

WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP MYSELF WITH ANXIETY?



Self-help
strategies for
mild anxiety



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This guide offers some effective self-help strategies that you can use for mild* anxiety.

These strategies are intended for three types of anxiety: generalised anxiety (troublesome worry about a number of issues), social anxiety (anxiety about being negatively evaluated in social situations), and anxiety of a non-specific nature.

The strategies are **not** intended for use with anxiety associated with obsessions or compulsions, panic, agoraphobia, trauma, or specific phobias.

HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

The self-help strategies in this guide have been grouped according to the type of strategy involved. Although you might prefer some types of strategies, it is good to be open to others, as they may end up helping you more than expected.



REDUCE PHYSICAL TENSION

Anxiety has noticeable effects on the body, and there are a range of physical and psychological strategies you can use to ease that impact.

Try relieving times of high anxiety by exercise or physical activity. You could also practice progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) to help reduce physical tension. PMR involves working through major groups of muscles in the body, tensing and releasing them as you go (see beyondblue.org.au/the-facts/treatment-options/other-sources-of-support to listen to a guided PMR exercise). It is also recommended that you try using mindfulness when feeling anxious: bring your attention to what you are experiencing at that moment, and non-judgementally observe your thoughts, feelings, and sensations. In addition, meditation is good to do on a regular basis (i.e. not just as a way of coping at a time of anxiety) - whether it be mindfulness meditation or another form. A lot of anxiety is caused by your mind thinking about future events that haven't happened yet, and mindfulness can help with that. Also consider trying yoga - some forms of yoga include mindfulness.

Stress can make anxiety worse, and also has a major impact on the body, so it also pays to identify the sources/causes of your stress, and then find ways to avoid, reduce, or address them. Stress is often caused by time pressure, so it helps to develop good time management skills to gain more time away from work and responsibilities (e.g. by delegating, by only working on less important tasks once the essential and important ones are completed). If relevant, try to find ways to reduce perfectionism (e.g. don't magnify the importance of small errors, have realistic standards, etc.), as this creates stress and anxiety.

Rest from tasks and demands is important to give the body a break (as well as the mind). Try to have a proportion of each day, week, and year as 'down-time' or non-work time, and if you have gone through a demanding time, give yourself some time to rest and have a break. It is best to avoid using alcohol to help you cope.

TRY TO HAVE A PROPORTION OF EACH DAY, WEEK, AND YEAR AS 'DOWN-TIME'.

*If you are experiencing anxiety that significantly affects your relationships or your ability to work/study, these strategies may not be sufficient, and you might also require professional help. There is a list of further resources on how to seek help at the end of this guide.



UNDERSTAND AND ANALYSE YOUR ANXIETY

To help manage your anxiety, you can begin by trying to learn as much as possible about it and how it affects you. Try to understand the typical ways you react and behave when you become anxious. Look for patterns in when you feel anxious and identify the specific situations or triggers that are making you stressed or anxious. To help you understand your anxiety, keep a record of your anxiety levels and the activities/events that go with these.

In addition to analysing your experience of anxiety, it is a good idea to learn about the nature of anxiety more generally, so you can understand it better. All this learning provides the foundation for changing thoughts and behaviours that are contributing to, and maintaining, anxiety.

TACKLE YOUR THOUGHTS

Thoughts play a very important role in anxiety, so working on these will often pay off. The first step is to identify the thoughts, beliefs, or images that are responsible for your anxiety (e.g. by learning common types of thoughts associated with anxiety, recording samples of your 'self-talk' during anxiety). It is also recommended that you try using a self-help book based on cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) principles. CBT helps people to change thoughts and behaviours that contribute to anxiety. Such a book will be particularly helpful if you find it difficult to identify your thoughts that are making you anxious. Some suitable books are listed at the end of this guide.

Once you have identified the thoughts responsible for your anxiety, there are several approaches you can take. One is to consider how *helpful* your thoughts are in terms of your anxiety, and try to deal with them accordingly. For example, when feeling anxious, try asking yourself whether your thoughts right now are helping your anxiety or not. You might also want to write a list of the ways that a thought helps or worsens your anxiety. As a general strategy, it is a good idea to ask yourself whether the *typical* ways you think are helpful to your anxiety or not.

Another approach is to *critique* your thoughts: try evaluating your anxious thoughts to see how realistic or accurate they are (e.g. by looking at the evidence, re-examining their actual likelihood, etc.) and try challenging your anxious thoughts by asking "Can I identify any patterns of unhelpful thinking?" For example, are you jumping to conclusions because you assume you know what someone else is thinking (mind reading) or what is going to happen in the future (predicting the future)? After you have evaluated your anxious thoughts, try developing more realistic or helpful thoughts to use as substitutes, then find ways to strengthen your new, helpful ways of thinking (e.g. by frequently re-reading lists of new thoughts, by practicing 'answering back' to anxious thoughts).

A third approach is problem solving: if a worry comes into your head, start by asking yourself whether it is a problem you can actually solve. If anxiety is caused by a problem situation, try to identify as many options as possible for solving the problem, consider the chances that each will help, choose the preferred option, then make a plan to implement it. If this doesn't work, go back to the list and try another option.



FACE WHAT MAKES YOU ANXIOUS

Although it is natural to avoid situations that cause anxiety, this doesn't help in the long run. Try to expose yourself to what makes you anxious in a systematic, gradual set of steps that you tackle one at a time. This can help change the thoughts and beliefs that underlie your anxiety. It can also help to enlist a family member or friend to help you face anxiety-provoking situations. Lastly, when feeling anxious, try visualising yourself successfully coping with the situation you feel anxious about.

IMPROVE INTERPERSONAL SKILLS AND SEEK SOCIAL SUPPORT

Some anxiety can stem from problems with other people. For this reason, developing certain skills can help - in particular: learning assertiveness skills; learning to say "no" to some requests (e.g. a task that will overwhelm you); improving general social skills (e.g. communication, handling criticism, etc.); and learning how to resolve interpersonal conflicts as they come up.

While some people can contribute to anxiety, other people can play an important role in managing or overcoming anxiety. It is a good idea to seek support from friends, family, or others. More specifically, it can help to talk about your problems and feelings with a trusted person who will listen and understand. In telling someone you trust about your problems, let that person know how they can help you. In general, avoid isolating yourself.

IT IS A GOOD IDEA TO LEARN ABOUT THE NATURE OF ANXIETY SO YOU CAN UNDERSTAND IT BETTER.



LIVE A HEALTHY LIFESTYLE

There are a number of lifestyle habits that can help anxiety.

These are:

- engage in regular aerobic exercise (e.g. walk, jog)
- spend time in contact with nature
- spend more time outdoors
- try to maintain a regular sleep pattern and practice good sleep hygiene (habits that promote healthy sleep including things such as improving your sleeping environment, relaxing your mind, and avoiding drugs)
- get enough sleep
- have regular leisure time (e.g. pursuing a hobby)
- try to change your life towards a healthy balance of work and non-work activities
- regularly spend time achieving relaxation, using a method that works for you (e.g. being near running water, listening to a relaxation CD, etc.)
- eat regular meals
- reduce or eliminate your use of alcohol, marijuana, and any other illicit drugs (e.g. amphetamines).



SHIFT YOUR PERSPECTIVE

It can be helpful to change your usual perspectives. For example, if you are constantly dwelling on past negative experiences, try instead to consider what learning you can take from these experiences. Consider also placing value on 'being' and the process of doing things – not just on the product or accomplishment. Try letting go of the idea that your worth is determined by what you achieve or accomplish. More broadly, try to find meaningful purposes and values in your life, and prioritise these in your actions.

BE PREPARED FOR ANXIETY

There are several useful strategies you can use related to preparation for future situations. In particular, consider developing a set of coping strategies (e.g. based on what has worked in the past or new ideas that could help). One example of a coping strategy is to generate some helpful thoughts in advance of anxious situations, and say these to yourself at those times (e.g. "Other people have managed with my problems, so I can too", "I'll never be perfect, just like everyone else", "This is difficult, but I have got through it before").

Your set of coping strategies may include items in this guide, or other things you have found that help. Once you have developed a set of coping strategies, you may want to carry with you a list of those things that may help if you become frightened or anxious (e.g. strategies, alternative thoughts). This can help you approach situations in your life with greater confidence, and can serve as handy reminders in a time of need.

TRY TO FIND MEANINGFUL PURPOSES AND VALUES IN YOUR LIFE, AND PRIORITISE THESE IN YOUR ACTIONS.

CULTIVATE ACCEPTANCE

Most of the strategies in this guide involve trying to prevent or reduce anxiety in some way. Sometimes, however, 'fighting' against anxiety is not possible or helpful. It can help to accept situations that cause anxiety if they can't be changed, to accept some amount of anxiety, and to find ways to let go of your need to control. You can practice acceptance by making yourself comfortable, taking a deep breath, letting it out slowly, letting your tummy muscles sag, giving way and trying to feel a willingness to accept.

Although uncertainty often contributes to anxiety, it is helpful to accept that there will be uncertainty and questions without immediate answers. Try also to practise accepting uncertainty (e.g. by not responding to the thoughts and feelings that go with it, recognising it is part of life, bringing your attention to the present). All these efforts towards acceptance can make a difference to how much you are bothered by anxiety.



RESOURCES FOR PROFESSIONAL HELP

If you are experiencing anxiety that **significantly** affects your relationships or your ability to work/study, you might be best off seeking professional help.

Your family doctor or general practitioner can refer you to appropriate help. Alternatively, you might want to use one of the services below.

BEYONDBLUE

Find a Professional service

beyondblue.org.au/get-support/find-a-professional

This provides links to directories of a range of health professionals and services that can help with anxiety. It also has information on the cost of getting treatment and how to prepare for your appointment.

T 1300 224 636 (this number offers support as well as for finding professional help)

AUSTRALIAN PSYCHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Find A Psychologist service

psychology.org.au/FindaPsychologist

T 1800 333 497

SELF-HELP BOOKS FOR ANXIETY BASED ON COGNITIVE BEHAVIOUR THERAPY (CBT)

Antony MM, Swinson RP. *The shyness & social anxiety workbook: Proven techniques for overcoming your fears*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications Inc; 2000.

Kennerley, H. *Overcoming anxiety: A self-help guide using cognitive behavioral techniques*. London, UK: Robinson, 2009.

Leahy, RL. *Worry cure: Stop worrying and start living*. London, UK: Piatkus, 2006.

Rapee RM. *Overcoming shyness and social phobia: A step by step guide*. Killara, NSW, Australia: Lifestyle Press; 1998.

HOW THIS GUIDE WAS DEVELOPED

The strategies listed in this guide have been rated by at least 80% of a group of 83 international experts in anxiety as *very likely* or *likely* to be helpful in reducing mild levels of generalised anxiety, social anxiety, or non-specific anxiety. The experts were researchers and clinicians who specialise in anxiety, as well as people who have experienced anxiety problems themselves. The strategies came from a very large pool of items that were identified after a systematic search of books, websites, and other sources for anything that has been recommended for helping anxiety. Details of the methodology can be found in Morgan, A. J., Chittleborough, P., & Jorm, A. F. (2016). Self-help strategies for sub-threshold anxiety: A Delphi consensus study to find messages suitable for population-wide promotion. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 206, 68-76.

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TRY TO MAINTAIN A REGULAR SLEEP PATTERN AND PRACTICE GOOD SLEEP HYGIENE (HABITS THAT PROMOTE HEALTHY SLEEP)
