

10 Best-Ever Anxiety Management Techniques

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Brain Structures

- Frontal Cortex (PFC) Executive Functions - analysis, decisions, intention (CBT methods)
- Anterior Cingulate Cortex (ACC) - Rumination, cooperation. Functioning well, contributes to problem solving, making effective transitions
- Gear shift - need methods to “put in the clutch” and to shift to a new thought, perspective, behavior, etc.

Hippocampus, Amygdala: Appraisal

Hippocampus – context - short term memory and retrieval processes

Amygdala – risk and safety appraisal, immediate responses

Amygdala registers safe - not safe and how urgent safety issue may be (valence and salience)

Does so without words or thinking and stimulates sympathetic arousal faster than thinking can occur

Learns threat signals fast, unlearns deliberately

Impact of Neurotransmitters

Built in the neurons, healthy neurotransmitter levels are affected by lifestyle

- Start (glutamate and acetylcholine) agitation, sensitivity
- Stop (GABA) – calming

Monoamine Neurotransmitters:

- Serotonin (5-HT) – neuromodulator in all systems
- Norepinephrine (NE) – alertness or vigilance - initiates SNS arousal

Dopamine and Reward = Motivation

In the basal ganglia, dopamine works in the reward pathway to produce sense of pleasure

Cortical intention (glutamate) + DA = Motivation

What we do well, when we receive praise, when we interact with joy, when we ingest substances that please, DA flows

Insufficient receptors for DA = low pleasure response = low motivation for social experience

Texts, new media, games = DA every time = addictive

Dopamine and Cues/Triggers

- In the Prefrontal Cortex: Attention and Focus
- Psychological Trauma: Physical and Psychological pain = flood of DA
- Riveted attention on details that the amygdala will remember and even when those details not assigned importance in conscious recall, the amygdala will recognize them as cues for danger and triggers reactions

The Purpose of Worry

- Anxiety is a natural response to ambiguity (when we do not know what is happening, what will happen, or when we do not know how to respond.)
- People feel sensations of anxiety before thinking about a problem:
- Worry or 'what-if' thinking is maladaptive effort to resolve it
- Real problems have real solutions. Anxiety sufferers usually handle those

Repetition Strengthens Brain Activity

- One important principle is that repetition strengthens the brain in a structural way
- Worry or repetitive thinking results in increased vascularization and also more glial cell support
- Interrupting worry consistently and persistently quickly starts to 'erase the trace' of worry

Repetition and Imagination

- The same is true of panic events and social phobia fears that are repetitively imagined or worried about.
- When panic events and social phobia fears that are repetitively imagined or worried about the pathways are strengthened, sensitizing the responses to cues – objective or perceived
- Brain activity reflects what is imagined, increasing possibility of occurrence– positive or negative

#1 – Contain Your Worry

- Worry can have a function that clients may/may not recognize and they won't stop worrying as long as the worry is needed.
- It may be a protection to ward off bad things, e.g., “If I worry about this it won't happen.”
 - Bring to awareness. Use thought stopping.
- It may be a sense of individual or relationship identity.

Clear the Mind (Contain the Worry)

- Teaches healthy defense of suppression
- Prepares for sleep
- Start or wrap up therapy sessions
- Transitions between work and home
- Prepare for activity that requires focus: meetings, writing, tests, homework or social events
- Be creative! Concrete tools instead of imagery work well: lists, God-Box, worry box for families, worry tree, worry backpack for kids, etc.

Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS)

SNS = “Fight or flight” system: hypothalamus triggers release of NE for SNS arousal - stimulates organs for a strong and effective response to danger

- Increased respiration, HR and BP
- Tingling, shakiness, dizziness consequence of hyperventilation
- Panic lasts 11-13 minutes, has after-effects that may last for hours, differentiate from acute anxiety

Types of Stress in Anxious Clients

Stress – directly affected by perception of control:

- COVID-19 intensified many types of stress
- Quantity (capable but overwhelmed)
 - More likely with generalized anxiety high activity clients
- Quality (skills deficits, need help) –
 - Parenting
 - Social Anxiety

5 Competencies for Stress Recovery

Stress recovery occurs under conditions of relief, passage of time and good self care:

1st competency: Eliminate stressor: Being chronically stressed interferes with ability to appraise the detriment of the stressor

Current culture: examine exposure to news and the source of the news

Look at relationships: work, with family, with friends

2nd Competency: Manage Time

1. Obviously utilize calendars and reminders – electronics can be helpful!!
2. Limit unnecessary time on tasks.
3. Utilize an “external prefrontal cortex” to plan your time. Try a ‘timed list.’
4. Many apps!! Todoist for college students needs

3rd Competency: Environment

Biggest challenge to getting work done efficiently is having tools at hand when needed. Check in with clients

Use helpers to organize environment.

1. Flylady.net – There's a support group! – can apply to work stations
 2. Konmari.com
- There are increasing numbers of apps to help with management of time and list chores, but these two remain useful to learn the skills of organizing

4rd competency: Manage Attitude

- Attitude about degree of control:
 - Is control possible?
 - How about influence vs. control?
 - Is this a situation where no control is possible – can the person let go?
- Social anxiety creates persistent stress. Utilize Albert Ellis = “I must do well and win the approval of others or else I am no good” to assess how this is evident in social anxiety and correct thinking/acting on this

5th Competency – Technique #2 Relaxation and Rest

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Tense and release or stretch and release

Yoga

Rest: Default Mode Network: “Sit and stare time”
creates insight, empathy, creative problem solving

This is not meditation.

#3 Manage intake – Physical Care of Self

- First, get a physical:
 - Asthma and its medications
 - Hormones – birth control as well as changes
 - Vitamin Levels
 - Unusual but not rare: POTS, AlphaGal
- Exercise: Improves resilience to stress (Ratey) and decrease impact of stress. Increases brain's ability to produce neurotransmitters
- Sleep enough – chronic deprivation = anxiety

#4 - Breathe

Diaphragmatic Breathing works if you do it. How?

Stimulates the vagus nerve to initiate parasympathetic activity to slow heart, lower BP

Teach the longer exhale = Decrease CO₂

Use technology or apps to remind client to practice several times a day until it comes easily and clients will remember it (Breathwrk, Breathing App, etc.)

Fear and Escape

Social anxiety and panic: conditions of fear (fear of fear, fear of humiliation)

Fear prompts escape attempts

Anticipation of fear leads to 'pre-escape', i.e., avoidance behaviors

Identify Panic Cues

Triggers or cues for Panic Attacks:

Spontaneous Kindling – leads to cue creation

Memories – Learned & remembered fear

Un-Remembered Trauma Cues

Panic Diary – use 5 senses memory

Go backward to the moment before panic when you felt good

Scan forward one thought, bodily sensation, event at a time and scan the 5 senses

Prevent = Predict, Prepare, Plan

- Predict when panic may occur to be ready to succeed without panic
- Prepare to be there without scare = what will help to prevent the event
- Preparation includes a specific plan for if it goes wrong, e.g., “What if I panic?” “What if I can’t remember what to do?” “What if I really turn all red?” “What if my voice shakes?” “What if my mind goes blank?”

When Panic Prevents Participation

3 C's of Successful Exposure

Calm – an exact plan for calm anticipation of an anxious moment includes *accurate anticipation*.

Teach breathing and relaxing to stay calm in the experience

Competent (Skills Training) – do you know ***how to do*** what you are expected to do?

Confident – have you had an opportunity to practice or enough preparation to be confident

#5 – Stop Catastrophizing

Correct Extreme Language and note how it feels different in the nervous system:

“I’m freaking out!”

“Panic is unbearable!”

Feelings are not facts and they are not uncontrollable.

(What I feel is a real feeling, but it is not true.)

Stop Projecting: Interrupt catastrophic expectations and notice that the outcome has not yet occurred.

Distinguish between possible and probable

Apps and Help Lines for Various Needs

- Virtual Hope Box – VA + NIH – for vets especially
- It gets Better LGBTQIA+
- The Trevor Project LGBTQIA+
- We R Native – Indigenous peoples
- Calm Harm – self injury impulse management
- Wysa – AI chatbot – also has a paid version
- Help Kids Cope – helps adults talk to kids about trauma
- Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741 or text STEVE for help sensitive to people of color – connected to WhatsApp – It has Spanish language help and numbers for Canada, UK and Ireland
- Remember 988 in US for Suicide hotline

#6: Mindfulness

Being in the moment (observe-describe) is the antithesis of anxiety.

Awareness of here and now without judgment/assumptions helps anxiety.

You choose what you pay attention to.

Try grounding with 5-4-3-2-1 (See, touch, hear, smell, taste)

Effectively: Minimizes importance of sensations

Apps and YouTube

- Headspace
- Calm
- Cosmic Kids
- Insight timer

#7- Handling TMA Over-Activity

People with Too Much Activity (TMA) in their lives or minds tend to develop GAD – have trouble shifting gears. Over scheduling stress is most likely.

- Stop saying yes. At first always say: “Give me a moment and I will get back to you”. This allows ‘put in the clutch’ so they can shift gears.
- During the pause, ask “How Important Is It?”
- Then: “How important is ***what I am not doing*** in order to do this activity?”

Is Procrastination a Means to Limit Perfectionism?

1. Note with client:
 1. Do they “Work better under pressure?”
 2. Do they always meet the deadline?
2. Pay attention to outcomes so you learn to distinguish importance from urgency and consequential from inconsequential.

Identify Difference Between Urgent and Important
– see Focus Matrix or Eisenhower.me

	Important	Not Important
Urgent		
Not Urgent		

Procrastination: Inability to Be Perfect

- Will not start if they don't know how
- Self-criticism and expectation of judgment by others increases being judgmental of others
- Exacerbated by new media and belief that others are always doing perfect work, perfect projects, etc.
- Bring to Conscious Awareness, check origin of beliefs and change self-talk

8 – Cognitive Control

Anxiety precedes worry: Change the Channel!

First: Do I ever need this thought again? Then, plan for where the mind should go away from the worry

- Thought Stopping – Replacing: Intentional and consistent:
- Sing
- Physical change or movement: “Move a muscle, move your mind!”
- Engage teachers and parents – make a “Kid Grid”
- Consider a sensory shift- promote mental shift

Cognitive Methods for GAD

1. Plan don't worry! – Teach especially how to identify the problem and know when to evaluate the plan
2. Do the Worst First
3. Transfer worry to another person – e.g. Legal, financial, care management
4. Pay Attention – Out Loud!

Apps: Mindshift, Clear Fear, Camp Cope-a-Lot

#9 Talk Yourself Into Changing Your Behavior – Start with Beliefs that Affect Thought/Action

A person must rationally decide to change a belief - most people realize immediately inner language is extreme and recognize beliefs as *true or false*.

Children can be taught that what they say to themselves might be untrue or exaggerated:

- 1 – Shrink it down to size
- 2 – Identify ‘worry brain’ vs. the ‘smart brain’
- 3 – Ask them to answer themselves – this is where Ellis’ work comes in with “What is the Evidence???”
- 4 – Change belief, “If I think it, it must be true”

Create New Self-Talk: Change the Script

Find counter cognitions and apply them ***consistently*** to thoughts that undermine. Identify: Goals, actions, or intentions (e.g. “I intend to go back to school.”)

Then write:

My first thought about this

The opposite of my first thought

Counter cognition ***must be believable*** and only contain positive language – i.e., avoid ‘no’ ‘never’ ‘not’

Use it whenever the negative thought occurs

#10 Real Life Practice

Ready for Exposure and Success

Make a plan (accurate anticipation) with **small steps that will increase in duration or complexity. This will decrease the worry of trying something new.**

Clarify the Motivation: What are the intrinsic rewards of doing some of the feared experiences?
Motivation increases when reward is clear and desirable

This pertains a lot to social anxiety as well.