

Effective Strategies for Managing Stress and Anxiety

Is the quality of your life being affected by feelings of anxiety or panic attacks? Are you dwelling upon situations in your life in a way that is not helpful? As a therapist I frequently encounter people who are experiencing feelings of anxiety that are seriously restricting their lives. Although not harmful in itself, anxiety can cause unpleasant sensations and can sometimes be extremely debilitating. Anxiety is a natural human response when you feel under pressure and you are struggling to cope with challenging situations. Recognising some of the early warning signs of stress and anxiety can be a real support in helping you to manage the feelings and cope better. The most common symptoms of anxiety include excessive sweating, palpitations, tension headaches and feelings of nausea or dizziness. When pressure builds up and the anxiety becomes extreme, it can turn into a full-blown panic attack, which can feel very frightening.

Developing strategies to manage stress, anxiety and panic attacks can help you to cope much more effectively when you experience some of the more distressing symptoms. It is important to identify major sources of stress, to anticipate stressful periods in your life and actively plan for them. Building in a regular relaxation practice, such as the one outlined below, can really help to reduce feelings of stress and anxiety, bringing greater balance to your life.

Relaxation Technique

Set aside a regular time each day when you are not going to be interrupted or disturbed in any way. Sit or lie down in a position that supports your body. If you are sitting, make sure that your feet are firmly placed on the ground. Also, ensure that your thighs and buttocks are well supported and that your back is straight, with your shoulders, neck and head aligned.

Start by taking some long, slow, deep breaths and feel yourself completely supported by the chair or ground beneath you. Bring your attention to your feet and on the in-breath, tense the muscles in your feet until you feel both feet becoming completely tense. Hold this position to a count of 5, then slowly on the out-breath, relax your toes and feet. As you do this, bring your awareness to the support of the earth and sense the warmth spreading up to your thighs. Now, on the in-breath, tense your buttocks and thighs, hold this to a count of 5, and then slowly release. Notice the warmth spreading through your body and be aware of how your body is being supported by the ground, your feet and legs.

Now, go through each part of your body in turn, your abdomen, chest, arms and hands, tensing the muscles on the in-breath, holding to a count of 5 and then letting go on the out-breath. Move up to your shoulders and neck, tense them, again holding to a count of 5, feeling the warmth spreading down your arms, and then gently relax. Finally, screw up your face, hold this position to a count of 5 and then fully let go of all the tension you have been holding.

Focus on your breathing and allow yourself to rest in a place of complete calm and relaxation. Stay in that position for 2 or 3 minutes, allowing the feelings of warmth and relaxation to bathe your brain, filling the whole of your head with healing light,

and then spreading through your whole body, washing away all tension and worries, cleansing and revitalising your body.

If you still find that you keep going over and over your problems in your head, you may need to seek professional help from a counsellor or therapist, who is trained in working with these issues. It can be difficult to address deep-seated obsessive patterns of thinking on your own.

Some Final Tips to Lessen Stress and Anxiety:

- Identify your major sources of anxiety and develop constructive strategies to deal with them
- Don't dwell upon situations in your life that make you feel anxious
- Whenever possible find ways of distracting yourself from your worries
- Learn to assert yourself by saying 'No' to things you don't want to do without feeling guilty
- Pay attention to lifestyle factors such as diet, exercise, relaxation and intake of substances
- Aim to eat a balanced diet and to use alcohol and caffeine in moderation or not at all
- Don't bottle up your feelings
- Open up to others and draw upon support from them

Think about what it is costing you to live with constant anxiety. Are you willing to do something about it?

For further information about how counselling or psychotherapy can help you, check out our website www.healingconnections.com

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