

# How to Cope with Anxiety

A PUBLICATION OF CBT PROFESSIONALS

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# 1. Coping Skills for Anxiety

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1. Do not let your anxiety control you and affect your choices.
2. If you are experiencing intense physical anxiety symptoms stay where you are, don't escape/run away from the situation. In confronting your fear you give yourself a chance to learn that there is no danger to you.
3. If you are breathing too quickly this can make your symptoms worse. Try a slow-breathing exercise as soon as you can (see explanation below).
4. Remind yourself what is happening – 'this is anxiety'.
5. Remind yourself about the facts 'anxiety attacks are not harmful', 'this is a false alarm'.
6. Ride out your anxiety.
7. Try opening up to your feelings allowing them to be.
8. Ground yourself in the moment. Notice what you can see and hear in the environment around you. Notice you can move your body at the same time that you have this anxiety.
9. As soon as you can, get back to what you were doing and continue with your plan. It can be helpful to remind yourself what this activity contributes to your life or why it is important to help motivate you to keep going. Remind yourself of helpful and encouraging self-talk.
10. Do a breathing exercise – see Page 3 for breathing exercise instructions.
11. Make relaxation a part of your daily life with strategies such as:
  - progressive muscle relaxation – see Page 4 for instructions
  - yoga
  - doing the things you enjoy
  - having a warm bath
  - listening to music, etc.Create your own menu of relaxation strategies.
12. Have healthy lifestyle habits
  - regular exercise such as a brisk walk can help release tension
  - nurture your body with regular healthy meals
  - reduce/avoid alcohol, caffeine, smoking
  - get enough sleep.



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## 2. Breathing Exercise

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Anxiety sufferer's often over-breathe by breathing too quickly. This can change the levels of gases in your bloodstream and when your carbon dioxide levels drop too low, this sets off a chemical chain reaction. This changes the blood flow around your body and can make you feel dizzy, light-headed, nauseous, make your chest feel tight, sensations of pins and needles, or you may feel like you can't breathe. Here is a Breathing exercise to help you manage your breathing rate and help your anxiety:

- Support yourself by sitting down or leaning against something.
- Slowly and gently empty your lungs first before breathing in. Gently push out all the air.
- Pause for 1 or 2 seconds.
- Breathe gently and slowly in through your nose into your lower belly for about 4 seconds.
- Pause for about 1 or 2 seconds.
- Then breathe out through your mouth, slowly, gently for about 4 seconds.
- Pause again before taking another breath.
- Continue slow breathing while you deal with your anxiety.
- Practice slow breathing often, including practicing when you are relaxed so that you are more likely to be able to use it when your anxiety is intense.

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## 3. Progressive Muscle Relaxation Exercise:

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1. Sit in a comfortable chair in a quiet room.
2. Put your feet flat on the floor and rest your hands in your lap.
3. Close your eyes.
4. Do the slow breathing exercise for 3 minutes.
5. After 3 minutes of slow breathing, start the muscle relaxation exercise: tense each of your muscle groups for 10 seconds, then relax for 10 seconds, in the following order:

Hands – clench your hands into fists, then relax;

Lower arms – bend your hands up at the wrists, then relax;

Upper arms – bend your arms up at the elbow, then relax;

Shoulders – lift your shoulders up, then relax;

Neck – stretch your neck gently to the left, then forward, then to the right, then to the back in a slow rolling motion, then relax;

Forehead and scalp – raise your eyebrows, then relax;

Eyes – close your eyes tightly, then relax;

Jaw – clench your teeth, then relax;

Chest – breathe in deeply, then breathe out and relax;

Stomach – pull your tummy in, then relax;

Upper back – pull your shoulders forward, then relax;

Lower back – while sitting, roll your back into a smooth arc, then relax;

Buttocks – tighten your buttocks, then relax;

Thighs – push your feet firmly into the floor, then relax;

Calves – lift your toes off the ground, then relax, and

Feet – gently curl your toes down, then relax.

6. Continue slow breathing for 5 more minutes and enjoy the feeling of relaxation.

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## 4. Psychological Treatments for Anxiety

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If you find after trying these strategies you are still struggling with anxiety, then seeing your GP and seeking a referral to a mental health professional, such as a psychologist is recommended.

There are very effective psychological treatments for anxiety. Below you will find a brief description of two different therapeutic approaches to treating anxiety. By reading these, it will give you an idea of the kinds of exercises you may do when visiting a psychologist.

### **Cognitive Behaviour Therapy [CBT]**

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy is a type of psychotherapy that helps you deal with unhelpful or maladaptive thinking patterns and behaviours that contribute to anxiety. CBT strategies include:

**1. Problem solving** - this involves clarifying your problem, defining it clearly, considering various solutions to the problem, selecting the most promising solution through exploring probable positive and negative outcomes for each solution and considering what resources may be needed/whether it is practical, breaking the solution down into a manageable action plan, carrying it out and assessing the effectiveness of the solution.

It can be helpful to do this process with a mental health professional because they can help you explore options you may not be aware of or think possible due to unhelpful thoughts that may be getting in the way.

**2. Learning breathing and relaxation exercises like the ones in this eBook**, that are designed to help you deal with the anxiety arousal symptoms such as physical tension and a racing heart.

**3. Cognitive restructuring** - this is the process of first identifying what thoughts are automatically occurring in your mind and then secondly, challenging irrational and unhelpful thoughts, re-evaluating them for yourself and developing more helpful, realistic and effective ways of thinking.

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## 4. Psychological Treatments for Anxiety continued...

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This can be achieved by evaluating the evidence for your thought and exploring possible alternative views and determining whether the thought is helpful or useful to you in achieving your goals or in helping you feel better.

**4. Exposure therapy** involves helping you to confront feared situations or experiences by exposing yourself gradually to increasingly anxiety provoking situations and experiences until you are coping and the feared situation is no longer feared.

### **Acceptance and Commitment Therapy [ACT]**

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy or 'ACT' is a mindfulness-based behavioural therapy. The aim of ACT is to create a rich, full and meaningful life whilst accepting that pain is an inevitable part of human life.

ACT teaches you psychological skills (mindfulness skills) to deal with distressing or unwanted private experiences (thoughts and feelings), which work to change your relationship with these thoughts and feelings in such a way that they have less influence over you and your choices.

ACT helps you to clarify what is truly important to you in the big picture and what you want to stand for in life. It focuses on taking effective action as guided by your values through being psychologically flexible and fully present in the here and now.

ACT identifies the problem of anxiety as being caught up in the struggle of trying to get rid of or avoid anxiety. Your anxiety gets worse as you get caught in a vicious cycle of becoming anxious about your anxiety. Often the focus on getting rid of anxiety can lead to behaviours that are harmful in the long-term such as using substances as a way to control anxiety that may result in drug or alcohol abuse or avoiding situations that may result in experiences such as social isolation.

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## 4. Psychological Treatments for Anxiety continued...

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**There are six core processes in ACT:**

- 1. Cognitive Defusion** – this helps you to separate from your thoughts and learn to perceive your thoughts as nothing more or less than just thoughts, rather than them being the literal truth, facts or rules you must obey.
- 2. Acceptance** – this principle helps you to learn to make room and open up to private experiences such as difficult feelings, sensations and urges, allowing them to come and go without struggle, avoidance or overly focusing on them.
- 3..Contact with the Present Moment** - this involves learning how to bring your full awareness to your here and now experience being able to attend to and engage in what you are doing.
- 4. The Observing Self** – this is a sense of self that you learn to access and from this perspective you are able to observe your experience without getting caught up in it.
- 5. Clarifying Values** – this helps you to identify what is truly important to motivate you, guide your goals and behaviour and give a sense of vitality in living by your values, even when dealing with the difficulties of life.
- 6. Committed Action** – this helps you to set clear goals, make committed action plans and engage in effective action to improve your life situation.



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