

Managing Anxiety

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Almost everyone has trouble falling asleep sometimes; almost everyone feels occasional concerns about current events. Seeing news reports of natural disasters, beheadings, school shootings, wars, human trafficking, or impending global financial disasters is enough to cause unsettled thoughts in all of us! The challenge occurs when those concerns multiply so much that they become an anxiety disorder.

Emotions can become virtually incapacitating if we don't know how to deal with them. Especially now, we need to know how to manage our emotions so that world crises do not cause us to implode in hopelessness, fear or anxiety.

The DSM-5 states "anxiety disorders include disorders that share features of excessive fear and anxiety and related behavioral disturbances. *Fear* is the emotional response to real or perceived imminent threat, whereas *anxiety* is anticipation of future threat." Anxiety disorders can also occur because of various medical conditions. If you are experiencing anxiety, it is important to see your medical doctor to make sure a medical condition isn't causing your emotional or mental symptoms.

After you've ruled out various physical causes, it might be time to see a mental health specialist such as a psychologist, counselor, or psychiatrist, to learn practical steps you can take to reduce anxiety.

Other possible causes of anxiety:

- Posttraumatic stress
- Chronic relationship problems
- The "rumination gene," discovered by a Yale researcher, this gene is a "variation of a gene known as BDNF that is active in the hippocampus, an area of the brain involved in thinking and memory" (WSJ, January 15, 2008).
- Anything that causes chronic fear
- Distorted God concepts
- Unforgiveness
- Unresolved guilt
- Television/news
- Excessive caffeine
- Medications
- Environmental allergens
- Worry

Worry is often the thought process that fuels anxiety. Regrettably, many people think worry is a good thing! Worry is like climbing into a large hamster wheel—constantly going around and around and going nowhere! “But someone has to worry about what happens to you,” a grandmother might say to a grandchild to demonstrate loving compassion. But that same grandmother might find herself unable to sleep at night when her grandson buys a motorcycle.

Webster’s dictionary defines worry as “mental distress or agitation resulting from concern, usually for something impending or anticipated.” The word “worry” comes from an old Anglo-Saxon word which means “to choke.” A continual habit of worry can result in intense anxiety so intense that it feels like being suffocated by diverse fears and concerns. Choked with anxieties, it becomes increasingly difficult to function in everyday life.

Even if you are one of the people who has a physiological predisposition to anxiety, that is not an excuse to continue obsessing on discouraging, debilitating thoughts. Instead it can be a catalyst to learn new skills to counteract and replace negative thinking. Uncontrolled negative thinking, on the other hand, could increase anxious thought patterns to the point that they become both obsessive and compulsive. [If you are already at that point, please see a mental health professional.]

You’ve probably heard the term “neuroplasticity.” What that describes is the brain’s incredible ability to form new neural connections throughout life when we make conscious, new moment-by-moment choices to retrain our brains. Training our brains includes learning how to recognize when our brains go on autopilot and changing destructive thought patterns as soon as they occur.

One simple technique for beginning effective change is to set aside five to ten minutes each day—at a specific time—to focus on your concerns. When worries, fears and anxieties enter your mind at other times during the day, you can simply remind yourself, “It’s not time to think about that yet.” Train yourself to wait for the time you’ve set aside to think about your concerns, being careful not to expand that time to longer than ten minutes. Delaying anxious thoughts can help you reduce the frequency, intensity and duration of those concerns.

A vital aspect of brain training is learning to recognize an amygdala hijacking when it occurs. Referred to as the emotional center of the brain, the amygdalae can “hijack” the brain’s prefrontal cortex (PFC), resulting in a move from the brain’s CEO of rational response (PFC) to often-overwhelming feelings triggered by anxiety, traumatic memories, etc. You can recognize an amygdala-hijacking when you move into any of the emotional five F’s: Fight, Flight, Freeze, Fornicate or Feed. Activated by any of our five senses, the amygdalae can cause rapid emotional and physiological reactions that can even result in a panic attack.

“Amygdala,” the Greek word for almond, is used to describe two almond-shaped clusters of neurons in the brain. “Amygdala hijack” is a term coined by Daniel Goleman in his 1996 book “Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ.” [It is important to state clearly that I am not a neuroscientist or a

neurosurgeon; I am not a medical doctor. I am a psychotherapist and have attended numerous courses on this topic. However, please consult a medical specialist for a medical description of the brain's complex functions. I am only offering basic thoughts that could be helpful in your everyday life.]

Certainly it is helpful to be able to move quickly if a bull is charging you (the Flight Response); however, any of the Five F's become problematic when they either consciously or unconsciously govern our lives. You might notice the Five F's in one or more areas: when angry outbursts occur frequently (Fight); when you feel like running away from people or problems (Flight), when you "numb out" your emotions to the point that you aren't able to have a normal range of feelings (Freeze); have various sexual compulsions (Fornicate); or when you eat either for comfort or don't feel like eating at all (Feed).

Remember to get a medical evaluation if you are concerned about physical symptoms like chest pains, trembling, excessive sweating, shaking, nausea or abdominal distress. If a thorough medical examination reveals no physical causes, those symptoms could be indicators of anxiety. If so, the following grounding exercises could be helpful in returning your thoughts to your brain's PFC after an amygdala hijacking. As rapidly as you moved from your executive brain to your emotional brain, you can move back into your PFC by utilizing any of the three types of grounding exercises.

Grounding Exercises

Grounding exercises are helpful whenever you feel overwhelmed by traumatic memories, sadness, feelings of anxiety, anger or inexplicable fears. These challenging emotions can be activated by any of your five senses—such as seeing or smelling something that reminds you of past trauma. It only takes a fraction of a second for traumatic memories stored in the brain's emotional regulator, the amygdala, to "hijack" the brain's CEO, the prefrontal cortex (PFC). When a "hijacking" occurs, be alert for any indication of the Five Fs (Fight, Flight, Freeze, Fornicate, or Feed). The presence of one or more "F" indicators is a reminder for you to immediately ground yourself. You can consciously move your thoughts back into your brain's prefrontal cortex as rapidly as they left there (see 2 Corinthians 10:5).

Applying positive self-talk to move out of a "hijacking," you can choose from any of the following grounding exercises to help you live in the here-and-now instead of in past trauma.

1. **Physical Grounding:** if seated, press your hands into the chair/sofa where you're seated and simply notice fabrics, textures, etc.; or stand and observe the sensations of your feet touching the floor. Then, press the palms of your hands together and be aware of the sensation of stretching. Or, try a 4-D exercise—stand up, and take time to fully stretch your body north, south, west, and then east. Another option is to go outside and take a walk, observing where you are, using all five of your senses.
2. **Mental Grounding:** describe shapes or colors in the room or place where you are; count backwards from 100 by 5's; solve a basic math problem; write down a list of things you like to do; recall favorite

places you've visited; name sports teams, dog breeds, types of flowers, birds, etc. Or, imagine a large container with a tightly-fitting lid; quickly open the container and put the distressing thoughts into it, sealing them with the lid, then mentally place that sealed container far away from you. Review the sample positive self-talk statements on this and the following page.

3. **Soothing Grounding:** Instead of allowing intrusive traumatic memories to govern your life or shift your focus to painful feelings, you can think calmly, breathing deeply. You can consciously choose to talk to yourself with kindness and dignity, thinking with a gentle internal voice. You can remind yourself that you have a future and a hope. You can focus on God's promises. For example, the *Lord is gracious, merciful, and full of loving compassion* (Psalm 111:4, Amplified).

What are other ways to reduce anxiety?

- Realize that approximately 80% of the things we worry about will never occur! **Solution** Leave a notepad and pen beside your bed; as you begin each day (or at the end of each day), aggressively list what you are grateful for.
- If you follow local, national and/or world news, **pray** for the people in various news reports rather than allowing fearful thoughts to overtake you.

There are legitimate concerns in the world, but allowing them to cripple us with fear and dread could eventually incapacitate us. We can choose our thoughts as carefully as we choose other areas of life.

For example, we know that consuming a diet high in caloric intake could cause us to gain weight. If we discover that is the cause of weight gain, we might choose various healthy ways to reduce our caloric intake. Similarly, we can reduce our anxiety intake. Just as reducing calories doesn't mean we stop eating; reducing anxiety doesn't mean we stop thinking or acting. It simply means we **choose meaningful, productive thoughts** that help us get where we need to go.

One challenge to replacing automatic negative thoughts is that people experiencing excessive anxiety cannot even think of new thought patterns that *aren't* negative. Reading the Psalms and Proverbs can provide numerous thoughts to help replace automatic negative thoughts. The psalmist, who experienced a full range of emotions, said this:

When my anxious thoughts multiply within me, Your consolations delight my soul (Psalm 94:19, NASU). That verse in the Amplified version says: *In the multitude of my [anxious] thoughts within me, Your comforts cheer and delight my soul!*

Meditating on specific verses can help:

1. Calm our thoughts.

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid [Jesus, in John 14:27].

2. Consider actions to take, such as writing letters to soldiers, sending care packages, working at a homeless shelter or helping family members of those who are suffering. Action can reduce anxiety. *An anxious heart weighs a man down, but a kind word cheers him up* (Proverbs 12:25, NIV).

In a world of increasing callousness, George Washington Carver's words are worth reviewing: "How far you go in life depends on your being tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving and tolerant of the weak and strong. Because someday in your life you will have been all of these."

3. Open our minds to new emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual possibilities. For example, instead of living in fear and dread, we can take time to **enjoy God's magnificent creation**, and **increase our faith in the living God**.

To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One. Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing (Isaiah 40:25-26, NIV).

4. Instead of allowing ourselves to think the same anxiety-laden thoughts over and over, we can **train our brains** and improve functions in the Dorsal Lateral Prefrontal Cortex (DLPFC) by applying God's Word. Truth applied makes a difference. We can pray specific verses that offer hope.

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. 4 The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. 5 We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:3-5, NIV).

5. Discover new strength and courage.

A final word: Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. 11 Put on all of God's armor so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies of the devil. 12 For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places. 13 Therefore, put on every piece of God's armor so you will be able to resist the enemy in the time of evil. Then after the battle you will still be standing firm (Ephesians 6:10-13, NLT).

Practicing Positive Self-Talk

Often people talk to themselves in a negative way—not at all like they would speak to anyone else. We can all learn to talk to ourselves in a kinder, gentler way than we sometimes do. Think of how you might calm a crying baby—speaking with a soft, soothing voice. Then imagine how you speak to yourself when you feel anxious or sad. Are you harsh or negative when you talk to yourself? The statements on this and the following page can help you develop positive self-talk.

When you feel symptoms of anxiety, fear or worry, how you talk to yourself determines how rapidly you will move beyond difficult emotions or even initial physiological symptoms* of a panic attack [*symptoms such as chest pain and shortness of breath should be evaluated by a medical doctor]. Your proactive mental choices can shorten debilitating symptoms to minutes instead of hours.

Any of the following sample statements and Scripture verses can help you build a positive self-talk “vocabulary.” You can put any of these statements and verses on your phone, laptop or index cards, to use as needed. **You can choose what you think!**

- This feeling is uncomfortable, but I can acknowledge it, face it and move beyond it, trusting in God. He says: *Do not fear, for I am with you; do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, surely I will help you, surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand* (Isaiah 41:10, NASU).

The Lord is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life – of whom shall I be afraid? (Psalm 27:1, NIV)

- I can trust God during this difficult time, even if no one else seems to notice or care.

I call to God; God will help me. At dusk, dawn, and noon I sigh deep sighs – he hears, he rescues. My life is well and whole, secure in the middle of danger even while thousands are lined up against me. God hears it all, and from his judge's bench puts them in their place. But, set in their ways, they won't change; they pay him no mind. And this, my best friend, betrayed his best friends; his life betrayed his word. All my life I've been charmed by his speech, never dreaming he'd turn on me. His words, which were music to my ears, turned to daggers in my heart.

- Pile your troubles on God's shoulders – He'll carry your load, He'll help you out. He'll never let good people topple into ruin. But you, God, will throw the others into a muddy bog, cut the lifespan of assassins and traitors in half.

And I trust in you. (Psalm 55:16-22, The Message)

- I will ask God to show me my root issues or fears and allow Him to heal me from the inside out.

Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way. (Psalm 139:23-24, NASU)

- This will pass.

I sought the Lord, and He answered me, and delivered me from all my fears. (Psalm 34:4, NASU)

- This is just anxiety; I'm not going to let it define me.

In the multitude of my [anxious] thoughts within me, Your comforts cheer and delight my soul! (Psalm 94:19, Amplified)

- I will choose to focus on solutions, not on problems, people, or things I cannot change.

Casting the whole of your care [all your anxieties, all your worries, all your concerns, once and for all] on Him, for He cares for you affectionately and cares about you watchfully. [Psalm 55:22.] (1 Peter 5:7, Amplified)

- I can survive—and thrive!

May the Master take you by the hand and lead you along the path of God's love and Christ's endurance. (2 Thessalonians 3:5, The Message)