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Managing Anxiety & Panic

About Anxiety

Anxiety among college students is a common experience. In a survey of over 19,000 students across campuses nationwide, over half reported feeling “overwhelming anxiety” during the past year (ACHA, 2016).

Anxiety is a normal and healthy emotion, and serves an adaptive function by motivating us to take action when something is wrong.

However, for some, anxiety is experienced almost constantly, may feel out of proportion to the situation, and/or is difficult to control. When this happens, anxiety can interfere with one’s performance and quality of life.

Signs of unhelpful anxiety

- Worrying more days than not for several weeks at a time about several different aspects of life
- Worrying that interferes with your daily activities or responsibilities
- Feeling restless, on edge, or “keyed up” most of the time
- Difficulty falling or staying asleep
- Muscle tension, headaches, or other physical symptoms of stress
- Feeling easily irritated or fatigued
- Difficulty turning your worry “off”

Anxiety has physical and cognitive components. Improving anxiety therefore involves addressing both the mind and body.

Deep breathing, relaxation — as well as other methods that lower physiological arousal — are effective for lessening the physical symptoms of anxiety. However, it is also helpful to practice thinking differently in order to combat anxiety.

About Panic

Individuals with anxiety are sometimes prone to experiencing sudden and intense episodes of anxious arousal, called panic attacks. Panic is triggered by the activation of your body’s sympathetic nervous system, or “fight or flight” system.

This system is designed to protect you by preparing your body to either fight or flee when encountering a life-threatening situation. Unfortunately, for individuals with panic, this system can be highly sensitive, activating in response to events that are not actually life-threatening.



Practicing relaxation exercises and learning to think differently about worry can help reduce both anxiety and panic.

Panic can be a scary experience, partly because it feels unpredictable. With practice, individuals can learn their likely triggers for panic and learn ways to prevent it. Further, individuals with panic often fear the sensations they are experiencing, and may worry they are dying or that something is seriously wrong. However, panic cannot physically hurt you. The symptoms associated with panic are a normal response produced by the body during times of duress. The key to reducing panic is learning how to turn down the brain’s sensitivity to triggering the “fight or flight” system.

Physical signs of panic

- Increased heart rate
- Shortness of breath
- Muscle tension
- Tight chest
- Sweating
- Light headed, dizzy
- Trembling, shaking
- Choking feeling

Cognitive signs of panic

- *The worst will happen*
- *I am going crazy*
- *I am going to die*
- *I am going to lose control*
- *I have to get out of here*

The same strategies outlined above can be useful for coping with panic. Slow, controlled breathing,

(over)



challenging your negative thoughts, and taking time to care for your mind and body are all strategies that help dampen the panic response.

Tips & Tools

Relaxation strategies

- Breathe in slowly to the count of 5 and out slowly to the count of 5. Repeat for 5–10 minutes several times a day.
- Go for a walk with friends.
- Imagine you are somewhere peaceful, beautiful, and serene. Use all your senses to imagine the place. Envision yourself in your relaxing setting several minutes a day.
- Try yoga and/or meditation.
- Listen to soothing music; engage in a favorite activity; spend time doing something meaningful, like volunteering.

Thinking differently about worry

- Ask yourself:
 - *What are the chances my worst fears will actually come true?*
 - *What would I tell a friend if they were having the same worries?*
 - *Am I thinking in extremes (“always/never,” “must/should/have to”)?*
- Recall times you successfully dealt with stress/problems. What worked then? Can it be applied now? Remind yourself you are capable of dealing with stress effectively.
- Use self-affirming statements:
 - *I can handle this.*
 - *One day at a time; this shall pass.*
 - *I am not alone, I have others to support me.*
 - *This is just my worry talking.*

Dealing with panic

- Remember that panic is not a physical emergency, won't hurt you, and that the uncomfortable sensations will decrease with time.
- Continue to do things you love, and go the places you want to go, despite fear of having a panic attack in public.
- Talk with your provider about potential medications that are helpful for both anxiety and panic.