

ANXIETY AND PANIC ATTACKS



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HOW TO STOP ANXIETY AND **PANIC ATTACKS**

What is Anxiety?

Fritz Perls, developer of Gestalt Therapy, used to tell his clients that: “Anxiety is excitement without breathing.” What a practical definition! The more constricted the breath – the more anxiety. Something exciting is happening and you need to breathe. What’s a situation where you are experiencing some anxiety? Where even just thinking about it triggers anxiety? Rather than suffer through or avoid the situation, try breathing.

Here’s the practice:

- Bring the situation/conversation to mind.
- And breathe . . . breathe . . . breathe.
- Keep holding the situation in mind and enjoy breathing.

How does that change your experience? Where’s the anxiety, now?

Anxiety and Fear

Fear is a normal reaction to a known, external source of danger. Phobias are normal reactions. In anxiety, the individual is frightened, but the source of the danger is not known, not recognized, or inadequate to account for the symptoms. The physiological manifestations are similar.

Anxiety Disorders

Anxiety disorders are all 100% treatable. They are well understood and there is a whole range of different techniques you can use to overcome any anxiety problems. Fear is essential to human survival. Anxiety attacks and other forms of anxiety are behaviours that have developed from inappropriate fear of particular situations. These reactions then become generalized and can be triggered at the wrong times.

Fear memories are learned faster and retained longer than other types of emotional memory. This is important. Learning to respond rapidly to danger makes sure that you do the right thing in event that the same thing happens again. It is an automatic behaviour that is learnt very quickly and is essential to basic survival. It is this rapid learning that leaves us vulnerable to the development of anxiety.

Research has shown that genes can be a factor in anxiety. Some people have a genetic predisposition which is then often triggered by some stressful life event. This event appears to change how the brain deals with fear.

An enormous number of people are affected every year by anxiety. Anxiety disorders are the most common mental illness in the United States. 19 million (13%) of the adult U.S. population (ages 18-54) are affected.

Types of anxiety disorder:

- **Panic Disorder (PD)**

Panic disorder is characterized by repeated, unexpected panic attacks, as well as fear of experiencing another episode. Symptoms of a panic attack vary from one person to the next and may include:

- Surge of overwhelming panic
- Feeling of losing control or going crazy
- Rapid heartbeat, heart palpitations or chest pain
- Feeling like you're going to pass out
- Trouble breathing or choking sensation
- Hyperventilation
- Hot flashes or chills
- Trembling or shaking inside
- Nausea or stomach cramps
- Feeling detached or unreal
- Sweating

- **Agoraphobia**

Panic disorder may also be accompanied by agoraphobia, which is a fear of being in places where escape or help would be difficult in the event of a panic attack. If you have agoraphobia, you are likely to avoid public places such as shopping malls or confined spaces such as an airplane.

- **Social Phobia / Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD)**

If you have a debilitating fear of being seen negatively by others and humiliated in public, you may have social anxiety disorder, also known as social phobia. Social anxiety disorder can be thought of as extreme shyness. In severe cases, social situations are avoided altogether. Performance anxiety (better known as stage fright) is the most common type of social phobia. Many sufferers of social phobia can point to something that made their condition worse, often family, parents, bullying, an illness, perhaps just a lingering feeling of something too far back to remember.

- **Specific Phobia**

A phobia is an unrealistic or exaggerated fear of a specific object, activity, or situation that in reality presents little to no danger. Common phobias include fear of animals such as snakes and spiders, fear of flying, and fear of heights. In the case of a severe phobia, you might go to extreme lengths to avoid the thing you fear. Unfortunately, avoidance only strengthens the phobia.

- **Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)**

If constant worries and fears distract you from your day-to-day activities or you're troubled by a persistent feeling that something bad is going to happen, you may be suffering from generalized anxiety disorder (GAD). People with GAD are chronic worrywarts who feel anxious nearly all of the time, though they may not even know why. Anxiety related to GAD often shows up as physical symptoms like insomnia, stomach upset, restlessness, and fatigue.

- **Limited Symptom Attacks (LSA)**

Many people with panic disorder have a mixture of panic attacks and Limited Symptom Attacks. A Limited Symptom Attack (LSA) is a lower-scale, less comprehensive onset of panic symptoms, when a person feels 3 or less of the panic symptoms listed above. For example, a sudden episode of trembling or nausea accompanied by a fear of dying would be considered an LSA. Not everyone who experiences an LSA has a mental illness. People often experience Limited Symptom Attacks while recovering from or being treated for panic disorder. Like a panic attack, an LSA usually peaks in 10 minutes; however, an attack might last only 1 to 5 minutes, or could be part of a panic episode of varying intensity that lasts several hours.

- **Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)**

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is characterized by unwanted thoughts or behaviours that seem impossible to stop or control. If you have OCD, you may be troubled by obsessions, such as a recurring worry that you forgot to turn off the oven or that you might hurt someone. You may also suffer from uncontrollable compulsions, such as washing your hands over and over.

- **Obsessions**

Everyone has some strange and bizarre thoughts from time to time, but mostly these thoughts are instantly dismissed. Obsessions grow out of frustration and despair. If you suffer from any type of anxiety, then you are probably doing the same thing in your mind; continually going over and over the same thoughts and worries. By the very act of worrying about it you pull that thought back into your mind over and over again.

- Compulsions
Have you ever been to a zoo and watched a tiger pacing relentlessly back and forwards? But imagine (perhaps you don't have to) that a particular thought is so disturbing that you can't help asking yourself where it came from, why did you have that thought. If you are so caught up in the moment then you can begin to act these out and they can grow into uncontrolled movements, even whole rituals.

- **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is an extreme anxiety disorder that can occur in the aftermath of a traumatic or life-threatening event. PTSD can be thought of as a panic attack that rarely, if ever, lets up. Symptoms of PTSD include flashbacks or nightmares about what happened, hyper-vigilance, startling easily, withdrawing from others, and avoiding situations that remind you of the event.

Understanding anxiety disorders

It's normal to worry and feel tense or scared when under pressure or facing a stressful situation. Anxiety is the body's natural response to danger, an automatic alarm that goes off when you feel threatened.

In moderation, anxiety isn't always a bad thing. In fact, anxiety can help you stay alert and focused, spur you to action, and motivate you to solve problems. But when anxiety is constant or overwhelming, when it interferes with your relationships and activities, it stops being functional that's when you've crossed the line from normal, productive anxiety into the territory of anxiety disorders.

Do Your Symptoms Indicate an Anxiety Disorder?

If you identify with several of the following signs and symptoms, and they just won't go away, you may be suffering from an anxiety disorder.

- Are you constantly tense, worried, or on edge?
- Does your anxiety interfere with your work, school, or family responsibilities?
- Are you plagued by fears that you know are irrational, but can't shake?
- Do you believe that something bad will happen if certain things aren't done a certain way?
- Do you avoid everyday situations or activities because they cause you anxiety?
- Do you experience sudden, unexpected attacks of heart-pounding panic?
- Do you feel like danger and catastrophe are around every corner?

Signs and Symptoms of Anxiety Disorders

Because anxiety disorders are a group of related conditions rather than a single disorder, they can look very different from person to person. One individual may suffer from intense anxiety attacks that strike without warning, while another gets panicky at the thought of mingling at a party. Someone else may struggle with a disabling fear of driving, or uncontrollable, intrusive thoughts. Yet another may live in a constant state of tension, worrying about anything and everything. Despite their different forms, all anxiety disorders share one major symptom: persistent or severe fear or worry in situations where most people wouldn't feel threatened.

Emotional Symptoms of Anxiety

In addition to the primary symptoms of irrational and excessive fear and worry, other common emotional symptoms of anxiety include:

- Feelings of apprehension or dread
- Trouble concentrating
- Feeling tense and jumpy
- Anticipating the worst
- Irritability
- Restlessness
- Watching for signs of danger
- Feeling like your mind's gone blank

Physical Symptoms of Anxiety

Anxiety is more than just a feeling. As a product of the body's fight-or-flight response, anxiety involves a wide range of physical symptoms. Because of the numerous physical symptoms, anxiety sufferers often mistake their disorder for a medical illness. They may visit many doctors and make numerous trips to the hospital before their anxiety disorder is discovered. Common physical symptoms of anxiety include:

- Pounding heart
- Sweating
- Cold hands and feet
- Stomach upset or dizziness
- Frequent urination or diarrhoea
- Shortness of breath
- Tremors and twitches
- Muscle tension
- Headaches
- Fatigue
- Insomnia

The Link Between Anxiety Symptoms and Depression

Many people with anxiety disorders also suffer from depression at some point. Anxiety and depression are believed to stem from the same biological vulnerability, which may explain why they so often go hand-in-hand. Since depression makes anxiety worse (and vice versa), it's important to seek treatment for both conditions.

Anyone living with anxiety long enough knows that you start to get depressed because it just seems to never end. Sure, some days are better than others, but there is that feeling that it is some downward spiral, with no way out. Then there are days where there is just some dark cloud hanging over you. Any improvement, however small, brings hope.

Anxiety Attacks and Their Symptoms

In most cases, anxiety attacks respond quickly to treatment. Even if you're starting to avoid certain situations or places because you're afraid of having a panic attack, treatment can often rapidly and effectively help you regain control.

Anxiety attacks, also known as panic attacks, are episodes of intense panic or fear. Anxiety attacks usually occur suddenly and without warning. Sometimes there's an obvious trigger - getting stuck in an elevator, for example, or thinking about the big speech you have to give - but in other cases, the attacks come out of the blue.

Anxiety attacks usually peak within ten minutes, and they rarely last more than thirty minutes. But during that short time, the terror can be so severe that you feel as if you're about to die or totally lose control. The physical symptoms of anxiety attacks are themselves so frightening that many people believe they're having a heart attack. After an anxiety attack is over, you may be worried about having another one, particularly in a public place where help isn't available, or you can't easily escape.

Symptoms of anxiety attacks include:

- Surge of overwhelming panic
- Feeling of losing control or going crazy
- Heart palpitations or chest pain
- Feeling like you're going to pass out
- Trouble breathing or choking sensation
- Hyperventilation
- Hot flashes or chills
- Trembling or shaking
- Nausea or stomach cramps

- Feeling detached or unreal
- Rapid heartbeat, pounding heart or palpitations
- Sweating
- Ice cold hands and feet
- Nausea, bloating, indigestion or abdominal discomfort
- Dizziness or unsteadiness
- Paraesthesia's (numbness or tingling sensations) in face, extremities or body
- Skin losing colour
- Blushing or skin blotches
- Urgently needing to urinate or defecate
- Inappropriate/Disturbed thoughts
- Muscle pain, especially in neck or shoulders

There is Hope!

Anxiety and depression will fade away as you introduce small, simple changes into your life and your hopes and expectations grow. The real danger is that you examine it, perhaps even horrify yourself and you start to think that there is something wrong with you. Of course, there is NOTHING wrong with you. All you did was to be over sensitive and start off examining something too closely and then blaming yourself.

Some anxiety symptoms are born out of healthy ways of thinking and behaving that become magnified out of all proportion. It is time to shrink them down to the insignificant things they really are.

Don't blame yourself. Don't blame anyone. Just concentrate on getting well.

The Five Basic Ground Rules Before You Begin Treatment

The first step in getting well is to stop thinking you're sick, to stop feeding your fears. Stop talking about it. This includes friends, family and unnecessary trips to your doctor or therapist. Stop reading about it and researching it. Many of the long-term anxiety sufferers that I see have read everything there is to read on the subject, they are experts in their field. The net result is nothing. They are still in the same state of anxiety and in many cases getting worse. Constantly reminding yourself about your anxiety increases its importance in your mind and keeps the whole cycle repeating over and over.

Stop thinking about the past problem. Again, you are reminding yourself of your condition and damaging your own confidence and self-esteem. Start focusing on the future and getting well.

Treatment for Anxiety Disorders

- Anxiety Hypnosis – Cognitive Behaviour techniques work very well under hypnosis.
- Distraction Therapy
- Dissociation Therapy
- Relaxation Therapy
- Exposure Therapy or Flooding - recreating the symptoms to familiarize yourself with them.
- Exercise motivation
- Dietary changes
- Deliberate changes in daily habits and lifestyle
- Self-assessment skills training
- Social skills training
- Assertiveness and confidence building
- Relaxing breathing techniques

Anxiety is not a mental illness or a disability, it is a state of mind that can be permanently eliminated with some simple changes in your daily life.

Do I Need to Know What Caused My Anxiety?

What I would like to say to you is that the cause of your anxiety is not necessarily part of the treatment. It helps that you understand how it happened because it is always good to have reasons; it is important to know that you are not mentally ill, but a victim of circumstances.

Having treated many anxiety sufferers I honestly believe that treating the cause on its own rarely works that well, while treating the condition, as it is right now, wins every time. You stop panic attacks with simple changes to the way you deal with them when they happen. You stop social phobias by building up some very straightforward patterns of thinking.

Medication

Medication treatment of anxiety is generally safe and effective and is best used in conjunction with therapy. Medication may be a short-term or long-term treatment option, depending on severity of symptoms, other medical conditions, and other individual circumstances. However, it often takes time and patience to find the drug that works best for you.

Medications are commonly prescribed by physicians (family practice, paediatricians, Ob-Gyns, psychiatrists). Four major classes of medications are used in the treatment of anxiety disorders:

Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs)

SSRIs relieve symptoms by blocking the reabsorption, or reuptake, of serotonin by certain nerve cells in the brain. This leaves more serotonin available, which improves mood. SSRIs generally produced fewer side effects when compared with tricyclic antidepressants. However, common side effects include insomnia or sleepiness, sexual dysfunction, and weight gain. They are considered an effective treatment for all anxiety disorders, although the treatment of obsessive-compulsive disorder, or OCD, typically requires higher doses.

Serotonin-Norepinephrine Reuptake Inhibitors (SNRIs)

The serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitor, or SNRI, class is notable for a dual mechanism of action: increasing the levels of the neurotransmitters serotonin and norepinephrine by inhibiting their reabsorption into cells in the brain. As with other medications, side effects may occur, including stomach upset, insomnia, headache, sexual dysfunction, and minor increase in blood pressure. These medications are considered as effective as SSRIs, so they are also considered a first-line treatment, particularly for the treatment of generalized anxiety disorder.

Benzodiazepines

This class of drugs is frequently used for short-term management of anxiety. Benzodiazepines are highly effective in promoting relaxation and reducing muscular tension and other physical symptoms of anxiety. Long-term use may require increased doses to achieve the same effect, which may lead to problems related to tolerance and dependence.

Tricyclic Antidepressants

Concerns about long-term use of the benzodiazepines led many doctors to favor tricyclic antidepressants. Although effective in the treatment of anxiety, they can cause significant side effects, including orthostatic hypotension (drop in blood pressure on standing), constipation, urinary retention, dry mouth, and blurry vision.

Contact your physician if you experience side effects, even if you are not sure a symptom is caused by a medication. Do not stop taking a medication without consulting with the prescribing physician; abrupt discontinuation may cause other health risks. Medications will work only if they are taken according the explicit instructions of your physician, but they may not resolve all symptoms of an anxiety disorder. Get detailed medication information on this chart.

DRUG CLASS	BRAND NAME	GENERIC NAME	TARGET DISORDER	HOW IT WORKS
Antidepressants				
Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs)	Celexa Lexapro Luvox Luvox CR Paxil Prozac Zoloft	Citalopram Escitalopram Fluvoxamine Paroxetine Fluoxetine Sertraline	PD OCD SAD GAD PTSD	Affects the Concentration and activity of the neurotransmitter serotonin.
Tricyclic Antidepressants (TCAs)	Adapin Anafranil Aventyl Elavil Ludiomil Norpramin Pamelor Sinequan Surmontil Tofranil	Doxepin Clomiprimine Nortriptyline Amitriptyline Maprotiline Desipramine Nortriptyline Doxepin Trimipramine Imipramine	PD PTSD GAD OCD (Anafranil only)	Affects the concentration and activity of the neurotransmitters serotonin and norepinephrine, linked to anxiety disorders.
Monoamine Oxidase Inhibitors (MAOIs)	Marplan Nardil Parnate	Isocarboxid Phenelzine Tranlycypromine	PD SAD PTSD	Blocks the effect of an important brain enzyme, preventing the breakdown of serotonin and norepinephrine.
Other Antidepressants	Cymbalta Desyrel Effexor Remeron	Duloxetine Trazodone Venlafaxine Milrtazapine	PD OCD SAD GAD PTSD	Affects the concentration of the neurotransmitters serotonin and/or norepinephrine.
Anxiolytics				
Azapirones	BuSpar	Buspirone	GAD	Enhances the activity of serotonin.
Benzodiazepines	Ativan Dalmane Halcion Librium Restoril Serax Tranxene Valium Xanax	Lorazepam Clonazepam Triazolam Chlordiazepoxide Temazepam Oxazepam Clorazepate Diazepam Alprazolam	GAD SAD PD	Exact mechanism unknown; some research shown to enhance the function of gamma aminobutyric acid (GABA).

Anticonvulsants			Augmentation therapy	May be added to increase the overall response to treatment.
	Depakote Lamictal Topimax	Valproate Lamotrigine Topiramate		Enhancing or inhibiting effects of neurotransmitters and blockade of sodium channels in the brain.
Noradrenergic Agents				
Beta Blockers	Inderal Tenormin	Propranolol Atenolol Prazosin	Performance anxiety, possibly PD	Blocks receptors associated with anxiety.
Atypical Antipsychotics			Augmentation therapy	May be added to treatment.
	Abilify Geodon Risperdal Seroquel Zyprexa	Aripiprazole Ziprasidone Risperidone Quetiapine Olanzapine		Affects the concentration and activity of serotonin.

Discussing Medications: What You Need to Know

To avoid potentially dangerous drug interactions, let your mental health care provider know all medications you are taking, including prescriptions and over-the-counter drugs, herbal or dietary supplements, and vitamins. And make sure your family doctor knows you are taking medications for an anxiety disorder.

Ask these questions about a new prescription: How will the medication help me? What side effects might occur? Should I avoid any foods or beverages? Are drug interactions with other prescriptions a possibility?

Learn when to take a new medication and how, such as on an empty stomach or with food, in the morning or evening, and how frequently.

Find out how long it should take for the medication to start working and what you should expect when this happens. Ask for the prescribing physician's after-hours phone number in case you develop side effects.

A good source of information about medications and over-the-counter products is your pharmacist, who should have information about all your prescriptions to advise you about possible drug interactions, side effects, and instructions for use.

Ask how often you should see the doctor for a medication check-up. If your physician does not want to spend the time to answer your questions, you may need a referral to a different physician. The most effective Anxiety Disorder Treatment is a combination of medication and psychotherapy. For Severe Anxiety Disorder, the combination of all treatment methods will give the best result.

Therapy for Anxiety Disorders

Please read my summaries on various forms of therapy (available as downloads from my website):

- Acceptance and Commitment Therapy
- Emotional Freedom Techniques
- Focusing
- Hypnotherapy
- Neuro-Linguistic Programming
- Somatic Experiencing

Below are two therapy approaches commonly utilized for the treatment of anxiety; Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, and Mindfulness-Based Psychotherapy.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)

This psychotherapy method aims to help you recognize, understand and finally change unreasonable patterns of thinking and behaviour.

Formulation

The Cognitive Behavioural Therapist will work with you to discover the maintaining factors of the presenting problem and collaboratively construct an idiosyncratic formulation of this problem. It may for example be understood that worry is a key feature of GAD, but that it differs from that of obsessions and negative automatic thoughts, in that two conflicting beliefs are held concerning the nature of worry. The idea that worry (Type 1 Worry) is a problem-solving strategy conflicts with the idea that worry will also have some sort of catastrophic consequence (Type 2 Worry). The worry is distressing and generally believed to be uncontrollable.

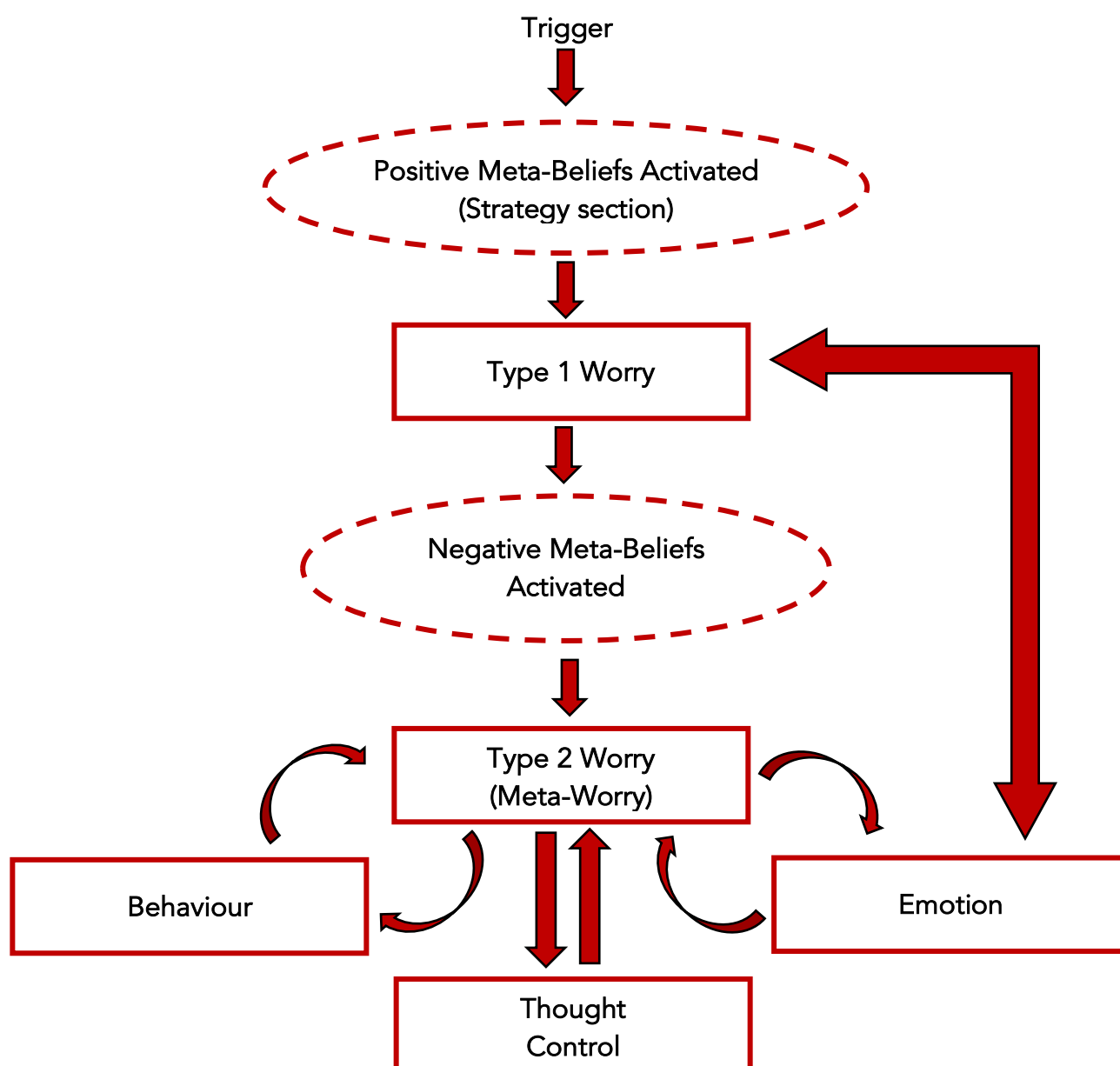
You may be guided to understand that worry can be triggered intentionally, by a situation or from a single intrusive thought. Periods of chronic or repeated worrying, cause feelings of anxiety or apprehension.

These episodes range from a pervasive sense of being worried to discrete episodes of rumination lasting from minutes to hours. Following this an individual treatment regimen will be constructed which will be guided by the formulation.

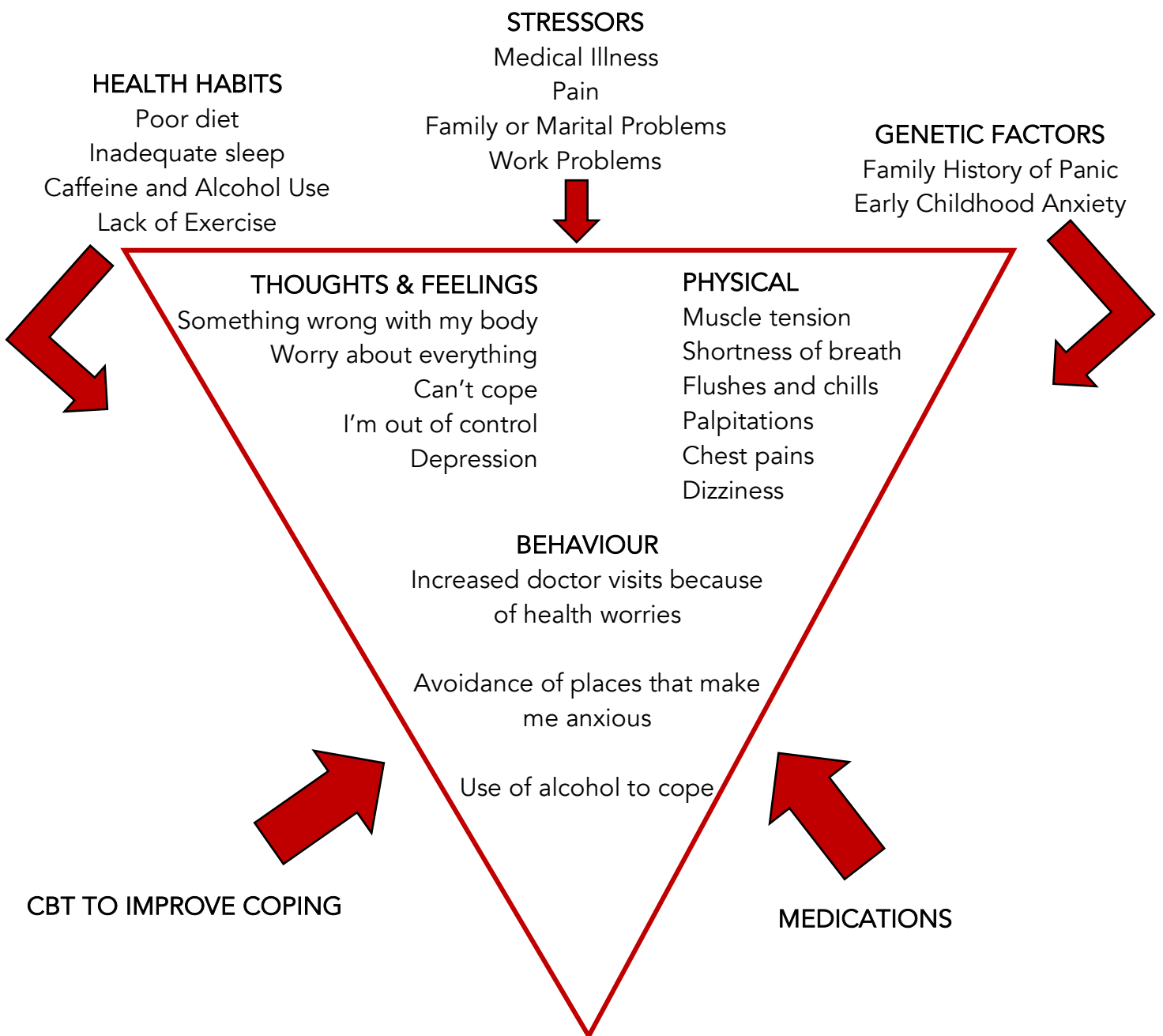
Treatment

The treatment approach will include education into the nature of GAD, strategies to minimize avoidance and reassurance seeking behaviours, thought control and other unhelpful behaviours. Cognitive interventions include verbal reattribution, behavioural experimentation, and challenging core beliefs or meta-beliefs which underlie the symptoms.

Cognitive Model of GAD



THE CYCLE OF ANXIETY



Education and Simple Skills for Anxiety

You will be educated about the value and place of medication and about the "cycle of anxiety", which consists of a positive feedback cycle where anxious thoughts, physical symptoms, and avoidance behaviour feed on one another and aggravate anxiety. The figure illustrates that genetic vulnerability, stressful experiences, and maladaptive thoughts and habits all contribute to anxiety and hence both medication and habit change can be therapeutic. Understanding that anxiety is a normal human response that you are having trouble turning off when it is not needed, helps normalize your reaction.

CBT approaches are used to interrupt this cycle and typically require at least 6 to 8 sessions. Some simple educational guidelines that address the behavioural, cognitive, and physical manifestations of anxiety are discussed.

Behavioural avoidance can be directly counteracted by gradual exposure to feared objects or situations. You are encouraged to make a list of your most feared situations (from least feared to most feared) and gradually try to face these situations, starting with the easiest first (e.g., social situations for SAD, reminders of trauma for PTSD, situations from which it is difficult to escape or help is not readily available for PD, and situations involving more self-reliance, for example, for GAD). It could well require 8 to 12 weeks to work through least feared to most feared. The most important point is for practice to be regular and daily with little interruption.

During exposure, cognitive distortions are likely to arise and will be questioned with an open scientific mind. The 2 most common errors made by anxious patients are overestimating the risk that something bad will happen (jumping to conclusions - "if I feel lightheaded, I will faint") or thinking that if something bad does happen the outcome will be terribly catastrophic (blowing things out of proportion - "I will panic while driving and will lose control of the car and crash"). You are helped to understand that these thinking patterns are unrealistic (that is, these beliefs have rarely, if ever, been confirmed in real life) so that you can develop more evidence-based appraisals. Some persons are able to apply these simple principles themselves although many others are likely to need more coaching.

Finally, in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, physical symptoms of anxiety are counteracted by relaxation techniques such as progressive muscle relaxation and diaphragmatic breathing (put one hand on your belly, the other on your chest, and make only the hand on your belly move when you breathe; this should be practiced several times a day). Regular exercise may also be prescribed to counteract the physical symptoms of anxiety, as will avoidance of caffeine and alcohol and poor sleep hygiene, which can often aggravate anxiety. Addressing these lifestyle factors can often have a clear-cut effect. In CBT it is emphasized that you do not need to totally eliminate anxious symptoms. Instead, you should develop an attitude that symptoms can be managed and even tolerated while you do something you were not able to do previously (like drive on the freeway). This helps establish realistic expectations about treatment.

Mindfulness-Based Psychotherapy

Unresolved trauma - whether from abuse, witnessing or being a victim of violence, grieving a sudden or painful death, being in a car accident, or a myriad of other difficult events - can affect every aspect of a person's life: physically, socially, emotionally, cognitively and spiritually.

For example, intrusive thoughts and images can impact a person's sleep, eating and overall health. The body's flight, fight or freeze response to unresolved trauma can impact a person's social and emotional life. Trauma is usually accompanied by negative beliefs such as "I am not safe", "I do not deserve love", "The world is a terrifying place", "God cannot help me", "I deserved to be hurt," which affect the traumatized person's sense of self, world view and spirituality.

Mindfulness-Based Psychotherapy is similar to Focusing Therapy and Somatic Experiencing, and may be combined with Hypnosis, which can be like adding a turbo-booster to any of these therapies. These are all powerful tools in healing trauma. Learning to be "Mindful" of thoughts and feelings helps free people from the seeming power and "truth" of their thoughts, helping them stay in the present, rather than dwelling on the past or worrying about the future.

Many people dealing with depression, anxiety or trauma are not connected to their bodies. They literally live in their heads. This is a coping mechanism to escape the pain of their feelings - it may have served them in the past but is no longer serving them. Mindfulness-based techniques help a person focus on the present moment and notice where thoughts and emotions are felt in the body. This experience can help the traumatized person feel grounded. The simple act of feeling one's feet on the floor, feeling the support of the floor and Mother Earth, is especially effective in letting go of racing thoughts about the past and future and being grounded in the present. This grounding helps us feel safe in the present.

Mindfulness practices keep us in contact with things as they really are, helping us let go of the seeming power and solidity of our thoughts. Dealing with the past in the present moment creates spaciousness and workability around swirling and claustrophobic thoughts and feelings. In this way, mindfulness-based psychotherapy allows traumatized clients to re-experience the traumas of the past while staying in touch with their present thoughts, feelings and body sensations.

The experience of the present moment actually provides a sense of safety and distance from past horrors. We are able to experience as a witness the thoughts, feelings and emotions associated with the past without being stuck in them, simply letting the experiences come and go. This witnessing ability is extremely powerful, allowing us to see that we are not our thoughts or our past experiences.

Physiologically speaking, working with the present body sensations, emotions and feelings associated with the past actually releases traumatic material that is literally stuck in the amygdala, or "reptile brain." This stuckness affects our adrenal system and other body systems as well as our brains, resulting in the automatic flight, fight or freeze response.

Mindfulness practices facilitate the release of traumatic images from the brain, making them less intrusive. In turn, it becomes easier to choose more healthy responses than fight, flight or freeze, let go of negative thoughts about oneself, and actually replace those thoughts with positive thoughts.

As one client grieving the traumatic death of her husband said, "I still miss him, and still have images of him being in the ICU on life support, but those images are no longer intrusive and disturbing. They are now just memories, and the negative beliefs about myself and the world are gone. I know that my husband's death was not my fault and I am OK."

Complementary Anxiety Disorder Treatments

- **Diaphragmatic breathing** - Practice of deep breathing in a fuller way to ingest oxygen or known as abdominal breathing or belly breathing.
- **Meditation** - A mental discipline by which one attempts to get beyond the conditioned, "thinking" mind into a deeper state of relaxation or awareness. It is highly recommended to have a guidance guru for advanced meditation.
- **Visualization** - Use of relaxation music and sounds of nature - the sound of the ocean or a small river stream - to help create visualization of a relaxing environment.
- **Acupuncture** - A technique of inserting and manipulating fine filiform needles into specific points on the body with the aim of relieving pain and for therapeutic purposes.
- **Acupressure Massage** - A traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) technique derived from acupuncture. In acupressure physical pressure is applied to acupuncture points by the hand, elbow, or with various devices.
- **Natural Treatment** - The use of natural herbs to relieve anxiety.
- **Exercise** – Light exercise as little as 30 minutes a day, 3 to 5 times a week will relieve the anxiety significantly. To achieve the maximum result, an hour of aerobic exercise everyday will greatly improve the situation.
- **Biofeedback** – Using sensors to measure the symptoms of anxiety like rapid heart rate, breathing and muscle tension to recognize the body's panic or anxiety response, and use relaxation techniques to control them.
- **Hypnosis** – Hypnosis is sometimes used in combination with Cognitive-Behavioural therapy for anxiety. A hypnotherapist will use therapeutic techniques to "re-program" and help you face your fear.

Self-Help for Anxiety: 12 Ways to Manage Anxiety

If your mind were a diesel engine, anxiety would be the leaded gas that was accidentally poured in and responsible for all the burps and stutters. Even more so than depression, I think, anxiety is the big disabler in life, with a capital D, which is why I try to nip it in its early symptoms. That doesn't always happen, of course, but here are some techniques you may use:

1. Recognize the reptilian brain.

Elvira Aletta gives a brilliant neuro-psychology lesson where she explains the two parts of our brain: the primitive part containing the amygdala – which is responsible for generating and processing our fear and other primal emotions – and our frontal lobes: the neo-cortex or the newest part of our brain, which is sophisticated, educated, and is able to apply a bit of logic to the message of raw fear that our reptilian brain generates. Why is this helpful? When I feel that knot in my stomach that comes with a message that I am unloved by the world, I try to envision a Harvard professor, or some intellectual creature whacking a reptile on the head with the a book, saying something like “Would you just evolve, you overly dramatic creature?”

2. Exaggerate your greatest fear.

I know this doesn't seem like a good idea, but truly it works. Tell your fear to someone else and make sure to be as dramatic as possible, with very descriptive words and emotions. Then, when you've told every detail you can think of, start over again. Tell the entire, dramatic story, again with very elaborate descriptions. By the third or fourth time, it becomes a bit silly.

3. Distract yourself.

“Distract, don't think.” Your thinking – even though you are using cognitive behavioural techniques – can make things worse. Stay away from the self-help books and work on a word puzzle or watch a movie instead and surround yourself with people as much as possible. Don't get me wrong, there is a place for cognitive behavioural techniques and mindfulness. But when you reach a point of disabling anxiety, it's sometimes more beneficial to try to get out of your head as much as possible.

4. Write twin letters.

Rossi Lebowitz offers a smart strategy for anxiety: Compose a love letter to your object of hand-chill (your fear). Celebrate all of the reasons you fell in love with him/her/it in the first place. List everything positive you can think of, and nothing negative. Now write a missive. Vent all of your worries about the situation and try to make a case against moving forward. I'll bet you can't come up with a single true deal-breaker but giving your worries some air will feel good.

5. Sweat.

Many people have found only one full-proof immediate solution to anxiety. And that is exercise. Bike. Walk. Swim. Run. I don't care what you do, as long as you get that ticker of yours working hard. You don't have to be training for an Ironman to feel the antidepressant effect of exercise. Even picking the weeds and watering the flowers has been shown to boost moods. Aerobic exercise can be as effective at relieving mild and moderate depression as SSRIs (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors like Prozac and Zoloft). Stephen Ilardi writes: "Exercise changes the brain. It increases the activity level of important brain chemicals such as dopamine and serotonin. Exercise also increases the brain's production of a key growth hormone called BDNF. Because levels of this hormone plummet in anxiety and depression, some parts of the brain start to shrink over time and learning and memory are impaired. But exercise reverses this trend, protecting the brain in a way nothing else can."

6. Watch the movie.

Elisha Goldstein explains that we can practice mindfulness and experience some relief from anxiety by procuring some distance from our thoughts, so that we learn to watch them as we would a movie (in my case, "The Rocky Horror Picture Show"). That way, we can sit back with our bag of popcorn and be entertained. Most importantly, we must try to let go of judgments. That's a tad hard for a Catholic girl that tends to think like the Vatican: dividing every thought, emotion, and behaviour into two categories, which are "good" and "deserving of eternal damnation."

7. Eat super mood foods.

Unfortunately, anxiety is usually the first clue that I should, once again, analyse my diet: to make sure I'm not drinking too much caffeine, not ingesting too much processed flour, and not bingeing on sweets. If I'm honest with myself, I've usually committed a misdemeanour in one of those areas. So, I go back to power foods. What are they? Elizabeth Somer, author of *Food and Mood*, and *Eating Your Way to Happiness*, mentions these: nuts, soy, milk and yogurt, dark green leaves, dark orange vegetables, citrus, tart cherries, and berries.

8. Return to the breath.

A very simple and effective way to meditate is by counting your breaths. Merely say "one" as you inhale and exhale, and then say "two" with my next breath. It's like swimming laps. You can't tune into all the chatter inside your brain because you don't want to mess up your counting. When you bring attention to your breathing – and remember to breathe from your diaphragm, not your chest – you are able to calm yourself down a notch, or at least control your hysteria (so that you can wait five minutes before bursting into tears, which means you avoid the public cry session, which is preferred).

9. Break the day into minutes.

One cognitive adjustment that helps relieve anxiety is reminding yourself that you don't have to think about 2:45 pm when you pick up the kids from school and how you will be able to cope with the noise and chaos when you're feeling this way, or about the boundary issue you have with a friend – whether or not you're strong enough to continue putting yourself first in that relationship. All you have to worry about is the very second before you. If you are successful at breaking down time down that way, you usually discover that everything is fine for the moment.

10. Use visual anchors.

I often look up to the clouds. They calm me down in traffic or whenever I feel anxious. Water also helps me. Water has always calmed me down in the same way as Xanax, and since I don't take the latter (I try to stay away from sedatives), I need to rely on the former. Some of my clients downloaded some "ocean waves" that they can listen to on their iPod when they feel that familiar knot in their stomach. One person has a medal of St. Therese that he grabs when he becomes scared, a kind of "blankie" to make him feel safe in an anxious world.

11. Repeat a mantra.

Mantras can be very simple: "I am okay" or "I am enough." But you can also recite a "metta meditation." It slowly changes the way you respond to things in your day. Say to yourself:

May I be filled with loving kindness.

May I be happy, and healthy.

May I accept myself in the moment right as I am.

May all sentient beings, be at peace, and free from suffering.

12. Laugh.

Flexing your funny bone does much more than relieving any crushing anxiety. It boosts your immune system, diminishes both physical and psychological pain, fights viruses and foreign cells, heals wounds, and builds community. You have no doubt experienced a moment when you were crippled by anxiety until someone made you laugh out loud, and in doing so anxiety lost its hold over you. Why not laugh all the time, then?

Panic Attacks Explained

Having a panic attack is something that nobody likes to deal with. The feeling of your chest tightening as if you were having a heart attack is not good for anyone. There are actually ways that you can stop panic attacks without medication. They don't involve a doctor, medication or a trip to the nearest pharmacy. I know all too well the unkind visit of a panic attack and have found personal ways that I deal with them, hopefully they will help you as well.

Panic attacks are generally created by stress of course. Isn't stress the number one contributor of many things, panic attacks just being one of them? Therefore, it is no wonder that people wish to find ways to stop panic attacks without medication as many times the medication can just cause more problems.

With stress being the number one contributor to panic attacks you need to do what is necessary to cut down on the stresses in your life. You might think that sounds difficult to do but you just have to be dedicated to the solution and look at the bigger picture. If you think about what it is that causes you stress it will amaze you at the number of them that can be eliminated. Let us say that the reason you are so stressed is because of your schedule. You have kids to run to soccer, violin practice, dinner to make and everyone in bed by nine with many other things left to do the rest of the week. Figure out a solution, whatever it takes, because if you aren't healthy enough to enjoy taking your kids to where they need to be then odds are you need to quit. Find someone to help carpool, break out the crock-pot to work on a good dinner the slow way and cut back on the things that give you that, "Oh man I'm stressed," feeling.

Taking charge of your mental state is the best way to stop panic attacks without medication. When I feel as though something is really stressing me out, I decide if it is something I can change or not. Of course, having bills and such is always going to be stressful, it is for everybody. But you know what? Everybody does have them, has had them and probably will always have them. The only difference is that some have just learned to accept that things such as bills, and debt are always going to be a part of their lives and went on.

Looking at my check book sometimes I can just feel that pinch in my chest coming on when I see how tight things will be. If that happens, I think to myself, "will my stressing actually change the situation?" In other words, will my stress and worry bring us any more money? No. All it will do is make me tired, cranky, and extremely stressed. Therefore, I take charge and tell myself to let it go, it will not change anything. And, that makes it a lot easier. To stop panic attacks without medication simply means that you need to be aware of your own situation and be willing to take charge of it. Do you really want to allow the stresses of the world to run your life?

How Over-Breathing Can Produce Symptoms of Panic

Panic attacks occur when the amygdala (the “panic button” in the emotional brain) wrongly patterns matches to a situation and responds inappropriately with a full fight or flight reaction, ready to deal with a perceived threat to your survival that doesn't really exist. It's like your brain is an overly sensitive smoke alarm, going off when you've burned the toast and there is no real emergency.

Symptoms of a panic attack (including palpitations, increased heart rate, sweating, shaking, shortness of breath, fear of losing control or 'going crazy', nausea, dizziness, feelings of unreality, etc.) occur when the body remains inactive and doesn't use up all the adrenaline coursing through it in preparation for fight or flight. About 60% of panic attacks are accompanied by acute hyperventilation, whilst about 30% of panickers chronically hyperventilate (18 or more breaths per minute while relaxed).

Symptoms are also exacerbated by hyperventilation, and this is how: When you breathe in you take in oxygen to your lungs and the haemoglobin in the blood carries it to the tissues. The body cells use the oxygen for their various functions, producing carbon dioxide as a by-product. The carbon dioxide is carried back to the lungs where it is breathed out. If you breathe faster however, you will be inhaling more oxygen than you need, forcing your body to expel any available carbon dioxide from the arteries.

In short, this can cause an imbalance leading to a rise in the pH level of the blood. This in turn can lead to vascular constriction, resulting in diminished blood flow to the brain and other parts of the body, contributing to panic symptoms. Over time the kidneys may compensate by lowering the pH level, but the person remains in a precarious balance which, in the presence of even a mild stressor, can easily become symptomatic again.

Attack Anxiety Effectively

1. **Create an enduring anxiety buffer zone** (particularly useful for those who experience GAD). The most effective way to do this, is to regularly practice deep, diaphragmatic, soft belly breathing. Just three minutes of soft-belly breathing can shift your body out of the Stress Response mode into the Relaxation Response. And if you can maintain the Relaxation Response for just 20 minutes each day, you will go a long way toward counteracting the damaging effects of recurrent stress and anxiety on your body and create a powerful and lasting buffer against panic attacks.

2. **Keep a positive attitude.** When you allow negative thoughts to enter your mind, they overtake you and make you feel even more anxious. When you feel yourself allowing negative thoughts to enter your mind, try to replace them with a positive thought. You may be thinking to yourself, there is no way that I can put together this presentation my boss needs. Try replacing it with, I am an intelligent person and I know I can do this presentation. You may have to repeat this to yourself repeatedly to get the bad thoughts out of your mind, but you will find that with practice it gets easier to replace negative thoughts with positive ones. You might learn and repeat affirmations, like the following ones by Louise Hay that I love to use: *“In the Infinity of Life where I am, all is perfect, whole and complete,” “I am now totally centred in the love and joy of being alive. I flow with life. Peace of mind is mine,” “I am safe. All pressure dissolves. I am good enough,”* or *“I am safe everywhere in the Universe. I love myself and trust the process of life.”*
3. **Forget everything else and pay attention to your breathing.** When you feel an anxiety attack coming on, try to stop whatever you are doing and take in a deep breath through your nose. Hold it for a few seconds and then blow it out hard through your mouth. Holding your breath for as long as you comfortably can will prevent the dissipation of carbon dioxide. A period of 10–15 seconds, repeated a few times, is sufficient.

Try the 7/11 technique – this is a simple but powerful technique that is easy to do. It has an immediate beneficial effect and takes the following form:

Inhale to a count of seven

Exhale to a count of eleven

The reason for making the out-breath last longer is that inhalation has been shown to trigger the sympathetic nervous system (arousal) and exhalation stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system (the Relaxation Response).

By breathing out more slowly than breathing in, you strengthen the Relaxation Response over the arousal or Stress Response. If someone is hyperventilating, however, you need to start at a rate that feels comfortable for them, perhaps starting by inhaling to a count of 3 and exhaling to a count of 6, then gradually building up to 5/8 and then 7/11. The important thing to remember is to make the length of the out breaths longer than the in-breaths.

4. Another thing you can do when having a panic attack, is trying to **remove yourself from the situation**. Go out for a walk, listen to your favourite music, or read a book. Many times, just removing yourself from a situation that is causing the anxiety attack can help you to calm down.
5. **Try doing some exercise** - while breathing in and out through your nose. Running, brisk walking, going up and down stairs. Turn on an aerobics tape and exercise. Go for a jog, do some calisthenics, do some relaxing yoga or just turn on some music and dance. Exercise helps improve your blood flow and helps regulate your breathing.
6. Another technique for how to stop a panic attack naturally is to figure out ways to **'ground' yourself before it happens**. One suggested approach for this grounding is to drink a glass of cold water or to hold an ice cube in the hand. Another way is to start to speak out loud, mentioning the things you see around you. These techniques help you to stop focusing on the issue that is causing the panic attack and helps you to refocus on the world around you.

Cure Panic Attacks Fast

People who have experienced panic attacks often go around with a grave sense of unease that at any moment, they will experience a major panic attack. It's a fear of the ultimate panic attack that would finally push them over the edge. This leads people to make changes to their behaviour in order not to do anything that might trigger a panic episode.

When people feel this way, simple daily tasks can become big challenges. Some people start to fear driving their car in traffic. Others fear leaving their safe zone or simply any situation where they have responsibilities to perform. This state of apprehension keeps a person's anxiety level high, leading to feelings of general anxiety.

If you are such a person, I hope to put your mind at rest. Panic attacks as well as general anxiety (even when not accompanied by panic disorder) can be eliminated in simple steps regardless of how long the anxiety has been a problem.

Here is an important observation: The key difference between someone who has cured panic attacks and those who are not cured is really very simple. The one who is cured is not afraid of panic attacks. I'll try to show you how to become one of these people as well.

What if I told you the trick to ending panic attacks is to want to have one! That sounds strange but let me explain.

A simple trick to ending panic attacks is wanting to have one because the wanting causes an immediate diffusion of the anticipatory fear. Can you have a panic attack in this very second? No!

You know the saying "what you resist persists." Well that saying applies perfectly to fear. If you resist a situation out of fear, the fear around that issue will persist.

How do you stop resisting? You move directly into the path of the anxiety; by doing so it cannot persist because you process the fear out through your emotions.

Try in this very moment to have a panic attack and I will bet you cannot... Yes, I know the idea of calling on a panic attack is scary at first but play with the concept and watch what happens.

You may not realize it, but you have always decided to panic. You make the choice by thinking "This is beyond my control." "These scary sensations are beyond my body's control."

It may help if you imagine that having a panic attack is like standing on a cliff edge. The anxiety, it seems, is pushing you closer to falling over the edge. Each time you fight back using poor coping strategies the more desperate you feel.

To be rid of the fear you must metaphorically jump. You must jump off the cliff edge and into the anxiety and fear and all the things that you fear most. How do you jump? You jump by wanting to have a panic attack. You go about your day asking for a panic attack to appear. Your real safety is the fact that a panic attack will never harm you. That is a medical fact.

You are safe. Yes, the sensations are wild and uncomfortable, but no harm will come to you. Your body is in a heightened state, but no harm will come to you. The jump becomes nothing more than a two-inch drop! You are safe. You always were.

Think of all the panic attacks you have had to date and come out the other end. Was there any lasting physical damage to you, other than the mounting feeling of panic? Now you are going to approach this problem differently. You actively seek out the attack like an adventure seeker. Take the opposite approach. YOU bring it on!!!

Tips to Help You with Your Treatment for Panic Attacks

If you use these tips, you'll find that your treatment will be faster and more lasting than if you attempt it without them. Of course, the sooner you eliminate panic and anxiety attacks from your life, the better off you are.

Tip Number 1

If you haven't done so already, get a complete physical. Sometimes panic attacks come from biological reasons. A thyroid imbalance can cause symptoms that include a panic attack. If you have an overactive thyroid or hyperthyroidism, you might have hyperventilation, increased heart rate, trembling, panic and increased sweating, urination or diarrhoea. If it sounds like the symptoms of a panic attack, it is.

Your body also sends out more adrenaline to increase your levels of sugar if you have hypoglycaemia or blood-glucose imbalance that can cause a panic attack. In these cases, reactive-hypoglycaemia and diabetes, you either have rapid insulin reaction or insulin resistance. The body sends out the increased adrenaline to encourage the body to produce more insulin and get the energy levels higher. The result may be a panic attack.

Mitral valve prolapsed can also cause panic attacks. Regardless of the cause of the attack, a visit to the doctor is always a good idea. If the panic attack is from a biological cause, you can address the issue. If, however, there is nothing wrong with you, then you also get that reassurance that can help you through your next attack. Of course, getting treatment for anxiety once you've found the problem isn't physical is important.

Tip Number 2

You don't have to take medication to get rid of panic attacks. Not all people use medication to eliminate panic attacks and anxiety attacks. In fact, studies show that those using cognitive or behavioural therapies have results that are more lasting. Some people may use medication for short-term benefits and use cognitive or behavioural treatment for anxiety for their long-term results.

Tip Number 3

Give yourself a break. You may logically know that it's all in your head but it sure is uncomfortable while you go through it. Talk yourself through the attack and don't blame yourself while it occurs or after the attack. It is what it is. Remember that the increased adrenaline takes a few minutes to get into your system and then starts to subside. If you can make it through the first few minutes, you'll soon be back to normal even without treatment for anxiety. Treat the onset of the attack like a television commercial. It's irritating but it will be over soon.

Nocturnal Panic Attacks

Not being able to sleep can actually be quite a traumatic. There are two things that keep us from falling asleep - a worry and or physical discomfort. In your case it is the worry that is keeping you up. Possibly the worry of an anxiety attack as you sleep, and the worry of not being able to sleep and how that will affect your performance the following day. It's a viscous cycle.

The exact causes for nocturnal panic attacks are not known. So, what we need to help you do is reduce the frequency of them and if they do happen, to come out of them quickly.

We know that most nocturnal panic attacks are not caused by dreams. Records of sleep show a maximum of panic attacks during early sleep phase (phase II) , not during the REM-phases associated with dreams. This is a major difference to nightmares. Nightmares happen during the second half of the night, so we are often able to remember the content of these dreams.

When awoken with a nocturnal panic attack, use the 7/11 technique – this is a simple but powerful technique that is easy to do. It has an immediate beneficial effect and takes the following form:

Inhale to a count of seven
Exhale to a count of eleven

You will then probably find it takes you some time to get back to sleep as your mind is racing with all the things that could go wrong during the night. Have a journal beside your bed and start to write down all of the symptoms you are feeling.

"I was feeling xxx now I feel yyy" and continue to write until this actually becomes quite a boring exercise and your body and mind will want to return to sleep.

Writing down what you are feeling e.g. "now I feel less tired and eyelids heavy," is a simple tool for preparing your mind in a linear way to wind down and return to sleep (an advanced form of counting sheep). Don't be afraid of writing pages and pages of nothing in particular, what you are doing is helping the conscious mind release whatever is keeping it awake so it can relax and return to sleep.

It is also important when preparing for bed not to go to bed fearing you might awake with a nocturnal panic attack. Go to bed confident that if one should arise you will deal with it successfully. That way you do not put yourself under pressure to "not to have an anxiety attack". If you are overly anxious about not getting a good night sleep, then adopt the following attitude:

Each night as you retire say to yourself, "I am preparing for bed, but I will not try and force sleep - if it comes it comes - if not I will not beat myself up over it."

Every person goes through periods of sleeplessness from time to time it is very natural, you may not be aware of why you are experiencing what you do, but at the very least you can accept it.

When you wake in the night don't leave your bed; try and stay there, getting up and watching television, etc., takes you further out of the sleep pattern. It is best you stay in bed - reading/writing is fine but always do so lying down, as that sends a message to the brain that it really is bedtime.

Naturally the best way to get a good night's sleep is a good physical workout each evening. This is very effective as the mind may try and keep you awake but the sheer physical exhaustion will bring sleep on quicker.

The frustration at not being able to sleep is important to surrender. Surrender to whatever may or may not happen during the course of a night and you will sleep naturally. It is the anger and frustration that most often keeps you awake.

SparkNotes from Harvard University

So, they've done it again. The folks at Harvard University have managed to distil stress relief into SparkNotes (or Cliffs Notes for those of you over the age of 35). This mini-therapy session will have you seeing the glass half-full in no time and leave that co-pay cash in your pocket to enjoy the holiday season. Whether you have one minute or half an hour, you'll find ways to ease your day.

Take the sting out of 10 common stressors. Sometimes just thinking about embarking on a program of stress control can be stressful. Start small and bask in the glow of your successes. Give yourself a week to focus on practical solutions that could help you cope with just one stumbling block or source of stress in your life. Pick a problem and see if these suggestions work for you.

Frequently late? Apply time-management principles. Consider your priorities (be sure to include time for yourself) and delegate or discard unnecessary tasks. Map out your day, segment by segment, setting aside time for different tasks, such as writing or phone calls. If you are overly optimistic about travel time, consistently give yourself an extra 15 minutes or more to get to your destinations. If lateness stems from dragging your heels, consider the underlying issue. Are you anxious about what will happen after you get to work or to a social event, for example?

Often angry or irritated? Consider the weight of cognitive distortions. Are you magnifying a problem, leaping to conclusions, or applying emotional reasoning? Take the time to stop, breathe, reflect, and choose.

Unsure of your ability to do something? Don't try to go it alone. If the problem is work, talk to a co-worker or supportive boss. Ask a knowledgeable friend or call the local library or an organization that can supply the information you need. Write down other ways that you might get the answers or skills you need. Turn to CD's, books, or classes, for example, if you need a little tutoring. This works equally well when you're learning relaxation response techniques, too.

Overextended? Clear the deck of at least one time-consuming household task. Hire a house-cleaning service, shop for groceries through the Internet, convene a family meeting to consider who can take on certain jobs, or barter with or pay teens for work around the house and yard. Consider what is truly essential and important to you and what might take a backseat right now.

Not enough time for stress relief? Try mini relaxations. Or make a commitment to yourself to pare down your schedule for just one week so you can practice the Relaxation Response every day. Slowing down to pay attention to just one task or pleasure at hand is an excellent method of stress relief.

Feeling unbearably tense? Try massage, a hot bath, mini relaxations, a body scan, or a mindful walk. Practically any exercise – a brisk walk, a quick run, a sprint up and down the stairs – will help, too. Done regularly, exercise wards off tension, as do relaxation response techniques.

Frequently feel pessimistic? Remind yourself of the value of learned optimism: a more joyful life and, quite possibly, better health. Practice deflating cognitive distortions. Rent funny movies and read amusing books. Create a mental list of reasons you have to feel grateful. If the list seems too short, consider beefing up your social network and adding creative, productive, and leisure pursuits to your life.

Upset by conflicts with others? State your needs or distress directly, avoiding "you always" or "you never" zingers. Say, "I feel _____when you ____." "I would really appreciate it if you could ____." "I need some help setting priorities. What needs to be done first and what should I tackle later?" If conflicts are a significant source of distress for you, consider taking a class on assertiveness training.

Worn out or burned out? Focus on self-nurturing techniques. Carve out time to practice the Relaxation Response or at least indulge in mini relaxations. Care for your body by eating good, healthy food and for your heart by seeking out others.

Give thought to creative, productive, and leisure activities. Consider your priorities in life: is it worth feeling this way, or is another path open to you? If you want help, consider what kind would be best. Do you want the job taken off your hands? Do you want to do it at a later date? Do you need someone with particular expertise to assist you?

Feeling lonely? Connect with others. Even little connections – a brief conversation in line at the grocery store, an exchange about local goings-on with a neighbour, a question for a colleague – can help melt the ice within you. It may embolden you, too, to seek more opportunities to connect. Be a volunteer. Attend religious or community functions. Suggest coffee with an acquaintance. Call a friend or relative you miss. Take an interesting class. If social anxiety, low self-esteem, or depression is dampening your desire to reach out, seek help. The world is a kinder, more wondrous place when you share its pleasures and burdens.

Meditation on the go! Meditation can evoke the relaxation response and appears to have health benefits as well. It's also simple to perform. Here's how to get started:

Choose a mental device to help you focus.

Silently repeat a word, sound, prayer, or phrase (such as "one," "peace," "Om," or "breathing in calm"). You may close your eyes if you like or focus your gaze on an object.

Adopt a passive attitude.

Disregard distracting thoughts or concerns about how well you're doing. Any time your attention drifts, simply say, "Oh, well" to yourself and return to silently repeating your focus word or phrase.

Now slowly relax your muscles...

Moving your attention gradually from your face to your feet. Breathe easily and naturally while using your focal device for 10 to 20 minutes. After you finish, sit quietly for a minute or so with your eyes closed. Then open your eyes and wait another minute before standing up.

Try to practice this meditation daily for 10 to 20 minutes, preferably at a specific time each day.

Try a mini relaxation. Mini relaxations can help allay fear and reduce pain while you sit in the dentist's chair. They're equally helpful in thwarting stress before an important meeting, while stuck in traffic, or when faced with people or situations that annoy you. Here are a few quick relaxation techniques to try.

When you've got 1 minute:

Place your hand just beneath your navel so you can feel the gentle rise and fall of your belly as you breathe. Breathe in slowly. Pause for a count of three. Breathe out. Pause for a count of three. Continue to breathe deeply for one minute, pausing for a count of three after each inhalation and exhalation. Alternatively, while sitting comfortably, take a few slow deep breaths and quietly repeat to yourself "I am" as you breathe in and "at peace" as you breathe out. Repeat slowly two or three times. Then feel your entire body relax into the support of the chair.

When you've got 2 minutes:

Count down slowly from 10 to zero. With each number, take one complete breath, inhaling and exhaling. For example, breathe in deeply saying "10" to yourself. Breathe out slowly. On your next breath, say "nine," and so on. If you feel lightheaded, count down more slowly to space your breaths further apart. When you reach zero, you should feel more relaxed. If not, go through the exercise again.

When you've got 3 minutes:

While sitting down, take a break from whatever you're doing and check your body for tension. Relax your facial muscles and allow your jaw to fall open slightly. Let your shoulders drop. Let your arms fall to your sides. Allow your hands to loosen so that there are spaces between your fingers. Uncross your legs or ankles. Feel your thighs sink into your chair, letting your legs fall comfortably apart. Feel your shins and calves become heavier and your feet grow roots into the floor. Now breathe in slowly and breathe out slowly.

When you've got 5 minutes:

Try self-massage. A combination of strokes works well to relieve muscle tension. Try gentle chops with the edge of your hands or tapping with fingers or cupped palms. Put fingertip pressure on muscle knots. Knead across muscles, and try long, light, gliding strokes. You can apply these strokes to any part of the body that falls easily within your reach. For a short session like this, try focusing on your neck and head.

Start by kneading the muscles at the back of your neck and shoulders. Make a loose fist and drum swiftly up and down the sides and back of your neck. Next, use your thumbs to work tiny circles around the base of your skull. Slowly massage the rest of your scalp with your fingertips. Then tap your fingers against your scalp, moving from the front to the back and then over the sides. Now massage your face. Make a series of tiny circles with your thumbs or fingertips. Pay particular attention to your temples, forehead, and jaw muscles. Use your middle fingers to massage the bridge of your nose and work outward over your eyebrows to your temples. Finally, close your eyes. Cup your hands loosely over your face and inhale and exhale easily for a short while.

When you've got 10 minutes:

Try imagery. Start by sitting comfortably in a quiet room. Breathe deeply for a few minutes. Now picture yourself in a place that conjures up good memories. What do you smell – the heavy scent of roses on a hot day, crisp fall air, the wholesome smell of baking bread? What do you hear? Drink in the colours and shapes that surround you. Focus on sensory pleasures: the swoosh of a gentle wind; soft, cool grass tickling your feet; the salty smell and rhythmic beat of the ocean. Passively observe intrusive thoughts, and then gently disengage from them to return to the world you've created.

Keep a gratitude journal. Reflecting on the positive experiences, feelings, and relationships in your life can bring you greater joy. A gratitude journal is a good way to acknowledge the things that brighten your life and help you turn your focus away from negative thoughts and feelings.

Keep a journal by your bed so that at the end of each day, you can spend five to 10 minutes writing about something that you were grateful for in your day. Savour pleasant sights, sounds, and experiences – a sunset, the birds chirping outside your window, a hug from your child, or a call from a friend. Celebrate accomplishments large and small – learning to master a new hobby, doing well on a project at work or getting the kids off to school on time.

Conjure up the scene in your mind and try to write about it in detail. Then, spend a few minutes soaking in the experience again. You can also use this journal to reflect on things from the past that you are grateful for.

Deflate cognitive distortions. When you recognize negative thoughts cropping up, take the following steps.

Stop: Consciously call a mental time-out.

Breathe: Take a few deep breaths to help release tension.

Reflect: Ask some hard questions. Is this thought or belief true? Did I jump to a conclusion? What evidence do I actually have? Am I letting negative thoughts balloon? Is there another way to view the situation? What would be the worst that could happen? Does it help me to think this way?

Choose: Decide how to deal with the source of your stress. If distortion is the root of the problem, can you recognize this and let go? Is the problem or constraint a real one or is it one of your mind's making? If the problem is real, are there practical steps you can take to cope with it? Practicing a mini relaxation may also help.

Make a worry box. Everyone gets distracted by worries and concerns, but sometimes these worries can spill over, seeping into the fabric of your day. Having a place to contain your worries – literally – may help you set them aside so that you can focus on the more pleasurable or meaningful parts of your life.

Begin by finding or making a worry box. Any box will do. This is a great exercise for children, but youngsters may find it even more appealing if they can decorate the box as they like and keep it in a special place.

At the end of the day, take a few minutes to write down two or three of your concerns on slips of paper and place them inside the box. Or if the box is handy, you can write down worries as each crop up and drop your worries into the box throughout the day.

The worry box allows you to mentally let go of your worries. Once your worries are deposited in the box, try to turn your attention to other matters. What you do with your slips of paper is up to you. Some people choose to throw out the notes without reading them again while others benefit from looking through them periodically before tossing them away. In that case, you may be surprised to find that most of your worrying was fruitless; the scenarios you imagined never came to pass.



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