

## Understanding and Managing Anxiety

### Understanding Anxiety

It is natural to worry and feel anxious during stressful situations and uncertain times. However, anxiety can become a problem when feelings of intense, excessive and persistent worry and fear begins taking over your life and prevents you from doing everyday activities. Some common anxiety signs and symptoms include:

- Feelings of apprehension or dread
- Restlessness or the inability to relax
- Anticipating the worst and being watchful for signs of danger
- Trouble concentrating or thinking about anything other than the present worry
- Having difficulty controlling worry
- Having the urge to avoid things that trigger anxiety
- Uncomfortable physical symptoms, such as
  - Pounding or racing heart
  - Shortness of breath
  - Sweating
  - Trembling or shakiness
  - Muscle tension
  - Headaches
  - Becoming easily fatigued
  - Sleep difficulties
  - Gastrointestinal problems

You may also experience panic attacks which are recurrent episodes of sudden feelings of intense anxiety and fear or terror that reach a peak within minutes.

If you feel that excessive anxiety or worry is becoming a problem for you, it might be worth trying to find ways to limit the time you spend worrying, and taking steps to manage your well-being.

### Strategies to Manage Anxiety

**Practice regular relaxation and/or meditation.** Relaxation strategies and meditation can help reduce or manage your levels of stress and anxiety. There are many options to consider:

- Deep breathing (also called diaphragmatic breathing or belly breathing): When you're anxious, your breathing becomes faster and shallower. Try deliberately slowing down your breathing. Count to four as you breathe in slowly through the nose, pause, and then count to four as you breathe out slowly through the mouth.
- Progressive muscle relaxation: By alternately tensing and then releasing different muscle groups in your body, you release muscle tension in your body. As your body relaxes, your mind will follow.
- Formal meditation practice such as yoga or mindfulness meditation.
- Relaxation through any activity that you find enjoyable and relaxing (e.g., listening to music, taking a bubble bath).

**Be careful with the "What ifs" and stay in the present moment.** Our stress and anxiety generally cause us to focus on negatives and trigger "What if" questions and worst case scenarios. Anxiety can make your thoughts live in a terrible future that hasn't happened yet. If you find yourself getting stuck on a particular worry, try to bring your attention back to the present moment.

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**Distinguish between solvable and unsolvable worries.** Productive, solvable worries are those you can take action on right away. For example, if you're worried about your bills, you could call your creditors to see about flexible payment options. Unproductive, unsolvable worries are those for which there is no corresponding action, such as "What if I get cancer someday?" or "What if my loved one gets into an accident?"

**Accept that you cannot control everything.** Worrying is often a way we try to predict what the future has in store – a way to prevent unpleasant surprises and control the outcome. The problem is, it doesn't work. Thinking about all the things that could go wrong doesn't make life any more predictable. Focusing on worst-case scenarios will only keep you from enjoying the good things you have in the present. Focus on the things you have the power to change, rather than the circumstances or realities beyond your control. For example, you may not be able to control how severe the COVID-19 outbreak is in your city, but you can take steps to reduce your own personal risk by following precautions and recommendations.

**Take small acts of bravery.** Avoiding what makes you anxious provides some relief in the short term, but can make you more anxious in the long term. Try approaching something that makes you anxious – even in a small way. The way through anxiety is by learning that what you fear isn't likely to happen – and if it does, you'll be able to cope with it. For example, if you are feeling anxious about leaving your house because you're worried you might have a panic attack, start by trying to sit outside on your porch for 5 minutes, then maybe for 10 minutes (and then 15 minutes, etc.), and then maybe try to go for a 5-minute walk around your neighbourhood (and then 10 minutes, 15 minutes, etc.).

**Challenge worries and anxious thoughts.** How you think affects how you feel. Anxiety can make you overestimate how bad the situation can get and underestimate your ability to handle it. Try to think of different interpretations to a situation that's making you anxious, rather than jumping to the worst-case scenario. Challenge your negative thoughts by asking yourself:

- What's the evidence that the thought is true? That it's not true?
- Is there a more balanced, realistic way of looking at the situation?
- What's the probability that what I'm scared of will actually happen? If the probability is low, what are some more likely outcomes?
- Is the thought helpful? How will worrying about it help me and how will it hurt me?
- What would I say to a friend who had this worry?

For example, the worry "What if I get COVID-19 and die?" could be replaced with, "I am taking all of the recommended precautions, I have a good support network, and I am taking steps to stay healthy. This is a stressful situation, but it is likely that I am going to get through this."

**Plan worry time.** It's hard to stop worrying entirely so set aside some time to indulge your worries. Scheduling 10 minutes each day to write down your worries can help stop your worries from taking over at other times.

**Engage in regular self-care.** Keeping active, eating well, getting enough sleep, avoiding excessive substance use (e.g., alcohol, smoking, recreational drugs), staying connected with family and friends, and doing the activities you enjoy are all important for stress management and improving your wellbeing.

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## Suggested Resources for Anxiety

### Web Resources

vancouveranxiety.com  
www.anxietycanada.com  
www.anxietydisordersontario.ca  
www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/Resources/Looking-After-Yourself/Anxiety

### Relaxation Apps

Breathe2Relax  
Headspace  
CALM  
Insight Timer

<http://www.anxietydisordersontario.ca/online-audio-resources/>

Great compiled list of various audio resources for relaxation and meditation

### Books

Mind Over Mood – Dennis Greenberg and Christine Padesky  
The Happiness Trap – Russ Harris

## Resources to help manage COVID-related anxiety

<https://www.camh.ca/en/health-info/mental-health-and-covid-19/>

CAMH has many great resources related to mental health and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Some helpful PDF guides:

- [Living with Worry and Anxiety Amidst Global Uncertainty](#) by Matthew Whalley and Jardeep Kaur
- [Tolerance for Uncertainty: A COVID-19 Workbook](#) by Dr. Sachiko Nagasawa

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