



Work Life Services Newsletter October 2020
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COVID-19: Returning to Work for Employees & Employers

Don't Let Anxiety Control Your Life

Anxiety is familiar to everyone due to the many stresses and complexities of modern life, but about 25 percent of U.S. adults have a serious problem with anxiety that must be addressed at some time in their lives. "Unlike fear, which is usually directed toward a concrete thing or event, such as a snarling dog or not meeting a deadline, anxiety is often nonspecific and can be brought on by worrying about the future, your finances or your health, in general," says Edmund Bourne, Ph.D., author of *Coping With Anxiety*.

"Anxiety can appear in different forms and at different levels of intensity and can range in severity from a mere twinge of uneasiness to a full-blown panic attack." The causes of anxiety are varied and include upsets in brain chemistry, heredity, childhood trauma, abuse, chronic stress, loss of a loved one, and drug and alcohol abuse, to name a few. "While it can be helpful to identify possible causes of anxiety and address them, you don't need to know why you feel anxious to be helped by practicing coping strategies," says Dr. Bourne.

Coping strategies

The following practices are helpful for anyone with anxiety and may be all that's needed if your anxiety level is mild and not disrupting your life. People with more severe anxiety, including anyone dealing with panic or post-traumatic stress disorder, will still find the exercises helpful but also may need therapy and medication.

These exercises can be done individually or in any combination:

Take calming breaths: This exercise quickly interrupts the momentum of anxiety symptoms. Breathing from your abdomen, inhale through your nose slowly to a count of five. Pause and hold your breath to a count of five. Exhale slowly to a count of five. Take two normal breaths, then repeat the cycle for three to five minutes.

Stop magnifying problems: Exaggerating problems by making them seem bigger and more serious than they are can lead to anxiety. To combat this way of thinking, stop using words such as terrible, awful, or horrendous in relation to events or situations in your life. Instead of saying to yourself, "It's unbearable," or "I can't stand it," try saying, "I can cope" and "I can deal with and survive this."

Stop worrisome thoughts: Use this strategy if you find yourself stuck in a spiral of worrisome thoughts that won't go away. "If you're alone and want to halt a chain of anxious thoughts, shout in a loud and forceful manner, 'Stop!' or 'Stop it!'" says Dr. Bourne. "If you're with other people, shout internally as you visualize a large stop sign." Every time the worrisome thoughts return, repeat the spoken or internal command to yourself.

Shift your point of view: When anxiety or worry about an actual or possible problem is getting the best of you, try thinking about the situation in the following ways:

- Tell yourself you can lighten up about it.
- Say the affirmation, "This too shall pass."
- Realize it's not likely to be as bad as your worst thoughts about it.

Combat negative self-talk: Positive affirmations can help you cope with anxiety in the moment and over the long-term by helping you change long-standing beliefs, which tend to enable anxiety. To make your thoughts more constructive and supportive, replace or refute each negative statement. For example, replace "This is unbearable" with "I can learn to cope with this." Or, replace "What if this goes on without stopping?" with "I'll deal with this one day at a time."

"Resisting or fighting anxiety is likely to make it worse," says Dr. Bourne. "A more constructive approach is to cultivate an attitude that says, 'OK, here it is again. I can handle this. I've done it before.' In most cases, anxiety peaks and begins to subside in a few minutes. It will pass more quickly if you practice coping strategies regularly when you start to feel anxious."