

## MANAGING ANXIETY IN TROUBLED TIMES (COVID-19 AND OTHER CRISES)

**PLEASE NOTE:** *if you have mental health issues, severe sleep disruption, worsening of depression, or suicidal thoughts, you need to seek professional help and should not rely on the advice below.*

**Anxiety** is a set of emotions, a state of disquiet, worry, inner turmoil. It is sometimes accompanied by physical symptoms, uncontrolled or troubled thoughts, and/or other manifestations. Potential coping strategies to choose from are outlined below.

There is

- **Baseline anxiety**, which is always present, can be useful and adaptive to identify signals in our environment as potentially dangerous and help us avoid them
- **Situational anxiety** arises during specific events or life changes and escalates in a sudden sharp peak – such as during a panic attack.

### Productive Coping Methods

- 1. Aerobic sport, rhythmic movement** to perform at home: walking in place or on a treadmill, sit-ups, simple gymnastics (lots of YouTube videos can be used for that). This leads to the production of endorphins and serves as a distraction, helping you work through stress hormones, reduce your overall tension, and improve your mood and sleep. It's more important to do it regularly than for long stretches; even 10-15 minutes daily would be effective.
- 2. Meditation, relaxation, stretching exercises.** In a state of anxiety, your brain needs help to quiet down. Meditation does not work equally well or right away for everyone; nevertheless, it is worth trying again and again. There are apps and online videos that can be used as aids.
- 3. Body stimulation.** Your body is a good outlet for breaking the anxiety cycle. Anything that engages the body would help: showering, taking a bath, physical activity, massage, sex, cooking, making dough, working with clay, etc.
- 4. Supportive social network.** Research shows that social support helps ward off negativity and even pain. Weak social connections are more important than strong ones, since people in your immediate circle are already overloaded with information, while people somewhat farther removed can bring in something new.
- 5. Psychotherapy.** If there is a hotline or a support program at your workplace, do use it. There are also hotlines and consultation services offered by local authorities, religious organizations, charities, and others. It would not hurt to talk to a specialist, especially when your baseline anxiety is high.
- 6. Psychological hygiene.** Allot 30 minutes to catch up with the news in the morning and in the evening and try to refrain from updates for the rest of the day. Stay away from any acquaintances who tend to spread panic or hostile opinions/emotions. Try to stop your close family members or friends from using you as an outlet for their negativity or fear; they are adults and should be able to deal with these without using others as a crutch.
- 7. Distractions.** Some areas of the brain get overstimulated due to anxiety. It's important to engage other brain areas to redistribute the energy. Distractions could include neutral conversations, watching a movie, listening to music, cleaning, household chores, or other absorbing activities.
- 8. Fluid intake.** Dehydration is known to increase anxiety. 1.5-2 liters of clear non-caffeinated fluids per day, or 0.5-1 cup per hour during waking time, should be adequate.
- 9. Control of communications.** Detox periods are needed both for online and offline communication, from social networks to family contacts, if possible. This should be carefully

balanced to avoid social isolation; if you feel lonely, you should seek human contact when feasible.

**10. Rituals.** Routines are important and have a calming effect during crises. If you have obsessive-compulsive tendencies, you will be tempted to overdo rituals, and this should be monitored with the help of a professional.

**11. Anti-stress crafts.** If there is something you know how to do well with your hands, be it crafts, cooking, or any other creative activity, it would serve as a relaxant and activate the areas of the brain responsible for creative expression. Thirty to forty minutes of such activity will slow your pulse and breathing, lower blood pressure and relax tense muscles.

**12. Mental training.** It's important to learn to wait anxiety out while you do nothing; it will decrease. Improve your inner dialogue skills, arguing with the anxious thoughts.

**13. Humor** helps to accept a situation and activate the brain areas that decrease anxiety. Psychologists consider humor to be one of the strongest coping mechanisms.

**14. Helping others.** Providing support to those in need, be it food, conversation, or physical assistance, can take you out of focusing on yourself and help do some good for the community. Volunteering is an important and gratifying method of coping with crises.

### **Potentially Harmful Coping Methods That Should Be Avoided**

**1. Alcohol** is a known depressant and a diuretic. While it helps achieve immediate short-term relaxation, it builds up anxiety long-term and leads to dehydration.

**2. Sugary foods and drinks** may lead to a cycle of "eating to cover anxiety". High levels of blood glucose may also in some cases lead to increases in stress hormones in the bloodstream.

**3. Psychoactive substances and stimulants** (coffee, tea, energy drinks) lead to a burst of stress-related hormones and neuromodulators. Those with high baseline anxiety should avoid these altogether.

**4. Being plugged into the news cycle** and receiving constant updates on the spreading panic is associated with feeling helpless. Anxiety increases with the sense of total lack of control.

**5. Homeopathy, acupuncture, other methods not supported by clinical evidence** (unless you've tried them already and found them effective for you personally) are not proven to be effective and do not work for everyone.

### **Grounding Techniques to Cope With A Panic Attack**

#### **1. Breathing**

- *Slowing down your breathing*, even if it feels like it should be accelerated instead. Aim for shallow breathing and control of every intake and release of breath.

- *Breathing into a plastic bag* will reduce hyperventilation and restore the balance of oxygen and carbon dioxide in the bloodstream. This, in turn, will lead to a positive feedback loop that lowers your heart rate and reduces panic.

- *Breathing following the 4-7-8 method*: Start slowly counting, inhale slowly on the count of 1-2-3-4, hold your breath on the count of 1-2-3-4-5-6-7, and exhale on the count of 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8. As few as 5-7 such exercises will reduce hyperventilation.

- *Slow inhalation through the nose followed by the release of air through the mouth* in a blowing or whistling manner. Ten to fifteen repetitions of this exercise will reduce hyperventilation.

#### **2. Supportive posture**

- Stand up or sit with both feet placed firmly on the ground. Use an inner "scanner" to go over the entire body and register the sensation in every part of the core and every limb.

#### **3. Forced engagement of cognitive powers**

- When emotions run high, the cognitive part of the brain is losing the competition to the emotional part. To restore balance, you can use math exercises (counting by 7's: 0, 7, 14, 21...), simple observational exercises (look around and name five blue objects; five round objects; etc.);

or pretend to be a witness at a crime scene who needs to give an accurate description of all the details.

#### **4. Rhythm**

- Cross your arms and drum your fingertips on your collarbone; or hug yourself tightly and swing from side to side. These activities are sometimes intuitively used for grounding oneself.

#### **5. Call a friend**

- Make arrangements with a friend you can call in case of a panic attack to talk about neutral subjects for 10–20 minutes. You can also just call someone who's known to be chatty, if the time of day is appropriate.

#### **6. Intense physical activity**

- The goal is to spend a lot of energy and to tire yourself out fast, doing something at the limit of your physical ability. Run around the house, do sit-ups or push-ups, pound a pillow, so that you are completely out of breath for 3-4 minutes after the exercise.

#### **7. Removing the brakes**

- Perform a theatrical hysterics session for 8–15 minutes (preferably when you are alone): Wring your hands, cry, scream, roll on the floor, until completely spent and unable to continue.

### **Other Coping Techniques**

**1. Make a list of anxiety triggers.** Observe yourself closely and record everything that throws you off balance. This might help you process events later, so instead of triggering an immediate reaction, you will think: "Okay, this was a trigger that increased my anxiety. It will pass."

**2. Write out a crisis checklist/backup plan** as a letter to yourself, which would contain the following:

- Signs of crisis: How to determine that the time has come to activate the plan
- What helped in previous crises
- What did not help in previous crises
- List of people you can rely on and would like to contact & their phone numbers
- Instruction to self: what steps to take, where are the things that support you, what actions you are planning to take and in what order
- Supportive language directed at yourself

**3. Build self-support.** It helps to admit what exactly is going on without devaluing yourself: if you're scared, say "I'm scared" rather than "no, it's really not so bad." Make a list of things, people, and actions that bring you joy and relief – a minimum of 20 points that could include anything at all.

You can check your anxiety level weekly or more often using tests that are available online.

### **YOU'RE STRONGER THAN YOU THINK!**

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