

Ways to Approach Anxiety

Weightless by Marconi Union – a piece of music designed to lower anxiety
iTunes has a 10 HOUR version that you can play in the background as you go about your day or play through an earbud for as long as you need. I highly recommend this for those times that you feel shaky for longer periods of time!

As much as you want to turn away from or avoid or distract yourself from feeling anxiety (or any difficult emotion), it will ease much more quickly if you allow yourself to feel it. At first you may not be able to stay with it for more than a breath or two – this is okay. You don't want to be with any difficult emotion or feeling until you move into overwhelm. Begin by being with it for a couple of breaths. Mindfulness meets us where we are! Gradually, you expand the window of tolerance and can be with difficulty for longer periods of time. Move slowly!

In the beginning it's helpful to feel the difficulty for a short time and then rest back practicing mindfulness of the breath for a few minutes (this is called taking refuge in the breath) and then again allowing yourself to feel the emotion for a few breaths – so you're titrating in and out. This keeps you from moving into overwhelm which can happen if we force ourselves to be with difficulty for too long.

As you train your mind to tune into the messages the body sends you will be able to feel the anxiety AS IT ARISES. When you notice the first butterfly flutter in the stomach, pause! Place a hand over the stomach, gently comforting yourself. You can simply say silently "Anxiety is here" or "Hello Anxiety, I see you". It's best if you use words you're comfortable with, but DO NOT use words like "I'm anxious". You don't want to identify as the feeling, rather you're creating space for the anxiety to be there and to eventually move through you and be released. Anxiety, as powerful as it is, is temporary and will move on. It's important to name what's Present for you. Naming what you feel helps take a little of the power from it. You're acknowledging the anxiety. You're bringing it into the light of your awareness rather than running from it. While you allow yourself to feel the anxiety, invite the breath in to support your being with it. Imagine the breath coming into the stomach (or wherever you feel the anxiety in your body), bringing in nourishing, replenishing, sustaining oxygen. Feel the belly expand beneath your hand. As you exhale imagine the fear underlying the anxiety, as well as the anxiety, being released on the wave of the out-breath. Feel the hand move where it rests on the abdomen as the breath is released. Imagine letting go of the fear and the anxiety, releasing it out into the universe. Imagine it dissipating and dissolving. You may need to do this several times, but the breath will gradually begin to calm. It will naturally lengthen and deepen.

Another thing you can do is to bring in Self-Compassion. Put a hand over the place in the body where you feel the anxiety or over your heart or anywhere that's calming and soothing to you.

Acknowledge “This is a moment of suffering. Anxiety is difficult to be with”. Take a few breaths here. Then remind yourself “countless others struggle with anxiety. I am not alone in this.” This connects you to Common Humanity. You have this struggle in common with many, many others. Breathe this reality into your body – you are not alone. Draw on the strength of others. Then remind yourself “I am strong enough to be with this. I am stronger than the anxiety. Awareness is vast enough to hold this and spacious enough for it to move through me and be let go”.

Anxiety and fear are “fed” by thought loops and rumination so it’s important to move energy out of the head and into the body. It can be helpful to move awareness into the soles of the feet. Feel them firmly rooted to the earth. Visualize roots growing from your feet reaching down, down, down into the earth, strong, stable, and powerful. Feel the support of the earth holding you. Keep returning awareness to the sensations in the feet when the mind wanders. Don’t entertain the thought loops. Thoughts are just thoughts, nothing more. They can be there without our doing anything with them.

Or move awareness into the root chakra at the base of the spine. Visualize the color red and breathe into and out of this area. Return again and again to this area when the mind wanders.

Movement is also a great way to help release low grade anxiety that sticks around. Walking meditation is wonderful. The awareness moves to the feet and the sensations of walking. You’ve moved awareness out of the head, out of overthinking, overjudging, overanalyzing and into the body as far from the head as you can get! You can walk indoors, or out. It doesn’t take a lot of space. If you can walk outdoors, it’s especially beneficial because it also connects you to the expansiveness of nature and the sky.

You could also practice yoga or Qigong or Tai Chi or go for a run. All of these things activate movement which can aid in the release of restless energy and the anxiety that is causing it.

Cultivating gratitude is another simple way of dealing with anxiety and other difficult emotions. You cannot feel gratitude AND be anxious or angry or fearful. Gratitude is expansive and spacious. It helps us move from the contraction of difficult emotions. It also helps us move from over-identifying with the self and reminds us of all the good in our lives and in the world.

AFTER the anxiety passes, see if you can trace back to the origins of it. What triggered the anxiety? A thought? A memory? Something someone said or did? Something you saw/witnessed? What’s the underlying fear? What is it EXACTLY that you are afraid of? How

might you address this fear? Can you make an *anxiety plan* for next time? How can you resource and ground yourself? Journal anything that you find relevant.

If the fear/anxiety is severe, seek help. Talk to a trusted friend, a spiritual leader (minister, rabbi, pastor, priest, etc.), or a counselor.

We all have small “t” traumas that we carry. And most of us have at least one or two capital “T” Traumas that we carry. You may need help processing anything that is in the capital “T” arena.

For Trauma survivors, Mindfulness isn't always appropriate because it asks you to be with and investigate your experiences. It doesn't mean you can't practice Mindfulness, but it needs to be done carefully, you need to be able to properly resource yourself, you need to be able to recognize when to move back from the feelings/emotions BEFORE you become overwhelmed.

Book Recommendations

The Anatomy of Anxiety by Ellen Vora

My Stroke of Insight by Jill Bolte Taylor

Welcoming the Unwelcome by Pema Chodron

The Places that Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times by Pema Chodron