

WELLNESS TIPS

MANAGING YOUR ANXIETY

We all experience anxiety at times - it is a natural emotion. Occasional, mild anxiety can serve as a motivator to follow through with problem solving and taking action to address challenging situations. But when anxiety occurs frequently, is on-going, or is too intense, it can become detrimental and interfere with one's life.

Some signs of anxiety include excessive worrying, difficulty concentrating, feeling jittery, muscle tightness/aches, tiredness, feeling "on edge", difficulty sleeping, and physical symptoms such as GI upset, headaches, or increased pain. Chronic and high levels of anxiety can contribute to feeling of exhaustion, poor decisions, and health problems.

Sometimes we can change or eliminate the source of stress that is creating anxiety. But when that is not possible or even desirable, there are strategies that can be helpful in managing anxiety.

Five Tips for Managing Anxiety

1. Focus on the Present:

Learn breathing, relaxation, and/or mindfulness techniques (see reference list).
Relaxation techniques are helpful in managing physical manifestations of anxiety.
Mindfulness techniques help you redirect your thinking to the here and now.

Breathing techniques are deceptively simple, but effective in decreasing anxiety.
There are many versions of relaxation deep breathing exercises. One version:
Breathe in through your nose to the count of 4 and breathe out through your mouth to the count of 4. Do this for 5 minutes.

2. Refocus to Something That is Less Anxiety-Provoking:

Engage in activities that distract you from your anxious thoughts:
hobbies, music, YouTube clips, cooking, painting, writing, household projects.
Take a break outside.

3. Figure Out What is Happening:

One of the first steps is to recognize that you are experiencing anxiety, label it as such, and notice how it impacts your behavior. This process creates emotional distance from the anxiety, avoiding becoming more caught up in it.

Identify typical times or circumstances when you become anxious.

Keeping a journal can be very helpful. It gets your thoughts out of your head and things may look differently when written out. Writing helps you express yourself, determine if your worries are reasonable and how likely the situation or consequences of concern are to happen. Journal entries can help you recognize patterns and changes you can make.

Pay attention to your thought patterns. Thoughts such as harsh self-criticism, perfectionist self-expectations, and catastrophizing about possible future events increase anxiety.

Ask yourself:

1. Is this true?
2. How is this thought helping me?
3. What would _____ say if I shared these thoughts with them?

4. Focus on What You can Control:

Can you eliminate the source of stress or is it even desirable to do so? Often, the answer is no. But you do have control over problem solving how you can approach the problem, identifying resources for assistance, and developing an action plan.

Self-care is important. Exercise redirects and expends anxious energy and releases endorphins. Engage in physical activity - take a walk, dance, do some vigorous cleaning.

Limit caffeine intake. Caffeine can intensify anxiety. You might be surprised at the difference this makes.

Avoid self-medicating with alcohol or other substances.

5. Use Your Support Systems:

Develop and use your support system. Talk about your anxiety with someone who will provide nonjudgmental support. Or talk about other topics or participate in an activity together to provide distraction.

Seek our faculty or OSAC staff for assistance in addressing concerns.

Talk with MSCC staff for personal or academic assistance.

Providing support to others can also be helpful: you will feel better, it keeps relationships in balance, and may give insight into how you might manage differently.

Occasional anxiety is normal and serves a purpose. But if it is taking over your life, becoming too intense, an ongoing problem, and disrupting the quality of your life, consider seeking assistance. Contact the MSCC to discuss your concerns. They can help you develop a plan and make recommendations and referrals as indicated.

Angers, L. Betterhelp.com. "10 Coping Strategies for Anxiety." January 22, 2021.

<https://tinyurl.com/2jm6db6w>

Greenberger, D. and Padesky, C. Mind Over Mood. Guilford Press. 2016.

YouTube sites for relaxation exercises.

City of Hope. "15-Minute Deep Breathing." YouTube. January 16, 2015:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F28MGLlP90>

"Progressive Muscle Relaxation Done Correctly" by Ray Barrett of Life's Canvass. May

2013: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3eHqfc8qQs0>

"A Mini Autogenic Relaxation for Stress and Anxiety". January 17, 2015:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fyS3WIAPF6o>

Check the MSCC Website for past Wellness Tips and additional references for relaxation exercises.

<https://medicine.uiowa.edu/md/student-support/student-counseling/mscc-wellness-programs-and-resources>

Feel free to contact the MSCC to talk with a counselor or schedule an appointment for questions and concerns.

Medical Student Counseling Center osac-mscc@uiowa.edu 319-335-8056 1240 MERF

Stay safe and stay well!

Liz Schacht elizabeth-schacht@uiowa.edu