



# 10 Tips to deal with Anxiety

1 April 2014

*Hello*

This month is a continuation of the phases of change. Often after shock and denial comes anxiety, fear or worry. And this can happen even if the change is one we like. Our brains like the familiar, and the unfamiliar, even the desired unfamiliar, can be a bit worrying. So although we typically think of anxiety as associated with danger, you can even feel anxious when you are not truly in danger, you are just out of your comfort zone. This doesn't mean something is wrong or bad. It just means you are moving into a new space.

**1.** If you are fearful you have to face the fears. It is not wrong to be scared. In fact it is close to impossible to not be scared. Most people experience fears, the thing is they just press on despite their fears. So examine your thoughts that underlie your fear, remind yourself that the probability of the worst case scenario occurring is very small, and go on and do what you need to do in spite of the fear. If you have lost your job and you keep thinking that you will never find another one remind yourself that people do find other jobs. If you keep on looking you have to find one. And that is usually how fears are conquered. You press on and discover that your world is not going to end. It is in fact going to be all right. You need courage when facing change. This is also why leading too sheltered an existence is not good for you. It means you don't get to build change resilience. Once you have mastered a challenge you know that you can do it.

**2.** Many fears are created by imaging the worst possible thing coming true. If you are going to "awfulize" or "catastrophize", create your worst possible scenario and work out how you would deal with the situation. Go there. Work out what you will do if you lost everything. Bring in the advice of others and any other resources you can find to help you work out a solution. Although it is not likely you will experience the worst case scenario, imagine that you do and then go there. Work it all through in your head. This is one way of making the fear lessen its power over you.

**3.** Resist critical sweeping self-judgements such as "I am so stupid". "How could I be such an idiot?" "I am useless". Instead acknowledge behaviours that show your strengths, your courage, and your positive efforts. With anxiety it is easy to focus on what is going wrong. Look at what is going right and what you already have working in your favour.

**4.** Take some action - commit to a goal - say going to gym or making an important phone call. Afterwards reward yourself.

**5.** You need to overcome the fear of the physical sensations - heart beating hard, rapid breathing, feeling dizzy, shaky hands, chest pains. These in themselves can be frightening and worsen anxiety. Learn mindfulness techniques for riding out anxiety. Learn techniques for grounding yourself when you feel overwhelmed. Learn relaxation techniques to calm yourself including slow breathing, progressive relaxation, imagery, and meditation. You can learn these through practice.

**6.** Learn to ride out anxiety. Don't fight it, don't try to escape it, just notice the anxiety and let it be. Observing and accepting the emotion in the moment is called mindfulness. Rate your anxiety on a scale of 1 to 10. Imagine your anxiety as the liquid in a thermometer and let the level rise until your anxiety has peaked. Wait a while and then see the liquid level in the thermometer drop. As you see it drop your anxiety will lessen.

**7.** After a difficult experience you can sometimes become overwhelmed by uncontrollable fear or emotional pain, unable to stop thinking or imagining the event. Grounding works by moving your focus away from your inner turmoil and redirecting it towards the outside world. Wherever you are stop and look around the room or the outdoor environment. Describe your environment in detail, out loud or to yourself. Take your time and describe it thoroughly - sights, sounds, taste, smells, colours, textures etc. Say to yourself, "I am safe right now". You can also ground yourself in physical activity. Or focus on mental distraction. When you find yourself getting anxious, distract yourself. For example try counting houses with red roofs, or blue objects, or thinking of every holiday resort you would like to go to.



**8.** Don't try and force anxiety to go away. Just focus on being calm and breathing. Breathing promotes different emotional states. When you experience anxiety your breathing becomes faster. Practice slow breathing. Get into a relaxed position and notice your breathing. Slow down your breathing. As you breathe out say a relaxing word such as "calm" to yourself. You could also try slow breathing with counting.

**9.** Your entire body tenses when you are anxious - learn to relax using progressive muscle relaxation (PMR). PMR involves squeezing and releasing different muscles working from your toes to your head. You tense a muscle and hold it for 10 seconds and then release it. Start with your right foot and then right leg. Then your left foot then left leg. Then abdomen, chest and upper back, right hand and arm, left hand and arm and shoulders. Then move to your neck and then face. Once you have tensed and relaxed your whole body, mentally scan your body for any remaining tension and then focus on tensing and relaxing the remaining tense muscles.

**10.** Imagery is also a relaxation technique and involves visualising yourself in a tranquil place that gives you a sense of calm and peace. Once you have mastered this it means you can go to your safe place in your mind whenever you feel anxious and need to calm your fears. Practice imagery visualisation. Begin to visualise the place you have selected. Imagine yourself arriving there, stretching out your arms, taking a deep breath and taking in all the sounds and sights and smells. Visualise the scene in detail, the birds, the trees, the water. What do you feel on your skin - a breeze, the sun? What do you smell? The trees, freshly cut lawn, tropical fruit? Imagine lying back against the mountain, in the meadow, or strolling along the beach. Move around into a comfortable position. Pick up a handful of sand or water. What does it feel like? As you take everything in let yourself fall into a state of deep relaxation and peace.

*Anxiety is one of the most intense emotions we can feel during times of change. You need to be brave enough to sit with your emotions and ride them out. Anxiety, fear, anger and sadness are unpleasant emotions, however try and accept them, and if you can, even welcome them as part of the normal journey through change.*