

## Managing anxiety and panic

### *An integrative approach*

Millions of Americans suffer from anxiety — a state of being uneasy, apprehensive, or worried about what may happen, or feeling powerless and unable to cope with threatening events. Extreme anxiety can lead to panic attacks with symptoms including rapid heartbeat or palpitations, chest pain, shakiness, dizziness, faintness, shortness of breath, cold hands and feet, numbness and tingling in the hands and feet, intestinal distress, sweating, feelings of losing control, or feelings of disconnectedness from reality. Below are suggestions suggested by physicians and naturopaths that may work for you:

#### 1. Breathing techniques:

There are two particularly helpful techniques for calming anxiety. If you experience anxiety more than occasionally, you may be skilled at sensing when a panic attack is about to begin. That's often the most effective time to use these techniques:

##### *a. Deep diaphragmatic breathing*

- Lie on your back, placing your hands on your abdomen.
- Without trying, simply breathe naturally.
- Notice that your hands move slightly up and down with the abdomen.
- Then gradually, breath more slowly and deeply, first into the lower abdomen, then gradually into the rib cage, and finally, expand the lungs.
- Exhale in a long slow breath, ending with the abdomen.

As you get skilled at this technique, you can do it standing or sitting as well. Just relax the lower abdomen and stomach before you begin.

##### *b. Anxiety breath*

This technique is recommended to help calm panic/anxiety attacks.

- Place the tip of the tongue just behind the top teeth, touching the gums (where the "l" sound is made). The tongue remains in this position throughout the exercise.
- Inhale through the nostrils for a count of 4.
- Hold the breath for 7.
- Slowly exhale through pursed lips for a count of (like blowing soap bubbles).
- Repeat as often as desired.

This technique has a mild tranquilizing effect on the nervous system. It is not always easy to calm yourself in the middle of an anxiety or panic attack, so you should also try this technique just as you feel symptoms or signs that you may be about to have an attack. That's the most effective time to prevent it.

2. Learn to meditate. There are many excellent resources available. Meditation cultivates calmness, and the ability to experience life with equanimity, with less worry or judgment.
3. Regular exercise is invaluable, especially for those who are experiencing anxiety, mood swings, or depression. Aerobic exercise and any type of exercise that require periods of deep breathing (such as swimming, for example) have the most beneficial effect on anxiety and depression.
4. While walking, try a calming breathing technique called *Equal Measured Breathing*:
  - Inhale through the nostrils to a count of 5.
  - Hold the breath for 5.
  - Exhale through the nostrils for a count of 5.
  - Contract the throat very slightly as you do this exercise, to allow for a long, slow inhalation and exhalation. In fact, sing a long, single note first, to help place the throat in the right position.
  - Then begin this breathing exercise with the throat in the same position, but without the audible, vocal sound.
5. Some foods and herbs can be very helpful in reducing anxiety; others are known to increase anxiety. Before using any herb, consult with a

qualified medical professional, as prescription medications and herbs may sometimes interact.

- a. Three general tonics for the nerves are old fashioned whole oat groats (not instant or rolled oats), ginseng, and Siberian ginseng.
- b. Valerian is the herbal source for Valium, and is an effective natural tranquilizer without the side effects of the more concentrated drug. The liquid form seems more effective than capsules. Take a half dropper full in some warm liquid about 30 minutes before bed. If you plan to use during the day, consult with a naturopath for the correct dosage. Other herbal remedies considered safe for regular use include balm, chamomile, lavender, lime blossom, oats, scullcap, valerian, and wood betony.
- c. Rescue Remedy is a Bach flower essence for calming anxiousness.
- d. A primarily vegetarian diet can be helpful in reducing anxiety, with a concentration on vegetables, carbohydrates, nuts, and seeds. Foods high in essential fatty acids have been found to provide anxiety relief, including raw nuts and seeds, salmon, mackerel, trout, and raw flax seed oil. Vitamins that may be helpful: Vitamin B complex, C, Bioflavonoids, E, Magnesium, Potassium, Calcium, Zinc, Chromium and Manganese.
- e. Foods to avoid: caffeine (including chocolate), refined sugars (which are in most packaged foods), white flour, alcohol, food additives like aspartame (Nutrasweet), MSG, nitrates and nitrites, red meats, poultry, tobacco.
- f. Further discussion about caffeine: If you suffer from anxiety, you will want to strictly eliminate caffeine from your diet for a few weeks, and observe the results. Keep a daily journal and rate your anxiety with and without caffeine. It may take more than a few weeks of experimenting if you have been a long-time heavy coffee-drinker. If you are unable to completely give up caffeine, then take in no caffeine after 4 pm (including chocolate).

- g. There are stimulants in many drugs which people are unaware of and which may contribute to anxiety: pseudoephedrine (used in nasal decongestants), diet pills, asthma inhalers, some anti-depressants, and caffeine in some over-the-counter pain relievers. If you need to take any of these medications, arrange with your doctor to take them earlier in the day if possible, and not in the evening.
  - h. Soak for 20 minutes in a warm bathtub with 1 cup of sea salt and 1 cup of bicarbonate of soda.
6. Aromatherapy may be helpful. Try orange flower, sandalwood, verbena, marjoram, lavender, patchouli, or rose. If anxiety is accompanied by depression, try lemon.
  7. A homeopathic remedy could be effective in relieving anxiety attacks. Consult with a homeopath or naturopathic physician, who will make a recommendation based on a detailed personal interview.
  8. Go on a news fast, suggests Dr. Andrew Weil. It can be one day a week, or for a whole week at a time. Turn off the radio in the car. Avoid television news. Listen to classical music, or music that calms your nervous system. Or listen to sounds of nature.
  9. Explore the use of affirmations. If you notice a habit of repeating unhelpful thoughts, you can create a positive thought to repeat in their place. Two helpful books which offer affirmations and how to use them are *You Can Heal Your Life* by Louise Hay and *Affirmations for Self-Healing* by J. Donald Walters.
  10. Yoga postures combine deep breathing with stretching and relaxation — vital tools for reducing stress and anxiety.
  11. Relax the abdomen whenever you happen to notice that you are feeling a little anxious. Take a short walk and allow the breath to originate from the abdomen.