

TIP SHEET FOR MANAGING ANXIETY

Anxiety – what is it?

Anxiety is a feeling of apprehension. The reasons behind this feeling may or may not be realistic. However, the anxious thoughts can threaten our feelings of wellbeing and ability to cope with life.

From time to time, we all feel anxious. Meeting deadlines for assignments, driving in heavy traffic, giving oral presentations or receiving large bills may all be situations where we feel anxious. It is quite normal to feel concerned when approached by a snarling dog or to feel nervous as exam dates get nearer. Sometimes mild anxiety helps us achieve our goals, but, high levels of anxiety have the opposite effect. Anxiety can be disruptive to daily living, making it difficult to function effectively and to achieve things that are usually not a problem.

One of the first steps to overcoming Anxiety is to understand how you experience it. Signs of anxiety can show themselves in the following three ways:

- In our bodies with physical symptoms including shallow breathing, tense muscles, headaches, nausea, butterflies in your tummy, upset stomach, dry mouth, sweating, shaking, heart palpitations.
- In the way we think such as “This will never end”; “I’m not going to get through”; “I’m losing control”; “I must be going mad”; “What if.....?” “I can’t face it”.
- In the way we behave as we try to do things to decrease the anxiety e.g. we may avoid people, places or situations which are likely to make us feel more anxious. Using alcohol, tobacco or recreational drugs may only make the anxiety worse. It can be difficult to sleep, to get organized and to meet deadlines.

What can I do to help myself?

Self-knowledge is power

Learn to read the signals that you are becoming anxious. Then you will be able to find ways to get some control before it increases. What is happening in your body? What are you saying to yourself? Make a conscious effort to reduce your expectations of yourself, and praise yourself for achievements, however small they appear. Notice when you make progress. Write down your achievements on palm cards. For example: “Read one article for an assignment” or “Cleaned the bathroom”. Have a box where you can put these cards, along with any cards from friends or awards or anything that has made you feel good in the past.

Observe and control your thoughts

Jot down the thoughts that run through your mind when you are anxious. Are they helpful or unhelpful to you? You are likely to catastrophise when you are anxious. This involves repeatedly imagining the worst outcomes of a situation. Try to avoid this by creating a mental image of a stop sign in your mind each time you catch yourself being tripped up by that spiral of negative thinking. Don’t compare yourself with others. Everyone has their own strengths, including you!

Anxiety is frequently associated with thoughts of the future. Bring yourself back to the present by thinking: “What is so scary about right now?” Concentrate your mind on staying in the present by focusing on something small in your immediate surroundings – a brick, a leaf, carpet, table leg – and describe it in as much detail as you can until you feel the anxiety subside

Take care of your physical health

Look after yourself by eating a healthy diet and making the effort to exercise at least four times a week. You don't need to make this a strenuous activity. Brisk walks are very beneficial.

Have a check up with your doctor to make sure that there is no physical reason for your symptoms. Although there are medications available that quickly stop the symptoms of anxiety, doctors will usually only prescribe these in severe cases and for a short time. This is because they slow your reactions, cause drowsiness, and are highly addictive. They give only temporary relief from symptoms which return as soon as the medication is stopped. In some cases, especially where anxiety is associated with depression, antidepressants are a very effective treatment. These may take a few weeks to start working and most people need to take them for at least six months. They are not addictive and assist in overcoming the cause of anxiety rather than just treating the symptoms.

Work to get a balance in your life

The more we can understand our Anxiety, the more likely it is that we can find ways to get some control. Try to look at what is causing you to feel anxious and whether or not some of the factors are open to change. Be proactive about getting control in those areas where you can change things. Are you trying to do too much? Do you need to let go of some of the demands on your time? Seek help from others. Set aside some 'Worry Time' each day where you can spend up to 30 minutes writing down anything you want about your situation. Here, you can catastrophise as much as you want! Talk to a trusted friend about how you feel. Notice that there are times when Anxiety doesn't have as strong a hold in your life.

Develop your own relaxation exercise

When we are anxious, our breathing is shallow, irregular and fast. To manage anxiety, therefore, we need to practise controlling our breathing so that it becomes slow, deep and regular. We can combine our breathing exercise with a meditation, focusing on something beautiful like a candle flame or flower or beautiful stone. There are many CDs which you can borrow from the library or you could create your own exercise by recording your own voice as you read from a relaxation transcript. Once you are familiar with the sequence, you may not need a tape or CD at all. Practise breathing slowly in through the nose and out through the mouth. You can do this several times a day when you are making a cup of tea or coffee, sitting at traffic lights or waiting for a bus, or just before you get out of bed in the morning.

We wish you the best of luck in your efforts to manage anxiety. If you find any other techniques which are useful, please let us know so that we can pass on your tip to other students.

Where can we get help from others?

- Talk to a counsellor at Newcastle campus) Tel 4921 5801 or at the Central Coast campus Tel 4348 4060.
- Make an appointment to see your doctor.
- Lifeline 131 114 offers a 24-hour service, as do the Psychiatric Emergency Centre (1 800 655 085) for the Hunter region or the Central Intake (4320 3500) for the Central Coast area.

What other resources are available?

Websites:

www.anxietynetwork.com.au Provides information, education and support to consumers, carers, health practitioners and the wider community on all aspects of Anxiety

www.uq.edu.au/student-services/index.html?page=51694&pid=1194 The University of Queensland has a link for online self-paced learning modules, with one of them 'What? Me Worry?' designed to help manage anxiety. Each module includes information, worksheets, and suggested exercises or activities.

Books:

Aisbett, B. (1993). Living with It: A survivor's guide to Panic Attacks.

Brantley, J. (2003). Calming your Anxious Mind: How Mindfulness and Compassion can free you from Anxiety, Fear and Panic. Oakland: New Harbinger Publications.

DuPont, R.L., DuPont, E., & DuPont C.M. (2003). Anxiety Cure: An eight-Step Program for Getting Well. Sydney: Wiley & Sons.

Peurifoy, R.Z. (2005). Anxiety, Phobias and Panic: A step-by-step guide for regaining control of your life. NY: Warner Books.

CDs/ DVDs: Montgomery, B. & Morris, L. (2007). Living with Anxiety.

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