



Adult Anxiety:

10 Strategies to Combat Worried Thoughts, Intense Emotions, and Unproductive Behaviors



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Anxiety disorders are one of the most common mental disorders in the United States with at least 40 million adults being affected. It is estimated that 18 percent of adults have at least one anxiety disorder and that, if left untreated, these adults are more likely to have anxious children at a higher risk for academic failures, social struggles, and substance abuse (ADAA.org). The good news is that anxiety can be prevented and easily treated.

We all struggle with anxiety at times. Anxiety is normal and is often helpful. When it becomes extremely bothersome or heavily interferes with life, then it's a problem. There are many strategies that you can use to help prevent your anxious tendencies from developing into an anxiety disorder. If your anxiety has already developed into the level of an anxiety disorder, you can still use these strategies to help reduce your worried thoughts, intense emotional reactions, and bothersome behaviors.

WHEN IS ANXIETY GOOD?:

If we are truly in a threatening situation, anxiety can make us act quickly enough to save ourselves. If a car is about to hit us, our intense anxiety will motivate us to jump out of the way without wasting time thinking about our options. So, we should be very happy that we have an anxiety system that protects us from danger.

Anxiety can also help us perform difficult tasks optimally. According to the Yerkes-Dodson curve, being anxious helps motivate us to perform well but only up to a certain point. After this point, the anxiety hinders our performance. Extreme anxiety can hinder our performance because:

- It exhausts us. Our body's preparation to fight a threat or run away from a threat can deplete our energy.
- We are focused on our worried thoughts instead of the task at hand.

10 Strategies to Combat Anxiety:

WHEN IS ANXIETY "BAD"?

Anxiety is a normal human emotion, but when it causes significant amounts of distress and/or gets in the way of your social, academic, occupational, or other area of functioning, it's considered clinically significant and could be characterized as *disordered anxiety*.

Examples of *significant distress* include:

- physical symptoms such as headaches or stomachaches
- frequently asking for reassurance
- difficulty falling or staying asleep
- extreme irritability
- yelling
- ruminating about a threatening situation



Examples of *impairment* include:

- Academic difficulties
- Occupational difficulties
- Failure to make or keep friends
- Avoiding new people, places, and experiences
- Refusing to engage in activities in which you might not perform perfectly (perfectionism)
- Trouble maintaining intimate relationships

Have realistic expectations. Every person has different strengths and weaknesses, so it is not helpful to compare yourself to others. Start with attainable goals for *you*, and set yourself up for success.

Accept your feelings. Remind yourself that your feelings are a normal human emotion but that they are just out of proportion. There is nothing wrong with you because you feel anxious. Think of your anxiety as your brain setting off a "sensitive and false alarm."

Keep a thought diary. Many people with anxiety report feeling more in control of their worries when they write down their worried thoughts and worried feelings. Not only does this help organize your mind but it gives you another emotional outlet instead of losing your cool with your loved ones.

Avoid safety behaviors. You want to learn that the situation is not threatening and that you have the ability to cope with difficult situations. If you frequently ask others to save you from anxiety-provoking experiences or avoid these situations altogether, you will convince yourself that (a) the situation was, in fact, a threat and (b) you are not capable of dealing with your own struggles. When you believe your world is threatening and that you can't cope, this is a "breeding ground" for anxiety.

Educate yourself about anxiety. It is so important in every aspect of our lives to have accurate information. Understanding what anxiety is, what it means, what it does not mean, how it helps us, and how it hurts us can help you feel more in control and less alone.

Give anxiety a name. This might seem silly at first, but by calling your anxiety a "bully" or even a real name like "Suzie" or "John", you separate the worry from you. It helps you to remember that there is nothing wrong with you and gives you an enemy to fight.

Use thinking exercises. Anxious people often overestimate the likelihood of a threat and underestimate their abilities to cope. It's not always helpful to "think positively" - you want to think *realistically*. By (a) identifying the worried thought, (b) considering the evidence supporting and refuting the worried thought, and (c) coming up with a more realistic thought, you will learn how to accurately perceive your world which can lead to less anxiety.

Use relaxation techniques. Deep breathing, involving slowly breathing in and slowly breathing out, stops the body's fight or flight response when it perceives itself to be in danger. Relaxation can also involve tensing and relaxing major muscles groups (legs, arms, hands, etc.). This strategy should be used in combination with others so that these techniques don't become safety behaviors. If you use relaxation without also using the thinking exercises (mentioned above) and exposure (mentioned below), then you could be in a cycle of having anxiety, using relaxation, having anxiety again when the trigger occurs, using relaxation again, etc.

Expose yourself to the feared situation. The paradox of anxiety management is that you need to face the fears that you've been avoiding. The strongest and most long-lasting learning comes from direct experience. Identify your worry, make a list of steps that approximate the worry, engage in each step of the exposure until each step induces very little, if any, anxiety, and then reward yourself for a job well done.

Take care of yourself. Consult your medical doctor about an appropriate diet and exercise plan for you. Staying healthy can be a huge mood booster! Scheduling pleasurable activities can also boost your mood not only because you are engaging in something you enjoy but it reduces the amount of energy you put into ruminating about your worried thoughts.