



18 Ways to Quiet your Mind

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I come across many people who tell me they overthink. Their mind is one thought racing after another without a break. The thoughts feed off one another and it seems like they won't stop. Often these thoughts seem to have a life of their own. And often they come when we are trying to relax or trying to fall asleep. Usually these thoughts make us feel anxious, worried and fearful. Given the state of the world it is not surprising that so many of us experience this. We have been and still are going through some big disruptive changes in our lives. This is scary. The world does not feel safe. It is natural to some extent that we would feel anxious and scared. But a racing mind is not good for us. It makes us feel awful. No one desires to feel anxious. Anxiety is not good for our health – all our physiological systems are impacted negatively by ongoing fear. And anxiety stops us from being able to solve the very problems we are facing. All these anxious thoughts racing around our heads the whole time are in fact self-sabotaging.



Becoming fearful, anxious, or worried is a normal response to perceived danger. When our brains pick up that things are out of the ordinary and not going well, and hence sense danger, we do get fearful, anxious, and worried. That is what we are designed to do. And our brains have developed to respond to this perception of danger with a fight, flee, or freeze response. Except that fighting, freezing, or fleeing works well for straightforward dangers like being attacked by a sabre-toothed tiger, a mugger, or escaped lion. Those responses do not work so well for the more complex dangers our brains perceive in today's world. Fighting, fleeing, or freezing is not going to help you deal with the Covid-19 pandemic. Those actions also won't help

you find a job if you have lost one, nor will they help you restore your health and livelihood in today's world. The dangers we perceive today are not the simple and straightforward ones of many centuries ago. Similarly, our automatic responses - to fight, flee or freeze - also don't work so well with the complex challenges we face today. Our automatic reactions need to change if we are to manage our lives today.

When the danger is complex and our automatic reactions don't work, we have to engage the deep thinking, creative problem-solving part of the brain if we want to get out of danger. This is the pre-frontal cortex. And in order to engage this part of the brain to do the complex thinking required to find the new and different solutions required for the future, we have to calm the nervous system, and quiet the amygdala (the part of the brain that gets very active with fear and anxiety). The good news is, although engaging the cortex is not the typical automatic response to danger we are born with, we can learn a different response. Our brains can learn new ways to function. When you become anxious and fearful because you perceive complex challenges facing you, you can learn to quiet your mind, engage the part of the brain that solves complex problems and makes decisions, and work out the best way to deal with the danger your brain is picking up.

..... learning to quiet your mind is an important life skill today

I personally believe that learning to quiet your mind and so calm your nervous system is an important life skill today given the complex challenges we all continually face. Of course, there are times when fight or flight or freeze is appropriate. In that case let your brain take over automatically and do what it's designed to do to protect yourself. If those responses clearly don't work though, you need to think differently. And to think differently you need to calm your nervous system and stop the endless stream of scary thoughts.

So how do you do this? One way of course is with substances or actions that can become addictive. Medications, alcohol, illegal substances, and even activities like overworking or over exercising, can be used. However, I am not going to talk about these. I am going to talk about things you can do that don't involve getting yourself addicted to substances or habits that in the long run are most probably not good for you.

..... how to quiet your mind

1. Breathe. Yes, it's very simple but it's very effective. When you get anxious your breathing speeds up and is shallower. Focus on taking slow, deep breaths.
2. Get into nature. Nature has a calming influence on us.
3. Exercise – even 5 minutes can help. This can include yoga and dance.
4. Listen to music – calming music that is. Some research suggests that music leads to fewer neurons firing in the amygdala. Listen closely to the music and focus on it otherwise you can still dwell on the scary thoughts circulating through your mind all the time.
5. Help someone. By taking the focus off you and putting it onto someone else you can stop the anxious thoughts for a period of time. There is also research which suggests that helping others releases hormones that make us feel good.
6. Play with pets. This has also been found to lower the stress hormones – the fight and flight response.

7. Get creative. Colouring-in books and join the dots for adults have appeared on the market to help people relax. You can also paint, do scrapbooking, write, do mosaics, write poetry, compose music. You may even plan to redecorate your house.
8. Let your inner child play. Go and play some of the games you did as a child. Go and play with children doing the things children do.
9. Biofeedback. Biofeedback is way of learning to understand what makes your brain anxious and learning what calms you down. You are hooked up to a computer that shows your brainwaves. Then you need to try out various thoughts and images to see what triggers your nervous system and what calms it. Once you learn what thoughts or images calm your brain as indicated by your brainwave activity, you can learn to engage those thoughts, or images on your own to calm your nervous system.
10. Meditation. If you live in your head, meditation encourages you to sit still without reacting to your thoughts. There is so much information on meditation, if you want to learn how to do it you can find many good sites on the internet.
11. Mindfulness is often a form of meditation that lots of people use to calm themselves. Mindfulness meditation also helps rewire your brain as shown in many studies. Once again, if you want to learn how to do mindfulness meditation there are lots of good websites on the internet.
12. Declutter your space. A messy space can leave you feeling stressed out.
13. Share what is on your mind. Talk about it or journal about it.
14. Read a fiction book. Non-fiction books can keep your mind in overdrive. Fiction books allow your mind to escape into the story you are reading or listening to.
15. Take some action. Make an action plan and follow it. When your brain has to focus on taking certain actions it cannot devote all that energy to your anxious thoughts.
16. Cognitive behavioural therapy will teach you to recognise destructive thought processes and how to consciously create new thought processes to replace them. You can learn to do cognitive behavioural therapy on your own, or you can consult a therapist. Once again, you are rewiring your brain over time.
17. Practice being present. Just focus on "the now". Anxiety, worry, and fear typically mean we are focusing on the future. We are concerned about what might happen in the coming days, weeks, or years. Stop going into the future and just focus on experiencing what is happening in your life right now.
18. Practice acceptance. As human beings we often fight what we think is happening. Fighting something gives it energy and makes it bigger than it needs to be. Even if you don't like what is happening right now, practice learning to accept it. Tell yourself, "I accept that this is what is happening right now". Once we stop fighting with reality and wish it was different to what it is, we gain some semblance of peace and become better able to deal with the situation.



The past year has been difficult. We are coming up for one year under lockdown. Never could we have expected things to unfold the way they have. You may be feeling overwhelmed, you may have had enough, and some people are really struggling through each day. You can however, if you learn to quiet your mind, discover that you are capable of so much more than you thought you were. We all have, deep within us, the power to solve almost all the problems life throws at us. And if we don't know how to do it, there are enough resources – people, places, institutions, books, etc, - to give us ideas and answers. When you learn to quiet your mind, you learn to activate the power you have to come up with the solutions to problems in your life.