

Managing Anxiety

Basic Understandings

Anxiety is a reaction to a situation one perceives as stressful or dangerous. This reaction produces a stress response in your body—your brain alerts your sympathetic nervous system to release adrenaline and cortisol to get you out of harm's way. This is a good thing when there is a real threat of danger.

If you have anxiety, that stress response can kick in when it shouldn't. You feel very much the way you do when in a dangerous situation...but there's no real danger present. Instead of being helpful, this “misfiring” of your fight/flight/freeze reaction can hinder you. **Anxiety is *discomfort*, not *danger*. What is a useful (and necessary) response for danger is opposite to what is useful for discomfort.**

A little anxiety can help you to perform at an optimal level under stress, giving you a burst of adrenaline and hyper-focus to finish a business proposal before deadline or nail that dance number at a performance. Living in a constantly heightened state of anxiety, however, can be distracting at best and debilitating at worst.

Anxiety Disorders are characterized by a sense of doubt and vulnerability about future events. The attention of anxious people is focused on their future prospects, and the fear that those future prospects will be bad. Anxiety Disorders are characterized by a variety of symptoms involving anxious thoughts, unexplained physical sensations, and avoidant or self-protective behaviors.

When anxious thoughts are interfering with your life and causing you significant distress, it isn't something you should just “chalk up” to nerves and push through. **If anxiety interferes with your daily life—whatever that might look like to you—that's reason enough to see a mental health professional.**

Such interference may involve something along these lines:

- Your world starts to become limited because of anxiety. It's negatively impacting your relationships, your sleep, health, work, and ability to learn and pursue things that are important to you.
- You may not be getting enough sleep because you're up all night worrying about the next day. Anxiety over certain tasks may be leading to avoidance behaviors so extreme that they result in unpleasant consequences.
- Anger and irritability can sometimes be a sign of anxiety. If you have a shorter fuse or are always on edge for triggers, it could be related to anxiety.

Anxiety and depression are often, but not always, experienced together. They are not the same. A person whose primary problem is depression, rather than anxiety, generally

doesn't show the same fear and uncertainty that people do with anxiety disorders. Depressed people are not so preoccupied with worrying about what might happen to them in the future. They think they already know what will happen, and they believe it will be bad; the same bad stuff that's happening to them now. (We'll deal more fully with depression at the next session.)

There are basically two kinds of treatment which clinical research has shown to be effective in overcoming anxiety disorders: cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and certain forms of medication

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Consider one or more of the following when helping a friend with anxiety

1. Be present ... genuinely loving...obviously approachable...without judgement. You might ask, "Would it help if I just sit here with you?"
2. Ask: "What can I do to be helpful right now?" Be aware that your anxious friend may not be able to think clearly enough at the moment to tell you what would be helpful. Be patient. Invite your friend to think about it later if that's more comfortable.
3. You might ask, "Are you looking for advice, or should I just listen?"
 - a. If listening, be fully attentive, closing out other thoughts.
 - b. Good listening involves appropriate curiosity and meaningful questions without needing to know intimate details.
 - c. Empathy is a part of listening, only minimally telling "your own story" if at all.
 - d. It's more helpful to ask, "Why do you think that is?", rather than, "How does that make you feel?"
 - e. Encourage your friend to allow anxious thoughts to "proceed". i.e. "What do you think will be asked at the interview?", etc.
4. If open to suggestions, consider the following possibilities:
 - a. The number one consideration is getting good **sleep**. Did you know:
 - Blue lighting can upset the circadian rhythm for good sleep;
 - Wi-fi signal in the bedroom upsets cellular function;
 - Establish "Screen-free" zones (bedroom, dinner table, car ride, etc.);
 - "Parking lot" for electronics one hour before bedtime.
 - b. Another important consideration is **nutrition**.
 - Salmon, sweet potatoes, and oranges are known to help manage anxiety;
 - Turkey and avocado are considered to provide a calming effect;
 - Discuss the level of caffeine intake. Coffee and caffeinated teas should either be eliminated, or limited to one cup per day (if necessary). Caffeine abuse is highly problematic for individuals with anxiety.

- (See list of superfoods at www.superfoodsrx.com)
- c. A powerful anxiety antidote is **exercise**.
 - It helps bring release from built up stress;
 - It provides the feeling that one is “doing something”;
 - It can distract from unwelcome thoughts by requiring “other” focus;
 - Some examples include: jogging; bicycling; hiking; dance classes; tennis; volleyball; soccer; Tai chi; yoga; karate classes; weight training; marathon running; various team sports.
 - d. Breathing exercises provide a route to “calm”, and keeping calm in the presence of your anxious friend is one of the “silver bullets” for anxiety.
 - e. Daily and meaningful engagement in God’s Word, and prayer provide access to peace and calm.
 - f. Journaling can be helpful to savor life’s pleasures.
 - Encourage an anxious friend to retell an experience.
 - A gratitude journal has the ability to “redirect” attention during the day.
5. If your friend is avoiding activities which produce anxiety, he or she is giving it more and more power in their life. Eventually, your friend will become anxious about being anxious.
 - a. Gradual exposure, step by manageable step is the objective to managing anxiety.
 - b. Do what you can to help your friend break free of “avoidance behavior”.
 - c. Set limits in your own mind as to your level of availability to your friend, and, during neutral moments, ask, “So, have you thought about what you’ll do when I’m “tied up” with other things, and unable to respond?”
 6. Let this reality guide and dominate your thoughts and interaction with your friend: “Our Heavenly Father knows what we need, and is eager to provide rich blessing for His children.” Consider Matthew 6:25-34; 7:11; Luke 12:25-26; Philippians 4:6. Let these assurances guide your prayers with and for your anxious friend (Remembering also, Isaiah 55:8-9: “My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts”, says the LORD. “And My ways are far beyond anything you could imagine. For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so My ways are higher than your ways.” (NLT)

Consider: *Anxiety Disorders Made Simple-treatment approaches to overcome fear and build resiliency.* by Daniel van Ingen, Psy.D. 2014. (\$19.99 at Amazon)

David A. Muench MDiv, MS, LMFT
402.525.1773 muenchda@gmail.com