A stylized illustration of a woman with long dark hair, wearing an orange top, sitting cross-legged on a patterned rug in a living room. She has her eyes closed and hands resting on her knees, appearing to be in a meditative state. The room is decorated with framed art on the wall, a large potted plant, a cactus, and a striped rug. The entire scene is rendered in a monochromatic orange-brown color palette.

The Ultimate Guide to Taming Anxiety— COVID & Non-COVID

Six Effective Tools For Managing Anxiety



What Exactly Is Anxiety?

Anxiety, according to the American Psychological Association, is “an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts and physical changes like increased blood pressure.”

That’s a fine definition, but it also sounds a bit like fear. So how to distinguish them?

One of the ways to describe and distinguish anxiety from fear is this example:

Fear is what happens when you’re crossing the crosswalk just outside of my offices and a car comes barreling around the corner and is 10 feet away from hitting you. That surge of energy through your body is plain old primal fear. Anxiety is what happens when you’re crossing that same crosswalk and you see a car 20 blocks away and you start worrying if you’ll be able to cross the crosswalk in time and if that car will hit you if you don’t. Anxiety is fear of perceived threats in the future. Fear is a response to actual threat in the present. Both have physiological impacts. But one is definitely more head-driven. That’s anxiety.

Anxiety is a completely normal and expected response to a crisis. To ensure our survival, our brains are wired to feel anxious when we encounter uncertainties and threats. You know, fight or flight.

During this health crisis, our anxiety protects us and keeps us alert so that we maintain physical distance, wash our hands often and for 20 seconds, and keep our hands off our faces. For those who are ill or without financial resources right now, appropriate anxiety motivates us to take action to find what we need to survive.

Anxiety becomes problematic and unhealthy for us when it takes hold, overwhelms our coping mechanisms, and keeps us from functioning at capacity.

Although we can’t control much of what is happening in our world right now, we don’t want to be overwhelmed and paralyzed by anxiety. We do have control over how we manage it.

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Tool #1 For Anxiety: Ground Yourself & Calm Your Nervous System.

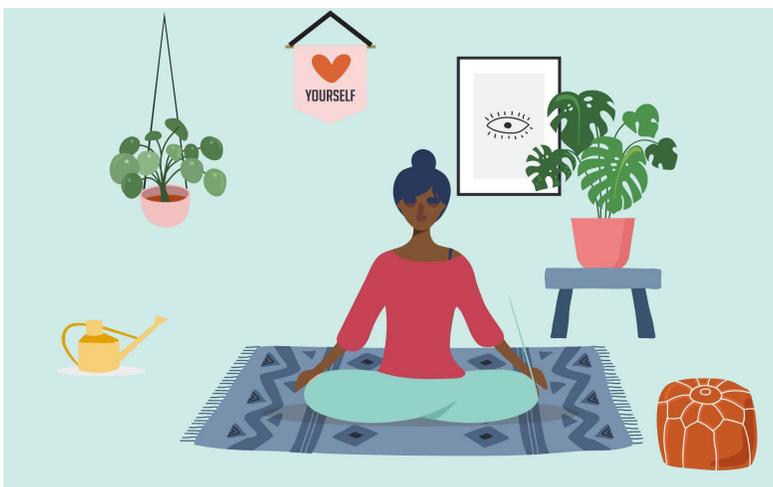
When you're feeling anxious, your autonomic nervous system (ANS) is aroused and activates your fight, flight, or freeze impulses, catalyzing a whole cascade of physiological symptoms throughout your body.

One of the ways you can begin to calm your nervous system and ease your anxiety is through some physical grounding and breath-driven self-soothing.

An incredibly effective tool is a simple presence and breathing exercise:

Sit comfortably in a chair or on the couch. Let your eyes close and rest your hands on your legs or on the furniture in whatever way feels comfortable to you. Slowly, and with your lips slightly open, begin taking a deep breath in, pushing your lower abdomen out with air, bringing oxygen to the bottom of your lungs. As you breathe in, notice your feet on the floor, your butt on the cushion, your back against the furniture. On your exhale, release your breath slowly — a few counts longer than your inhale — and continue bringing your awareness to any sensations or sounds you notice — maybe your fingers on the fabric of your jeans, the sound of traffic outside, the breeze coming in through the window... Breathe in and breath out slowly, noticing all the slight sensations around you for 10-15 slow, mindful breaths, allowing your body to relax and your mind to center. And finally, when you're ready, come back to the room.

The benefit to this particular tool is that it helps bring oxygen to our brain and calms our autonomic nervous system, allowing us to relax and access more parts of ourselves and to think and act from a more grounded, integrated place.



Did You Know?

Anxiety disorders are one of the most common mental illnesses in the country, affecting as many as 40 million people, or 18% of the population.

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Tool #2 For Anxiety: Untwist Your Thinking & Challenge Your Anxiety-Provoking Thoughts.

If you pay attention to what you're saying to yourself when you catch yourself feeling anxious, I'm going to guess you're probably saying something scary to yourself. Again, anxiety scans our lives and futures and tries to warn us of possible threats, so it's pretty masterful in triggering scary thoughts.

A really great tool to use when we are struggling with scary, catastrophic future-oriented thoughts is to untwist your thinking with a version of questioning informed by The Work by Byron Katie. Byron Katie is a spiritual teacher, author, and creator of The Work, which, according to her website is "a way of identifying and questioning the thoughts that cause all the anger, fear, depression, addiction, and violence in the world."

The Work is available for free on her website and while you can review all the steps of her process there, here is a simplified version of her process consisting of identifying and naming the anxiety-provoking thought, asking questions to test its reality, and turning the thought inside out by finding four reasons why that thought may not be fully true.

For example, asking questions to yourself in regards to catastrophic future-oriented thoughts like—can you absolutely, 100% beyond a shadow of a doubt concretely know that what you are thinking is true? Then unpack and untwist this thought—what is the opposite of that thought?

When you challenge the truth of the thoughts that are creating your anxiety and literally untwist them by finding reasons why the opposite might be true, you can create a bit more flexibility in your thinking. And since thoughts can generate feelings, when you create more spaciousness and flexibility in your thinking, you can often ease your anxiety.



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Tools #3 & #4 For Anxiety: Halt Emotional Flooding Through Mental Distraction.

Have you ever been so wrapped up in your anxiety that you started to become emotionally flooded? Slightly short of breath, totally in your story, detached from the room you're sitting in and the person you're with because of the intensity of your feelings?

You may have been **emotionally flooding**.

Again, when you're anxious and perceiving threats, your autonomic nervous system is aroused and your body becomes flooded with a cocktail of adrenaline and cortisol. This can make it hard to think clearly and to maintain focus and react rationally. This is emotional flooding.

Two ways you can interrupt this flooding and help yourself get centered and present is through the following tools, both of which were inspired by my understanding of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy.

Counting Colors.

If you catch yourself flooding or perhaps just caught in the loop of an anxiety-provoking thought, tell yourself to look around you in whatever room or environment you may be in, and try to scan the surroundings to find and count aloud five colors of a certain shade.

The reason why this tool is effective is that it pulls your mind away from the intensity of the internal experience you're having and forces your attention to be external, literally scanning your surroundings and focusing on a task, which can help reduce the emotional flooding you may have been experiencing.

Counting Backwards. With a Twist.

Another great tool to use on yourself (or to use with someone else who is anxious and emotionally flooded) is to count backwards. But not just any counting backwards — anyone can basically recite 100, 99, 98, 97, etc. without much concentration or effort.

What we want you to do instead is to pick a big number like 637 and then pick an odd, random number like 19.5 and start counting backwards to zero from 637 by 19.5.

(Did you just frown in concentration reading those words? That's exactly the point!)

Focused efforts to actually try and do that math engages your brain in a way that can distract from the anxiety and flooding you may have been experiencing. Try it next time you're emotionally flooded in any way, whether with anxiety, or maybe anger at a co-worker. It's a subtle, invisible tool that can be wonderful for emotional regulation.

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Tool #5 For Anxiety: Stop Feeding the Anxiety

It's bad out there, but don't feed the beast with media.

Turn off the 24-hour news cycle that endlessly repeats information that you could gather in 10 minutes, shows the scariest facts and videos available, and then supplements this with panels of talking heads making predictions about things that are unknown, or partaking in redundant discussions. Remember that there's a news business, all competing for ads and monitoring us for cues, such as anxiety, to know how to pitch their headlines and stories. Let it go. Keep your viewing time limited and try to do it in only one place, so the rest of your living space can be for work, pleasure, and relaxation.

On the Internet and on social media feeds, try to ignore endless data, panicky posts, and posts about conspiracies that only agitate. Right now, try to focus more narrowly on anything about COVID-19 that offers practical advice about physical and psychological health, or crucial data that can help you calculate your own personal response to local circumstances.

Look for reliable sources that report national and world news in 20 minutes or less. Pay attention to local news to stay abreast of public health advisories. Try to quickly gather the information you need and then turn your attention elsewhere. Definitely spare your children the horror of the endless TV depictions of the hot spots and projections about the number of deaths.

To evaluate news reports, consider asking yourself these three questions:

1. Did this report help or enrich me in any way?
2. How did I feel before I watched it?
3. How did I feel after?

Then, adjust your viewing habits as needed.



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Tool #6 For Anxiety: Endless Worry

One major response to anxiety is endless worry, going over and over all the possible negative outcomes. It's based on the illusion that if we keep thinking about things, we'll eventually find some sort of simple solution. It doesn't work that way. Consider replacing this obsessive thinking with limited "worry time."

Take an hour (or less) to list your worries. Use two columns. One column lists the things you can control. The other lists the things you can't control. Once the list is complete, spend some time making plans about how to address the issues you can control. After this initial plan is complete, set aside 10 to 15 minutes a day (not right before going to bed) to refine your plans about how to address the issues you can control and to remind yourself that the others are out of your control.

If you awaken in the morning feeling anxious and worried, don't let yourself obsess. Get out of bed right away, open the window, look outside, and start doing something. Get busy.

A Reminder

Anxiety is our friend when we face adversity, but a beast when it gets a hold on us. We can and must tame anxiety in order to preserve our health, security, and well being. As we cope with our current hardships, it's important to remind ourselves that there's a light at the end of the tunnel.

But if you suspect your anxiety is more than occasional, everyday anxiety and it's starting to impact the quality of your life (your relationships, your sleep and health, your job performance and your ability to move in the direction of your dreams), please get professional help or utilize your employee assistance program for guidance and support to get you started on the right path.

[HERE ARE A LIST OF RESOURCES](#)

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