

ANXIETY DISORDERS

Why We Worry and What to Do About It

We all worry or feel anxious at times. In fact, a certain amount of worry may be helpful. It can push us to evaluate our choices and be alert for danger. However, if worries persist and become so overwhelming that they disrupt day-to-day life, it may indicate an anxiety disorder. Talk to your doctor or a mental health professional if you're concerned that you might have an anxiety disorder.

Types of anxiety disorders

- › **Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD).** A person has ongoing, excessive worry about everyday situations or activities. The anxiety is hard to control. It causes problems in daily work and social settings. Physical symptoms include edginess, fatigue, difficulty concentrating, irritability, muscle tension, and sleep problems.
- › **Panic disorder.** The key symptom is recurring, unexpected panic attacks. These are instances of extreme fear that start abruptly and build to a rapid peak. The physical symptoms can feel life-threatening: pounding heart, trembling, shortness of breath, sweating, sensation of choking, chest pain, nausea, and dizziness. There can be a sense of looming danger and a strong desire to escape. It may be in response to a certain situation or occur for no reason.
- › **Social anxiety disorder (social phobia)** is an extreme fear of being embarrassed, humiliated, judged or rejected by others in social situations. A person will try to avoid worrisome situations, such as meeting new people, public speaking, or eating in public.
- › **Phobias. Specific phobias** are an exaggerated, irrational fear of particular situations or things. The person can't control this reaction. Examples include flying, heights, spiders, and closed-in places.
- › **Agoraphobia** is a fear of being in situations where escape would be hard or embarrassing if panic symptoms set in. Common examples include open spaces, public transportation, and being in a crowd. In extreme cases, the person can't leave their home.
- › **Separation anxiety disorder.** A person is excessively anxious about being separated from loved ones, beyond what is appropriate for their age.

Related conditions

- › **Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)** is having recurring upsetting thoughts, impulses, or mental images (obsessions) that one can't control. And having behaviors that one feels they must repeat to control the anxiety from these thoughts (compulsions).
- › **Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)** involves reliving a traumatic event through nightmares, hallucinations, or flashbacks long after the trauma is over. A person may try to avoid all things associated with the event. Symptoms include negative emotions, such as guilt, anger, and shame, difficulty sleeping, irritability, difficulty concentrating, extreme alertness, or jumpiness.
- › **Acute stress disorder** is a reaction to a traumatic event. Symptoms are similar to PTSD, but occur very soon after the event – about three days to one month.

Reference: American Psychiatric Association. (2017). What are anxiety disorders? Retrieved from <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/anxiety-disorders/what-are-anxiety-disorders>

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TALKING BACK TO YOUR AUTOMATIC THOUGHTS

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Things to keep in mind:

- › Most automatic thoughts—thoughts that come to mind instantly—have a *bit* of truth to them.
- › *Negative* automatic thoughts usually fall into the *exaggerated, all-or-nothing* category.
- › It is possible to learn to *talk back* to negative automatic thoughts, just like learning any other new skill.
- › Don't judge the effectiveness of the following technique until you have tried it for at least a month.

The technique: Identify and replace negative, automatic thoughts with alternative, balanced thoughts.

Example 1:

- › Your automatic thought: "I never get invited to lunch with my coworkers. They must not like me. They probably think I'm too boring and having nothing interesting to share."
- › Possible counter thought: "I bet I have something in common with at least one of my co-workers. I am going to see if they want to join me for lunch."

Example 2:

- › Your automatic thought: "I never come out on top. There's no way they will like my project."
- › Possible counter thought: "I worked hard to get this project right. I think the team will see the value."

Example 3: (Think of your own example)

Your automatic thought:

A possible counter thought:

The next time a stressful situation triggers your negative thoughts, take time to listen to your internal self-talk. Remind yourself that we have a choice about how we think about events in our lives. The above technique may feel mechanical and slow at first, but the more you practice, the easier and more automatic it will become.

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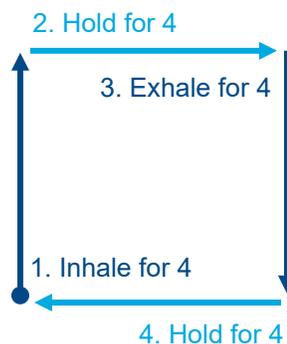
BREATHE

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Breathing slowly and rhythmically makes your body feel like it does when you are relaxed. This sends a message to your brain to calm down. Focusing on your breathing can also reduce your sense of stress by clearing your mind of negative thoughts.

Square breathing

- › Find a comfortable position. Take several slow natural breaths. Then close your eyes and picture a square in your mind. Choose one corner to be your starting point.
- › Count slowly to four as you inhale through your nose. Picturing your breath moving up one side of the square. You can also trace an outline of a square with your finger.
- › Then count slowly to four as you hold your breath and visualize moving across the next side of the square.
- › Moving down the next side, count slowly to four while exhaling.
- › Then hold without breathing in or out for a count of four on the last side.
- › Try to last for the full count, if you feel uncomfortable, reduce the count.
- › Repeat 4-5 times.



Belly breathing

- › Find a relaxed, comfortable position. Keep your back straight, but not tight. Put a hand on your belly just below your ribs and the other on your chest.
- › Take a slow, deep breath in through your nose, and let your belly push your hand out as the muscles relax. Your chest should not move.
- › Hold that breath for a moment, then breathe out through pursed lips as if you were whistling. Straighten the back. Let belly muscles tighten. Feel the hand on your belly go in.
- › Take your time with each breath. Try to increase each in and out breath. Notice where you feel your breath in your body – chest, abdomen, nostrils.
- › Your mind may wander. That's OK. Just notice the wandering and gently redirect your attention back to your breathing.
- › Do this 5 to 10 times.

Breathing meditation

- › Relax. Allow the body and mind to settle. Do what helps you become comfortable. Create a stable base for yourself. Gently allow eyes to close.
- › Take a few complete, deep breaths, in and out. Then trust the breath to continue on its own.
- › Notice where your breath is most obvious in the body. It may be the movement of your belly or chest or a sensation beneath your nostrils.
- › As you breathe in, focus on connecting with things as they are.
- › As you breathe out, focus on accepting and/or releasing.
- › It's OK if your mind wanders. When you become aware (that is a moment of mindfulness!), note what has happened and gently guide your thoughts back to your breath. It's always OK to begin again.
- › Continue to focus on your in and out breaths for several minutes.
- › Then wiggle your fingers and toes and gently open your eyes. Take your time to adjust. Note your experience. Observe any difference between when you began and now.

Learn more

The following links can help you learn more and explore the practice of mindfulness and breathwork.

Mindful: Healthy Mind, Healthy Life

www.mindful.org

MindfulNet

www.mindfulnet.org

UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center: Guided Meditations ¹

www.uclahealth.org/marc/mindful-meditations

University of Minnesota Center for Spirituality and Healing

www.takingcharge.csh.umn.edu/

Note: You may wish to do an online search for Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) or Mindful Meditation to find courses in your area.

¹ Mindfulness Meditations created by Diana Winston for the UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center (MARC).
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IS IT REALLY A WORRY?

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Worries have a way of sticking together and growing like a snowball. Sometimes the act of writing them down can help you see them more clearly and realistically. Try writing down a recurring thought that is distracting your focus. Is it a productive worry that you can do something about? Or is it one that's based on 'what if's' or 'should have's'? The questions below can help you challenge and perhaps lessen this worry.

1. Write down a current or recurring worry:
2. Think about the worry. Is it really true? (Would you guarantee that it's true if asked?)
3. Who is someone you could talk to about the worry and your thoughts to help put it in perspective?
4. What happens when you believe this thought? (What happens to your thoughts and emotions? How do you feel physically?).
5. Where would you be without this thought? (What if you just didn't think it? Imagine how things might be different. How would you act or interact with others?)
6. List at least one action you could take to address this worry.

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