

## ***Quick Tools for Managing Anxiety***

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There has recently been a significant increase in symptoms of anxiety among people of all ages. I have put together this brief summary of quick tools that are easily used to decrease the symptoms to help friends and colleagues and clients fairly easily reduce the discomfort.

Anxiety producing brain (memory) pathways get “kindled” at the neurotransmitter level so they get fired super-quickly and strongly. In anxious moments you cease to be living in the “executive” part of your brain and instead live from your “reptilian” primitive brain. Your body is truly in flight/fight/freeze mode even though that is not at all necessary. Here are several ways to disrupt the thinking errors and get back into living in reality in the current moment:

Remember that a collection of small events in a day that are seemingly innocuous can coalesce to bring you to an **anxiety “boiling point”** making you more vulnerable to your core worries.

It is important to have a **grounding statement** you can repeat like a mantra, your own version of “Though I feel anxious I am safe and nothing bad is happening or going to happen. My worry is a thinking error that will pass.” Remind yourself that though the feeling seems intolerable, you can tolerate it.

Have an arsenal of strategies that can be used together, or in progression, to divert your mind from perseverating in thoughts and worries that escalate your mood into higher levels of anxiety:

- **Assess level of anxiety on a scale of 1 to 10.** Re-assess periodically to note if the strategies are working.
- Focus on **breathing**. Keep to a slow and steady pace. Count 1, 2, 3, 4 to inhale. Pause and count 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7. Then exhale, counting 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8. If possible just focus on this disciplined breathing as long as possible. Not only does this distract you from the anxiety, it also changes the carbon

dioxide balance in your blood and is calming. When we are anxious we tend to over-breathe and have too much oxygen in our blood.

- **Thought-stopping**. Try to stop a line of thought that will only lead to more worry. There is an old saying: “Depression is living in the past, anxiety is living in the future, and peace of mind is living in the present moment.” You might find that counting or reciting a meditation phrase is a way to stop a worrisome pathway of thought. (e.g. “Be here now.” “Don’t engage with that thought.”)
- **Thought distraction**: try to focus on some other topic. If possible, watch television or read a book or listen to music or NPR. Have a fantasy if possible – some mild topic that is pleasant. Have a fantasy conversation with someone you would relish speaking with. Think back on a particularly successful accomplishment. Dwell in a pleasant memory or imagined pleasant activity.

If you are too overwhelmed by anxiety to occupy yourself with other thoughts, push yourself to be anchored in the moment by going through this exercise: “Five things I see right now are.... Four things I hear right now are.... Three things I will touch right now are .... Two odors I smell right now are... The taste on my tongue right now is...”

- **Practice “Gratitudes” and appreciative living** saying to yourself all the things you are grateful for at the moment, even the smallest things. “I am grateful for this comfortable chair. I am grateful that I can hear the dog’s toenails clicking on the wooden floor right now. I am grateful to be getting healthier. I am grateful that I had such a good conversation earlier today...” Do this until you are so bored with it that your mind begins to wander into even more pleasing things.
- Guide yourself through **systematic deep relaxation and visualization**. Starting at your feet, go through the full flexing and full release of each set of muscles, all the way up to your eye-lids. Concentrate on getting a slow and steady breathing pattern and then mentally take yourself to a favorite place, perhaps lying out in the sun. Get all of your senses alive to that imagined setting. What does the sunshine feel like falling on your relaxed face and body? What do you hear in the distance? What is the smell of the fresh air? What views are most pleasing? The more you practice this the more effective it will be. Eventually you will be able to close your eyes for a few moments in any setting and take yourself to this safest and most pleasing spot, and your entire body and mind will slip quickly into this relaxed state.
- Practice **mindfulness** in this relaxed state. The book ***“The Power of Now”*** will be helpful in developing this. In a relaxed state you can take some distance from yourself and observe yourself without having to pass judgment, take action, or feel distress. Let your thoughts come and go as though they are

clouds passing in a mostly blue sky. Notice them but don't be activated by them.

- There are some **prescription medications** and naturopathic **remedies** for anxiety. Keep them in your pack so that you are always sure you have them with you to use if needed.

You are not alone in needing to manage anxiety. As many as one in four of us need to learn these techniques in order to feel that we control anxiety instead of it controlling us. Practice will let you know the progression of these activities that is most effective for you.