

COPING WITH ANXIETY

A learning guide for all UN staff members

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WHAT IS ANXIETY?

Anxiety is a normal, natural biological and psychological reaction to a real or perceived threat. Under appropriate circumstances, anxiety helps to heighten our alertness in dealing with unfamiliar situations, and ready our body for any action that is needed. It is triggered by a combination of biochemical changes in the body, our personal history and memory, and the social situation. Anxiety is not “normal” when it becomes overwhelming and interferes with our daily living and ability to cope effectively.

COMMON SYMPTOMS OF ANXIETY

- Rapid breathing
- Headache, neck pain
- Upset stomach
- Tearfulness
- Racing or pounding heart
- Chest pain, muscle tension
- Cold, clammy hands
- Irritability, trembling, jumpiness
- Dizziness
- Nausea
- Sweating
- Diarrhea

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ANXIETY AND FEAR?

Anxiety is often perceived as a vague mixture of responses such as malaise, apprehension, dread, and agitation, which arise when you feel there is some threat to your well-being. You may be uncomfortable and anxious. Often when you are anxious, you may find that your energy level is low or your actions are paralyzed.

Fear tends to differ from anxiety in that it is usually linked to a specific situation, while anxiety is more of a diffused, generalized state. You may not know the exact cause of your anxiety, but you are usually aware of the source of your fears. When you are afraid, you face danger that threatens your survival in some way. The cause of fear or anxiety may be real or imagined. In either case, the feelings and bodily responses you experience are real. Physiologically, when you feel either anxiety or fear, your survival instinct kicks in, and your body reacts with the “fight or flight” response. Since fear is so closely linked with survival, it is inevitable that you have known fear many times in your life.

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR DEALING WITH ANXIETY

Controlled breathing. Anxiety can lead to shallow, rapid, or irregular breathing. Likewise, shallow, quick, or irregular breathing can increase physical sensations of anxiety. Try calming yourself down by slowing your breathing down with counting, like this:

- While counting to four, gently and slowly inhale a normal amount of air through your nose. (Your breathing should be done from your diaphragm.)
- Hold in the air for two or three seconds.
- Now gently exhale slowly through your nose, or slightly pursed lips as you count to six and experience the tension leaving your body.
- With one hand on your upper chest, and the other on your stomach; the hand on your stomach should move in and out as you breathe, the hand on your chest should remain stationary.
- Repeat several times. If you silently say the word “calm” or “relax” to yourself as you exhale, over time thinking of this word alone will be able to trigger a relaxation response.

Identify and challenge core negative beliefs and self-defeating thoughts. Research studies have revealed that certain thoughts automatically accompany the experience of anxiety. These thoughts are usually focused on the future: "I will make a fool of myself and be humiliated." "I won't be able to function." "I may be hurt or harmed." Stopping these automatic, self-defeating thoughts, and reshaping them to conform with reality is a very powerful way to control anxiety. Use the following steps and questions to help you arrive at a more rational and balanced appraisal of the situation.

Step 1. Be aware of your automatic thoughts when you feel anxious. In order to help you recognize them, keep these characteristics in mind:

- These thoughts often seem to come out of nowhere. They are not summoned up by conscious recollection or by an attempt to reason or develop a logical pattern.
- The thoughts are often unreasonable or irrational, as you will recognize when, you learn to evaluate them with your own logic and specific knowledge of reality.
- Even though the thoughts are unreasonable and inaccurate, they probably seem plausible and reliable at the time you are experiencing them.
- These automatic thoughts often serve no useful function and interfere with your ability to control your own behaviour. Therefore, the more you accept them, the more anxious you feel.

Step 2. Challenge any anxiety-producing thoughts, perceptions or evaluations.

- Does this thought make any sense? Is it logical? Am I being realistic?
- Am I personalizing the fear too much? Is there a clear and present danger?
- Have I received warning signals that support my fear?
- Is there a history or precedent to support the fear?
- Have I had experiences that show that this thought is not completely true all the time.

Step 3. Become aware of any faulty beliefs you may be using. Examples of beliefs that produce excessive and inappropriate stress and anxiety are:

- **Catastrophizing:** When anticipating danger or difficulty, you perceive total disaster as the probable outcome. (e.g., When facing a relatively simple surgical procedure you fear that death or prolonged incapacitation will be the result.)
- **Ignoring the Positive:** You overlook all the indications of your own ability to cope successfully and anticipate only insurmountable problems and unendurable suffering in the future. (e.g., Your boss generally praises you for your work, but one day he observes a small mistake you made. You become upset and think, "He's not happy with my work. I'm a failure.")
- **Overgeneralizing:** You jump to conclusions without looking at all the facts. (e.g., One negative experience, such as being turned down for a promotion, will be translated into a law governing your entire existence, "Things never go right! I may never get anywhere in life.")
- **Personalizing:** You tend to think that everything that happens around you is a reaction to you. (e.g., Your boss is irritable and distressed and as you leave his office, you think "What did I do this time to make him angry at me?")

Step 4. Select a more rational, productive and positive interpretation of the situation. For example:

- Just because something could happen doesn't mean it will.
- Am I blaming myself for something over which I do not have complete control?
- When I felt this way in the past, what did I think about that helped me feel better?
- What can I say to myself that will help me remain calmer and help me achieve what I want to accomplish in this situation?

Expect, allow and accept that fear will arise. Our body properly responds to the messages sent to it by the mind. If we label a situation as dangerous, and then begin to approach that situation, the body will secrete hormones that prepare us physically for crisis. Even if the situation appears relatively safe, if the mind interprets it as unsafe, the body responds to that message. It is important for you to remember that your feelings of fear or panic are normal bodily reactions that are inappropriate to the circumstances.

When fear comes, wait, let it be. When the fear or panic does come, let it happen. Don't resist it. The objective should not be to stop the fear from appearing but to control the process by which the fear intensifies. The goal is to learn to function at low and even moderately high levels of fear. You can achieve this by:

- Facing the symptoms - do not run away
- Accepting what is taking place - do not fight
- Flowing with your feelings - do not tense or resist them
- Letting time pass - do not be impatient

Take responsibility for your problems. Fear is something that our own mind creates, so only your own mind can do something about it. Exaggerated fears can have their basis in wrong decisions or experiences as a child, try to find out what caused the problem to begin with, and it may gradually dissolve.

Increase your tolerance for the unknown. Life is a continual process of facing the unknown. We all live in a world of unknowns. Every moment is in some way new and unknown. If you resist the ambiguity of the moment (“I need to know”), you’re going to create more ambiguity. Accept that your immediate future will inevitably entail many new situations and that uncertainty is bound to be present.

Stop to add to the panic with worrying or frightening thoughts about what will happen next if your fear carries on. Examples of negative self-defeating thoughts include:

- I must be certain at all times.
- I want to avoid the symptoms.
- Something bad might happen.
- My present troubles will go on forever.
- Someone or something (including myself) may be hurt or harmed.
- I don’t have the power (control) to keep something negative from happening.

Replace negative thoughts with positive reinforcing self-statements. Such as:

- Just because something could happen doesn’t mean it will. I am not going to die because of these reactions. They are not harmful or dangerous in any way. In time, they will disappear.
- I’m starting to really understand that my anxiety doesn’t hurt me and won’t hurt me, even though it’s unpleasant. Let the panic happen. I will wait for it to pass; I’m finished trying to fight it or run away. I’ll just get as comfortable as possible. I’m going to breathe it away.
- All problems are time limited. I’ll focus on the present, which I can control, not on the future which I can’t.
- I’m not going to give in to these symptoms. I’m going to stay right here and breathe slowly, calmly and naturally until they go away. I want to face symptoms to gain new skills.
- The more secure I try to become, the more insecure I make myself feel. I can tolerate uncertainty.

Practice diversion. When you are in the midst of a challenging situation and anxiety begins to take hold, focus and concentrate on various details that have no relation to your anxiety. Allow yourself to focus on concrete objects around you. Make a game of noticing details or inventing questions about every object you identify (e.g., In a social situation, study fabric patterns, furniture styles, or random superficial facts about other persons in the group). By bringing the attention to focus on the present and comforting realities you will lose a sense of helplessness and develop confidence. In this way you will have regained a feeling of control.

Label fear from 0 to 10. By monitoring the duration of your fear you will discover that it is time limited and that the intensity of the fear moves up and down depending on the focus of your attention.

Expect, allow and accept that fear will reappear. Setbacks are natural parts of the ups and downs of any learning process. However the worst seldom happens. Tolerance for the fear will begin to increase with each successive experience.

If all else fails, take as deep a breath as you can and hold it as long as you can. To occupy your mind, picture in your mind’s eye an image of someone you love, something that pleases you, something that calms you. Now as you exhale, let all the air out with an audible sigh. Your symptoms should come down and stay down.

Successful people and unsuccessful people both experience anxiety. The difference is, some live with it, and some live to avoid it.

STRESS COUNSELLOR SERVICES

The Stress Counsellor offers support and assistance to staff in resolving work or personal related concerns. Through a range of sensitive and innovative services, the Stress Counsellor seeks to enhance the emotional and physical health, well-being and job-performance of all staff members. For further information and practical advice on how to reduce anxiety and fear, visit the Stress Counsellor web page on the OHCHR Portal.