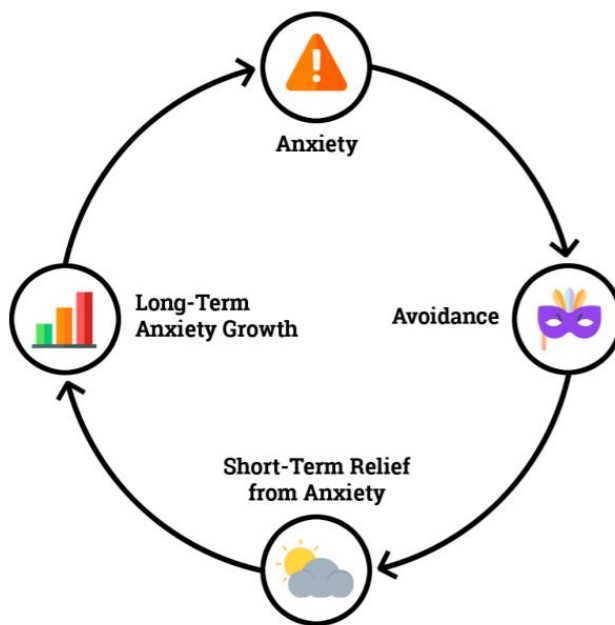


## Working with anxiety – practical strategies

Anxiety is a feeling of fear and distress. It is a normal physical response produced by your body when faced with severe stress, or perceived danger. However, if it is there all the time, or if it becomes so intense that it interferes with your life, then it becomes a problem.

One of the most common responses to anxiety is **avoidance**. When a person avoids what is causing them anxiety, they experience relief from the symptoms of anxiety and in its extreme form, panic. However, avoidance only gives short-term relief and can actually increase the feeling of anxiety for the source in the future.

### The Cycle of Anxiety



#### **Anxiety**

An anxiety-producing situation leads to uncomfortable symptoms such as worry, fear, a racing heart, sweating, or a feeling of being overwhelmed.

#### **Avoidance**

Uncomfortable symptoms are controlled by avoiding the anxiety-producing situation. Examples of avoidance include:

- Skipping class to avoid giving a presentation
- Using drugs or alcohol to numb feelings
- Procrastinating on challenging tasks

#### **Short-Term Relief from Anxiety**

Avoidance of the anxiety-producing situation gives an immediate sense of relief. The symptoms of anxiety lessen, but only temporarily.

#### **Long-Term Anxiety Growth**

The fear that initially led to avoidance worsens, and the brain learns that when the anxiety-producing situation is avoided, the symptoms go away. As a result, the symptoms of anxiety will be worse the next time, and avoidance is more likely.

The subtle actions used to avoid anxiety in social situations are called **safety behaviours**. An example might be, someone who is anxious about socializing at a party might focus on their phone to discourage others from approaching. As said before, safety behaviours are a form of avoidance and although they may provide some short-term relief, they can actually make anxiety worse in the long run.

### Do you recognise that you do any of the following safety behaviours?

Speak quietly or not at all OR Talk excessively to avoid silences	Hold arms stiffly at sides or fold arms to prevent shaking	Stand far away from others to avoid conversation and avoid eye contact	Wear excessive makeup to hide blushing
Keep phone in hand and check it so you 'look busy'	Obsess over appearance and constantly check mirror	Come up with reasons to leave an event early	Use drugs / alcohol
Avoid eating in front of others	Avoid asking questions or sharing personal information	Cave to peer pressure of wishes of others, constantly seeking approval/ reassurance	Excessively rehearse what could happen / what to say before socialising

**So what can you do ....**

The first important step is to **notice your signs of stress and what your triggers are** - Do you find that you can't sit still or concentrate? Does your patience become short? Do you get headaches or feel out of breath? Perhaps your sleeping or eating habits becomes disrupted, or you get that tell-tale tightness in your shoulders?



Once you recognise your body is under stress, you can actively do something about it. Such as...

- 1. Focus on your breathing.** When people are feeling anxious or tense, they naturally tend to take rapid, shallow breaths, which sends a message to the brain that they need more oxygen, stimulating the sympathetic nervous system and increasing the sense of panic! The simple act of breathing slowly and deeply (from your belly) can reduce feelings of stress:  
Breathe in slowly through the nose. Hold for a few seconds. Then slowly exhale through the mouth. Repeat several times
- 2. Do a body scan.** This technique blends breath focus with progressive muscle relaxation. After a few minutes of deep breathing, you focus on one part of the body or group of muscles at a time and mentally release any physical tension you feel there. Take deep breathing to the next level. When you're at home or someplace else where you can relax, you could lie down and put one hand on your stomach and the other on your chest. Close your eyes and relax your muscles one at a time, starting with the feet. Breathe slowly and deeply and imagine the tension escaping.
- 3. Guided imagery.** For this technique, you conjure up soothing scenes, places, or experiences in your mind to help you relax and focus. You can find free apps and online recordings of calming scenes—just make sure to choose imagery you find soothing and that has personal significance. Or you could do your own visualisation exercise. For example:

Close your eyes and visualize/imagine a relaxing place, it could be a favourite destination or place you have felt safe. Think about the sounds and smells of this place. Such as at a beach the waves crashing, the scent of the salt in the air, or other sensory details related to your favourite spot.

- 4. Hold tight.** - When people feel that they're under pressure, they tense up physically, which sends a message to the brain that you are scared, reinforcing the anxiety. Try releasing the tension in your body by gripping a squeeze ball, squishing playdoh or hugging a stuffed animal. Another way of releasing muscle tension is silent screaming. These actions also encourage a shift in focus from whatever's causing the anxiety to a new activity
- 5. Get moving.** - Exercise can be a great way to channel nervous energy. Plus, it releases feel-good endorphins that boosts mood. You could go for a run or a walk, dance to your favourite piece of music, do yoga, stretches or even hop on the spot 10 times - whatever works best for wherever you happen to be at the time.
- 6. Think positive.** – When we feel anxious, our brain can quickly go to a place of 'what if' and negative thoughts which increase anxiety. Negative thoughts cannot persist when we embrace gratitude – the two sets of emotions simply can not coincide. So come up with a list of 5-10 things you are grateful for in your life, these can be as simple as the fact you woke up this morning, had food to eat or a tree to look at outside your window. Similarly, preparing a list of empowering statements starting with "I am ...." Can combat negative thoughts – you could try going through the alphabet to finish off the statement e.g. "I am active, I am brave, I am compassionate etc

**Find what works for you** - Just as we all manifest stress differently, we each need different ways to manage it. When you build a collection of stress-relieving techniques that work for you, you can pull out the one that works best for that specific moment. If your stress busters are also things you do when you aren't feeling pressure they can quickly become part of your routine and are easier/quicker to activate when needed