



Ascension

Ascension WI EAP

## Coping with Anxiety

It's easy to get anxious when we watch the news or experience difficult circumstances in our lives. Anxiety is a natural reaction to situations that are life-threatening or dangerous, however; anxiety can easily spiral out of control. Read on for tips to stay calm amidst chaos.

### Fight or Flight

What humans experience as anxiety is actually a complex biochemical process, commonly known as the fight or flight response. When our brain perceives danger, it sends impulses throughout our body to release stress hormones. These hormones increase heart rate and blood pressure, slow down digestion, suppress the immune system, cause fast, shallow breathing, tense muscles, dilate pupils, and even change the way our brain takes in information which makes it difficult to concentrate or remember details—to name a few things!

This is an incredible survival mechanism when we are facing a life-or-death situation, but can become problematic when we are doing harmless activities like sitting on the couch watching the news, or walking through the toilet paper aisle and realize there's none to be found. In instances like those we want to train our fight or flight system not to overreact, because chronic stress and anxiety create chronic health problems.

### Self Awareness

Step one in managing anxiety is to recognize when your body is in fight or flight mode. What symptoms do you experience? Many people readily recognize the pounding heart, but don't pay as much attention to the tense muscles or shallow breath. Take a moment to reflect on your anxiety and all the thoughts and sensations it creates. How does anxiety feel to you?

### Triggers

Next, after we can easily identify when our bodies are in fight or flight, it's important to recognize what triggers it. Is it the news? Thoughts about coronavirus? Concerns about being stuck at home with your family for the next who-knows-how-long? Pay attention to the things that set you off, and when possible avoid them, at least until you feel more confident in managing anxious thoughts and feelings. (Note: this is not permission to avoid your boss or other necessary obligations! This is just a suggestion to minimize exposure, when possible, to things that unnecessarily provoke your anxiety).

### **Rest, Digest, Rejuvenate**

Ok, now you can recognize when your fight or flight system is activated, and have a pretty good idea about what is causing it to go off. The next step is de-escalating that fight or flight system to return to a more balanced state--the "rest, digest, rejuvenate" (RDR) state. When we are in RDR, we are calm, thinking clearly and rationally, and our body is functioning normally.

### **Deep Breathing**

One way to activate RDR is simply to breathe. Take a big, deep breathe in through your nose. Hold for several seconds. Slowly exhale through your mouth. When you inhale, be sure to expand your belly. Imagine there's a balloon in there, and as you breathe in you are filling that belly balloon with air. Breathe deeply and slowly for several seconds. Notice the relaxation that sets in to your body as you do this. Deep breathing is one of the most simple and effective tools to manage anxiety, and the best part is that you can do it anytime, anywhere. Just like with anything, it's a skill that gets easier to do and more effective with practice.

### **Changing Focus**

Another effective strategy for dealing with anxiety is distraction. We've all heard the adage, "Whatever you focus on grows," so don't focus on things that make you upset (especially if you can't do anything to change them!). Instead of focusing on all the people who have died from illness, focus on all the people who have survived and recovered. There are many angles and perspectives to any given scenario. Focus on the positive aspects, and practice an attitude of gratitude every day. Studies show that people who have a grateful attitude tend to be happier, healthier and more resilient to stress.

### **Visualizations**

Imagine this in as much detail as you can: You are on a wooded path, surrounded by huge, beautiful trees. You can hear the birds chirping above you, and a woodpecker in the distance. The air is warm, but a cool breeze keeps the temperature just right. You smell the wood, the dirt, and the fresh clean outside air. As you walk along the soft path you come to a clear brook that bubbles and chatters as it flows by. You look down and see a frog hop off into the tall grass. You feel so relaxed and peaceful, you can't help but smile...

How do you feel? When thinking of a scene like that most people feel more relaxed and a little bit happier. Visualizations are a great way to refocus your attention from negative, anxiety-provoking stimuli to a more calm and peaceful state. If woods aren't your thing try beaches, or a favorite vacation spot, or a favorite chair--wherever you feel calm, relaxed and content, use that as your visualization destination.

### **Call EAP**

These are just a few ideas to help you manage your fight or flight system and cope with anxiety. If you try these and find that you still struggle, don't hesitate to contact your Employee Assistance Program. Ascension WI EAP has licensed counselors who are trained in evidence-based strategies to help you overcome anxiety, depression, and many other problems and concerns that life may pose. It's free, it's confidential, and it's there for you. Call or email today!