation of “letting go” and imagine feeling more relaxed when not tensing muscles.

(Be cautious if you have physical limitations. Regardless, do not over tense your muscles to the point of cramping. On a scale of 0 to 10, flex and tense each muscle group with an intensity from 4 to 7 out of 10, depending on what is safe and most effective for you.)

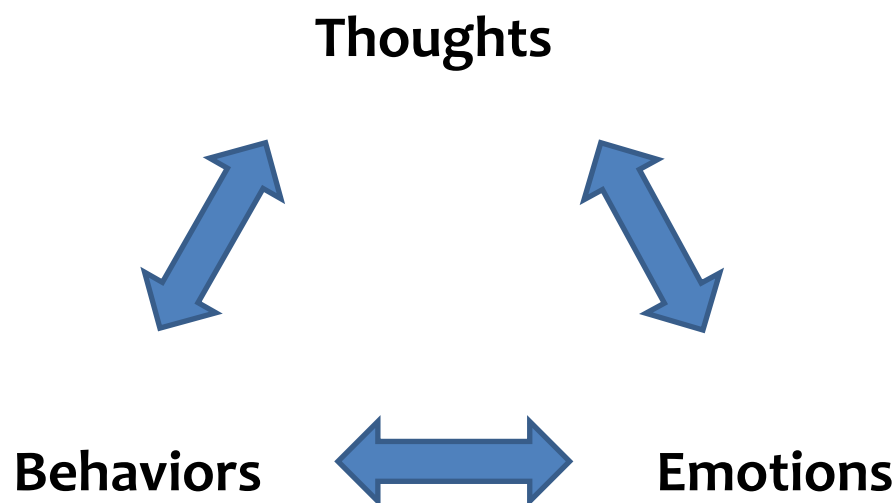
- a. Tense your facial and forehead muscles by tightly closing your eyes for 7 to 10 seconds, then let go and relax those muscles while imagining deep relaxation spreading all around your eyes. Repeat this cycle two more times.
- b. Open your jaw widely to stretch the muscles around the hinges of your jaw for 7 to 10 seconds, then allow your jaw to go limp for 7 to 10 seconds while imagining deep relaxation spreading all around your jaw. Repeat this cycle two more times.
- c. To target your shoulders and neck areas, raise your shoulders up toward your ears and hold that position for 7 to 10 seconds, then allow your shoulders to go limp and loose for 7 to 10 seconds while noticing how much more relaxed you feel when letting go. Repeat this cycle two more times.
- d. To target your shoulders and upper back area, push your shoulder blades back as if you were trying to touch them together and hold that position for 7 to 10 seconds, then relax that position and notice the pleasant difference. Repeat this cycle two more times.
- e. Tighten your biceps by drawing your forearms up toward your shoulders and “making a muscle” with both arms. Hold that tense position for 7 to 10 seconds, then relax the biceps for 7 to 10 seconds while paying attention to more relaxed and loose sensation. Repeat this cycle two more times.

- f. Tighten your triceps by extending your arms and locking your elbows for 7 to 10 seconds, then relax your arms for 7 to 10 seconds while noticing the loose and limp sensation. Repeat this cycle two more times.
 - g. Target your stomach muscles by sucking your stomach in and tensing your stomach at the same time and hold that position for 7 to 10 seconds, then relax for 7 to 10 seconds. Repeat three times total.
 - h. Tighten the muscles in your thighs and hold that tension for 7 to 10 seconds, then relax for 7 to 10 seconds. Repeat two more times.
 - i. Tighten your calf muscles by raising your toes upward, and hold that position 7 to 10 seconds. Relax and let your toes hang loose for 7 to 10 seconds. Repeat twice more.
 - j. Tighten your feet by curling your toes under and downward, and hold that position for 7 to 10 seconds. Relax your feet and toes for 7 to 10 seconds, maybe wiggle them around slightly. Repeat two more times.
4. **Mindful Counting.** Sit in a comfortable position in a quiet place. Feet flat on the floor. Sit up with good posture. Close your eyes. Take one deep breath to start off, then breathe normally at your own pace and normal rhythm. As you breathe normally, begin silently counting your breaths starting with one and going to ten, at your own pace and rhythm. Eventually, when you reach ten, circle back to one and silently repeat the counting process again. Repeat this process for at least five minutes. Consider setting a timer to alert you when five minutes have passed so that you don't get distracted by trying to track the time. If distracting thoughts arise (and they will), let them gently float away without pursuing or daydreaming about them, and mentally re-focus back on silently counting your breathing from one to ten. This is supposed to be a simple, repetitive, present moment kind of experience. It is also a skill requiring gentle concentration, therefore, it takes practice to get better and better. Ideally, try to practice mindful counting at least twice daily, most every day for several weeks. Talk to your therapist about practicing slightly different variations of this technique, or practice variations on your own, or browse online videos that teach similar versions of this skill. Find what works for you, and practice, practice, practice.
5. **Distraction techniques** are effective short-term coping strategies to be used when anxiety first begins to spike. They are not intended to be a “cure” for anxiety or panic, and they are not to be used to try to permanently avoid anxiety. However, distraction is (a) effective for reducing the intensity of symptoms so you can continue with your normal daily routine without getting entangled in anxiety thoughts, and (b)

so you can practice deliberately focusing your attention rather than assuming you must helplessly following automatic thoughts.

Examples of simple distractions are cleaning your desk or room for 2 minutes, making a grocery list for the next couple days, returning a phone call or email for several minutes, reading a couple pages from a magazine or book, or walking around the block or your work building for several minutes. Almost any neutral or small productive behavior can be used to consume your attention for a couple minutes to break the cycle of worrying your worries will quickly get worse.

6. **Self-Talk** plays an extremely important role in our emotions and behaviors. Self-talk is another word for thoughts, perceptions, opinions, beliefs, and automatic scripts that occur in our mind almost constantly, often in a fraction of a second without ever actually speaking aloud. Normally, however, we do not think about our thoughts. We do not usually question our thoughts. Most often we automatically accept our thoughts as accurate facts. But in reality, thoughts can be inaccurate and irrational, and they sometimes trigger over reactive emotions. To change the way we experience and cope with anxiety, changing our thought patterns can be very helpful. Consider the diagram below.



The diagram above presumes we must have some sort of thought before we experience an emotional reaction. Before we have a happy or joyful feeling, there needs to be some cognitive event in which we perceive or interpret something as happy. Before we have emotional anxiety or panic, we must first think about or interpret an event as anxious. In this diagram, a helpful place to make changes is in thoughts/perceptions/beliefs so the rest of the cycle changes too.

“We suffer more often in imagination than reality” (Seneca)

Subtypes of Anxious Self-Talk (adapted from Edmund Bourne, 2010. See references.)

The Worrier - this self-talk imagines the worst case scenario with fantasies of disaster or catastrophe. This category of self-talk encourages high anxiety by over estimating the chances of something bad or embarrassing happening. The Worrier is often vigilant and watching for small physical symptoms or signs of trouble in daily life.

Favorite expression: “What if...”

The Critic – promotes low self-esteem through frequent judgmental thinking. The Critic is constantly evaluating in order to point out flaws, limitations and mistakes. The Critic generates anxiety by putting you down for not being able to handle symptoms of anxiety, stress or panic. The Critic overlooks your positive qualities, and tells you that you are inadequate in contrast to other people, and the voice may sound like someone very judgmental from your past.

Favorite expressions: “You’re an idiot” or “That was stupid” or “I am weak”

The Victim – promotes depression with self-talk about being helpless or hopeless. It generates anxiety by telling you that progress is not happening, that you are incurable, or that it is too difficult to make healthy changes. Victim thinking emphasizes that life or someone is being unfair toward you.

Favorite expression: “I can’t” or “It’s not fair...”

The Perfectionist – promotes long-term stress and burn out, and is a close cousin of The Critic. It generates anxiety by telling you your efforts are not good enough, that you should be working harder, that you should be competent or smarter, etc. The Perfectionistic is intolerant of mistakes, and tries to convince you that your worth depends on externals (such as career achievements, money, status, image, pleasing others, the opinions of others, etc.) Control is important to the perfectionist.

Favorite expressions: “I should...” or “I have to...” or “That’s not good enough”

Other kinds of anxious, distorted thinking or thinking traps result in excessive emotions, such as anxiety, stress and panic. For example...

- a) **All-or-Nothing Thinking:** seeing things as black or white, nothing is gray. Something is a total failure or a total success. There is no perception of a continuum. Self and people are not seen as a blend of strengths, weakness and neutral characteristics.
- b) **Overgeneralization:** a single negative or anxious event is seen as a never-ending pattern
- c) **Selective Thinking:** picking out a single anxious detail and dwelling on it while overlooking other positive or neutral aspects of the situation or person
- d) **Disqualifying Positives:** rejecting positive experiences by insisting they “don’t count” for some reason. This thinking maintains a negative bias with few rewarding experiences.
- e) **Jumping To Conclusions:** making a negative or anxious interpretation even though there are few or no facts to support the conclusion
- f) **Fortune Telling:** predicting things will definitely turn out badly
- g) **Magnification:** exaggerating the importance and size of your mistakes or imperfections. Exaggerating the achievements or positive qualities in others.
- h) **Emotional Reasoning:** assuming that negative emotions reflect the way things really are, as if saying, “I feel it, so it must be true.” Believing you must act the way you feel emotionally, which is not true. You may choose to act in a rational manner when upset.
- i) **Catastrophic Thinking:** making a problem seem much larger than it is, or seeing it as having long-lasting consequences when it actually does not.
- j) **Fix It Thinking:** believing that perceived problems are all urgent and must be fixed and solved by you immediately.

Unproductive and unhealthy anxious thinking grows easily when focused on possible future events. Overly anxious thinking is often filled with unnecessary anticipation, as reflected in the following short paragraph.

“I stress about stress before there’s even stress to stress about. Then I stress about stressing over stress that doesn’t need to be stressed about. It’s stressful.”

Generally speaking, the goal is to practice balanced, healthy, rational and accurate thinking in order to take good care of ourselves. In order to practice balanced thinking, it is vital to be aware of the thinking errors described above so you can catch them happening, then challenge them, and then correct them. (**Catch** them. **Challenge** them. **Correct** them. These are sometimes referred to as the 3 C’s.)

“What we think, we become.” (Buddha)

7. **Practical life style changes** can have a very positive impact on stress level, anxiety and physical functioning. The following suggestions are “easier said than done,” but the benefits are well worth the effort over the course of several weeks until they become new habits.
 - a) **Simplify your life.** High anxiety and stress can be a clear emotional sign your life is too busy, too cluttered. Ask yourself what events, activities or obligations can be eliminated? What are the most important events in my day and week that I need to keep? Review and thin your daily and weekly routine every once in a while.
 - b) Regularly practice your preferred form of **relaxation**. Whatever works for you to relax, set aside time for it at least 3 times weekly. What relaxes you?
 - c) **Give yourself daily downtime.** Again, if your daily life has become crazy busy, this is a reminder you do have the option of set aside downtime when you choose. This may mean telling others “no” more often, and realizing that nothing tragic happens when you allow downtime.
 - d) **Get sufficient sleep** for your individual needs. Some people feel rested with less than 8 hours sleep, some people need more. Get what you need each night,

even if this means going to bed earlier than usual on a consistent basis. Be sure to get up consistently at the same (reasonable) time each morning, however, no matter how good or bad your sleep was the night before. (Ask about a separate behavioral handout listing do's and don'ts for healthy sleep habits.)

- e) **Get moving.** Persons with anxiety or panic often feel a mix of fatigue because it is draining to be highly anxious, restless and jittery. The benefits of increasing physical activity are so strong they cannot be over looked as a very effective tool to reduce the intensity of anxiety and panic.

Exercise Benefits

- ✓ increased endorphins (natural mood enhancing chemicals in your body)
- ✓ increased blood and oxygen flow to brain (to help with problem-solving skills, concentration, and memory functioning)
- ✓ increased blood flow and oxygen to muscles (to increase energy and stamina)
- ✓ decreased cortisol (high cortisol is connected with high stress response)
- ✓ a psychological sense of accomplishment for doing something that took effort
- ✓ increased activity levels increase the chance discovering a new hobby or interest
- ✓ exercising can be social (which helps meet your natural need to belong with others)
- ✓ exercising can be fun (which is the opposite emotional experience of anxiety and depression)
- ✓ better physical conditioning means a lower likelihood of future physical injuries and a better immune system to fight off infections
- ✓ better overall physical health reduces the impact of other medical concerns

Suggestions to Boost Activity Level

- ✓ partner with an exercise buddy, or two (being accountable to others increases chances for success)
- ✓ join a group activity scheduled for a specific time and place (like a yoga or cycling class, a softball team, a golf league, or hiking club)
- ✓ **start with small goals** to build upon successful feelings
- ✓ schedule specific times / places / activities for individual activities
- ✓ plan ahead to cope with obstacles (such as excuses you know you will likely create to avoid physical and social activities)
- ✓ find ways to combine fun and exercise
- ✓ walking counts (don't think you have to run a marathon to improve your condition)
- ✓ ask a couple people you trust and see routinely to remind you and encourage you to stick to your plan to exercise more over time

Ideally, we move to increase our heart rate at least 20 to 30 minutes daily and make it fun whenever possible. The minimum is at least 3 times weekly for a minimum of 30 minutes each time. Schedule it so it is more likely to happen.

- f) **Reduce or eliminate unhealthy substances.** If highly anxious and stressed, why add to it with caffeine, tobacco, or alcohol? Why add to stress with illicit substances or by misusing prescription medications? Be aware of possible side effects of prescription medications, because they can significantly increase anxiety.
- g) **Reduce your stress tolerance.** People often have it backwards. The goal is not to increase your tolerance for stress. The much better goal is to decrease your tolerance (Richard Carlson, 1997). If you increase your tolerance for stress, it is almost guaranteed you will take on more and more stress. You will automatically find new ways to push yourself to the limits of those new stress levels, and that's bad. Instead, the healthier goal is to become more aware of when your stress starts to increase, so you change how you are behaving or thinking sooner rather than later to keep stress relatively low. On a scale of 0 to 10, what are the early warning signs that your stress is going up from 2 to a 5? Or from 3 to 8, for example?
- h) **Stay connected with other people.** When depressed, stressed or anxious, we tend to withdrawal from others. Our social world shrinks, and unfortunately that kind of isolation can make anxiety worse. It is very important to remain socially connected with others, because those interactions (1) literally stimulate us in healthy ways, (2) keep us from getting too lost in our own anxious thinking habits, (3) increase our chances of having rewarding and fun experiences, and (4) provide opportunities for others to check on our well-being.
- i) **Have fun.** When anxious over a long period of time, or panicky, we often neglect putting ourselves in position to have enjoyable experiences. Schedule fun time, whether small activities or bigger adventures. Even when you don't feel like following through with your plan for a fun activity, do, and then be pleased with yourself afterward. The emotional anticipation of upcoming fun activities planned days or weeks ahead feels good. Deliberately schedule at least three brief small enjoyable activities or hobbies into your upcoming week.
- j) **Be kind to yourself.** Persons struggling with high anxiety or panic can be very self-critical and unforgiving of themselves for their symptoms. Anxious persons can be harsher toward themselves than anyone else in their life. Through deliberate rehearsal and self-observations, practice self-talk that is kind and encouraging. Do something nice for yourself. Practice self-talk that allows for

common human imperfections. Practice accepting human imperfections rather than working so hard to avoid them. (This is not the same as surrendering.) What advice might you give to someone else feeling like you do? At the very least, practice being fair with yourself.

- k) **Get out of your head and into the world around you.** High anxiety and panic are very internal experiences when people are stuck in over-attending to physical sensations (such as changes in breathing and heart rate) and anxious thinking (such as general worries, fear that others might notice how nervous they are feeling, or worrying the anxiety symptoms are going to grow worse and worse). Becoming overly focused on internal experiences is like putting yourself under a microscope, painfully, where anxieties seem much bigger than necessary.

One effective coping strategy is to deliberately change your focus to external events, tasks and people. When your focus is on events around you (instead of in you), those experiences occupy your mind and behaviors in healthier ways. This cognitive shift in attention is a skill that improves with practice. This healthier self-talk might say something similar to, “I need to get out of my head, so I am going to clean and straighten my work area for a few minutes, or talk to a co-worker for a couple minutes and ask how they are doing.” The key is to involve yourself in almost any neutral or productive task that directs your attention to something other than yourself. Get out of your head when it begins to trigger high anxiety. Consider making a short list in advance of the tasks or people you might focus on when your anxious thinking becomes too pre-occupied with your physical sensations and worrisome thoughts. The overall goal is to practice more self-control of what you attend to, and deliberately point or aim your attention to outward events, the way you might deliberately aim flashlight in the dark.

- l) **Practice a scheduled worry time.** Worrying is normal to some degree. It helps us anticipate problems and hopefully prepare for how to handle them. Therefore, the goal is not to stop worrying, but to practice it for a reasonable period of time and to put it to good use. Pick a time in advance in your day (usually late afternoon or early evening) and spend 10 minutes worrying to the best of your ability. Make a written list of worries on the left side of a page. Writing individual worries on separate index cards may work even better for this activity. Then spend the next 10 minutes thinking and writing about possible effective coping strategies for dealing with each one of those worries on the right side of the page, or on the back side of the same index card. As you consider possible coping strategies, stay aware of what you can and cannot control. When the 20 minutes is over, stop. Put aside your writings and worries until the next day at the same time. If you find your thoughts drifting back to the worries, tell yourself something like, “It’s not time for worrying right now. I can worry all I

want tomorrow at _____ o'clock.” (Do not practice this activity within two hours of your target bedtime.)

- m) **Unplug.** Try choosing one day a week, or at least one day a month, when you will not use electronics or social media. Completely unplug from email, television, movies, texting, and social media like Facebook or Instagram for an entire day. Unplugging will likely quiet your day. What enjoyable, interesting, rewarding or relaxing things will you do with that time?
- n) **Problem solve.** It is quite possible that increased anxiety is triggered by a problem that has you temporarily stuck. It may seem as if you have hit a wall because the problem exceeds or outweighs your abilities to cope with it at this moment in your life. Below are some questions intended to help you think about the problem from a different point of view, to help you solve the core problem so you can move on.
- i. Define the problem. (This sounds easier than it is.) Think logically and put aside your emotions. Take a step back and observe the problem as if you were sitting up in a theatre balcony observing your situation on a stage below. Be very specific about what the problem actually is. Try describing the problem in writing using as few words as possible, and then re-write it a few times to make it specific, short and clear.
 - ii. Ask yourself, “What outcome do I want? How do I want things to be? What specifically do I wish was different? If the situation improved, what would it look like?” (Again, be specific, short and clear in your description.)
 - iii. Is the problem short-term or long-term? Is it likely to go away on its own in the days or weeks ahead?
 - iv. Are there pieces of the problem you can control or influence?
 - v. Are you contributing to the problem in some way you might not be aware of?
 - vi. Seek out a different perspective from at least two other people, people you trust who are willing to disagree with you in a helpful way, if needed. Listen to their point of view and feedback, because there is almost always more than one side to consider. (Using this new information, re-write the problem again if needed as suggested above in step (i).

- vii. What options do you have to improve your situation? What choices can you make to move in the direction of the outcome you want, as described above in step (ii)? (Remember that changing your own thinking and behaviors might be the most appropriate options to improve your situation.)
- viii. What are the pros and cons for each option you have identified? (Again, it can be very useful to write this out to help yourself think rationally about what to do next)
- ix. Choose at least one specific goal and action step you have identified to improve the situation in some way. (Remember, the goal and action step do not have to be a perfect and total solution right, and the anxious situation does not have to improve immediately.) It helps to make a timeline for yourself to carry out the action steps you have decided upon, to help hold yourself accountable for taking action to improve your situation.
- o) Other possible options for healthy lifestyle changes? _____
- p) If you have genuinely tried the above steps, perhaps you should consider the possibility this problem cannot be solved or diminished at this time.

You don't have to have it all figured out to move forward.

8. **Change Your Relationship with Anxiety**

Anxiety is similar to quicksand – the more we struggle against it, the more it consumes us.

This paradoxical observation suggests that persons with high anxiety and/or panic need to go in a new direction, because other coping strategies have not been working.

Living a “Valued Life” is a new direction and non-traditional approach to reducing psychological suffering. In short, it is based on the following principles.

- a) Physical and psychological pain (such as anxiety, depression, stress and shame) are unavoidable. All human beings experience pain.

Attempts to completely avoid physical and psychological pain can consume more and more of our lives over time. We may start to believe that in order to be happy and fulfilled in our daily lives, we must first get rid of pain, or avoid it as often as possible.

For example, a person might mistakenly believe their high degree of social nervousness must be controlled or stopped before he or she can enjoy having fun with other people.

- b) Over time, our efforts to avoid pain (such as anxiety, panic or stress) consume more of our time and focus. As a result, we can lose track of what is most meaningful in our lives. The more our lives feel trapped and hopeless due to unavoidable pain, the more strongly we believe we must control or stop pain before we can be happy. We then enter a cycle of moving further and further away from meaningful lives.
- c) **Suffering** is the result of not moving in the direction of a valued life. Suffering is optional. Suffering is what we do to ourselves when adding unnecessary distress to our lives by focusing on the impossible goal of eliminating or totally controlling pain.
- d) Moving in a direction that truly provides purpose, vitality and meaning to our life is the definition of living a **“valued life.”**
- e) Think about the following questions deeply for a couple minutes then write down what comes to mind. Do not edit yourself or over-think the responses that come to mind, just write your answers after some brief reflection.

What would I do if I did not have this severe anxiety or panic in my life? If I did not have that psychological pain, what would I do with my life over the course of time? If I could truly live my life in a meaningful and excited way over time, what would I do? What do you want your life to be about? If I wasn't so anxious, I would...

- f) **Values** are like a compass that points your life in directions you want to go. They are lifelong roads that provide purpose, meaning and direction for your life. They are choices of what you want your life to be about. Your answers to item (f) above could be your values.

Ten Common Life Value Areas

intimate relationships	fun
parenting	citizenship
family relationships	personal growth
social relationships	health
work	spirituality

- g) **Committed action** means identifying some specific actions that would move you at least one step toward each of the meaningful and valued directions you listed above. Moving toward the values listed above is a valued life.

Beware! Rather than simply taking steps in toward a valued life, you may begin to put up obstacles using your mind. Examples include procrastination, making excuses, blaming, pessimism, distractibility, trying again to eliminate pain before pursuing a meaningful life, waiting for anxiety to vanish, or not recognizing your own abilities.

- h) **Hit the bull's eye.** After giving yourself a reasonable amount of time to complete committed actions, choose one the values to discuss. Use this bull's eye target to visually discuss how effectively you moved in that valued life direction. This is not intended to be a judgmental or critical activity, so be honest in rating how well you hit the target. See suggested definitions below.



www.targets.ws

Bull's Eye – you hit the center of the dartboard; you feel as though you are living fully by your values; feeling extremely satisfied with this area of your life; fully engaged

Very Close – your actions resulted in a good connection with your values; it is a satisfying outcome; you are very much on the right track; a little room to improve

Close – your actions resulted in a fair or OK outcome; better than in the past; room for improvement

Not Close – your actions are not consistent with values; obvious room for improvement

Far From - your actions are inconsistent with your values; old or unhealthy habits may be emerging

Bull's Eye Review Questions

- In the action I took, what did not feel meaningful, on target or energizing?
- What could I do that might move me closer to my values?
- What is a specific, concrete action I can take in order to move at least one small step closer to one of my values?

Be aware that as you take steps toward your valued life, others will notice. Tell them what is going on, and if appropriate, ask for their support. Others might not see these changes as positive. How might you handle the persons who dislike the changes you are making in your life? What are your options when encountering obstacles on your values path?

- i) **But what about my anxiety?** The short answer to that question is to invite your anxiety along for the journey. If you bring your anxiety along on the journey toward a valued life, put it in the back of bus, so it is less important and less likely to get your attention. But remember, it is your bus, you are driving it and you decide the direction your bus will travel. You decide how fast the bus travels. You decide whether to turn right or left. You decide who gets on or off the bus, and where they sit. If you no longer fight with the anxiety, it can no longer drive your

bus. You can have anxiety or panic and still drive your bus in the direction of a valued life.

- j) In terms of living a valued life, the skill of **acceptance** is another important piece.

Acceptance is:

- living with what you cannot completely control **and** actively pursuing the life you want
- very similar to the serenity prayer – “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”
- actively engaging all of your experiences throughout the day
- seeing the BIG picture
- healthy self-awareness
- living life more fully
- choosing not to remain stuck
- realizing that feelings are just feelings (they are temporary, they do not kill us, they always come and go like the weather, they are just a part of being human, they are not to be avoided)

Acceptance is not:

- surrendering to pain or suffering
- giving up
- judging yourself harshly or irrationally
- trying to control the uncontrollable
- tunnel vision

- k) **Mindfulness** is another key concept and skill in changing your relationship with anxiety. Developing mindfulness helps improve acceptance, relaxation, and healthy self-awareness.

- a. Mindfulness is the ability to step back and observe your thoughts, emotions, experiences and physical sensations.
- b. It is observing yourself without judgment or criticism.
- c. Mindfulness is thinking about your thinking.

- d. Mindfulness is remaining in the observing state of mind without following the impulse to take action.
- e. Mindfulness is staying in the present moment.
- f. Mindfulness is not an escape technique.
- g. It is a skill you already possess to a degree that can grow with practice to provide a much different perspective of your anxiety related experiences, and other experiences. It significantly widens your vision of your life, rather than practicing tunnel vision.
- h. Mindfulness helps you look at your thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations rather than from them.

The concepts of valued life, acceptance, mindfulness, pain and suffering are discussed in more detail in self-help workbook materials for ACT (Acceptance and Commitment Therapy), which is an established treatment approach backed by research for physical and psychological pain conditions. See suggested readings list earlier in the handout.

9. **Spirituality.** Spirituality can be a very meaningful source of guidance, inspiration and hope. Whether it's a small, large or past part of your, consider feeding it in some way. One obvious example is attending church, which can meet both spiritual needs and social needs. Reading or listening to spiritual materials is an option. Visiting spiritual places by yourself can feel rejuvenating. Sitting quietly by yourself for a few minutes can be peaceful. Consider asking God if he exists.

Medical Treatment Approaches

Anti-Anxiety medications can be helpful in reducing anxiety. There are two general categories.

1. Longer-term anxiety medications:
 - a. target certain chemicals in the brain (neurotransmitters) in the tiny gap in between brain cells. The neurotransmitters often targeted include serotonin, norepinephrine, and dopamine.
 - b. are often prescribed for either anxiety, depression or both.
 - c. include examples such as Lexapro (escitalopram), Luvox (fluvoxamine), BuSpar (buspirone), Celexa (citalopram), Paxil (paroxetine), Prozac (fluoxetine) and Zoloft (sertraline).
 - d. often take 2 to 4 weeks to reach a therapeutic level in the body, and are almost always prescribed to be taken consistently on a daily basis.
 - e. are prescribed for a trial period of at least two to three months, if there are no intolerable side effects present during the initial adjustment period.
 - f. are often taken for 8 or 12 months (or maybe years) to help prevent recurring symptoms, once a particular medication is found to be effective for a particular person.
 - g. are relatively safe because the chance of overdosing is low, they are not addictive, and these medications do not cause a sense of euphoria so getting “high” is not possible.
 - h. can be helpful to lessen the intensity of anxiety and panic while learning life-long skills and behavioral strategies for coping at the same time.
2. Short-term anxiety medications:
 - a. work quickly, usually starting in 30 to 60 minutes, then wear off after several hours.

- b. work, in part, by targeting the GABA neurotransmitter, which calms and slows things down.
- c. are commonly benzodiazepine medications, such as Klonopin (clonazepam), Valium (diazepam), Xanax (alprazolam), and Ativan (lorazepam).
- d. are not intended for long-term use over the course of months or years due to the potential for increased tolerance and addiction, and because long-term use gets in the way of learning non-medication coping skills.
- e. can be misused or abused.
- f. have common side effects such as sleepiness, unsteadiness, and memory or concentration impairments.
- g. should never be used with alcohol.
- h. from a behavioral health viewpoint, offer temporary emotional relief over the course of days or weeks so a patient can also learning longer-term coping skills and strategies from a healthcare provider that could effectively be used over a lifetime.
- i. from a behavioral health viewpoint, should have an “exit strategy.” This means that it is recommended a patient and his or her healthcare providers decide in advance how long they will use the medication. There should be a targeted stopping point, or at least a point at which the patient and healthcare providers pause to re-evaluate the need for the medication, how it is being used, and whether the patient is learning other non-medication coping strategies during this time period.
- j. can make a person feel “high” and euphoric, so it is strongly recommended to keep these medications secured, monitored or even “locked up” so other people do not get a hold of them accidentally, or for the wrong reasons.

Choosing an Anti-Anxiety medication is based on factors such as:

- your response to past medications
- family member responses to medications
- your experience of anxiety or panic, such as a consistent anxiety throughout the day at a mild to medium level, versus sudden spikes in intense anxiety
- medication interactions
- potential side effects for you
- the best educated guess between you and your physician

General Do's and Don'ts

- do take the longer-term medication daily as prescribed, because they need time “build up” in your body and need to remain at a “therapeutic level” over weeks and months
- do avoid alcohol, especially with the short-term antianxiety medications
- do notify your healthcare providers if you suspect side effects
- never take more than prescribed amount of short-term medication
- do not stop taking the longer-term medication as soon as you start feeling better
- actively communicate with your prescriber to find the best longer-term antianxiety medication that works for you, sometimes it is necessary to stop one medication and try another
- be aware that most longer-term antianxiety medications take 2 to 4 weeks to begin seeing benefits
- do request your refills at least one week before running out
- do realize that some antianxiety medications begin at a low dose and work up to a higher dose, so again, stay in touch with your healthcare provider about how you are responding to your current dose
- do remember that some antianxiety meds need to be tapered off slowly before stopping

How long do I take the medication? It is often suggested to continue taking the longer-term antianxiety antidepressant medication for months after the symptoms fade. Continuing to take the medication for six months, or longer, after anxiety and depression fades reduces the chance of the symptoms returning with the same intensity. Some patients take the longer-term medication for a year, or two, or longer because they realize they

function much better. Short-term antianxiety medication should be taken for a period of days, or just a few weeks, but not for months, years or indefinitely.