

15 Small Steps You Can Take Today to Improve Anxiety Symptoms

By MARGARITA TARTAKOVSKY, M.S.

"Anxiety is a normal, predictable part of life," said Tom Corboy, MFT, the founder and executive director of the [OCD Center of Los Angeles](#), and co-author of the upcoming book [The Mindfulness Workbook for OCD](#).

However, "people with an anxiety disorder are essentially phobic about the feeling state of anxiety." And they'll go to great lengths to avoid it.

Some people experience generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), excessive anxiety about real-life concerns, such as money, relationships, health and academics, he said.

Others struggle with society anxiety, and worry about being evaluated or embarrassing themselves, he said. People with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) might become preoccupied with symmetry or potential contamination, he said.

"The bottom line is that people can experience anxiety, and anxiety disorders, related to just about anything."

Some people may not struggle with a clinical disorder, but want to manage sporadic (yet intrusive) bouts of anxiety and stress.

Whether you have occasional anxiety or a diagnosable disorder, the good news is that you can take small, effective and straightforward steps every day to manage and minimize your anxiety.

Most of these steps contribute to a healthy and fulfilling life, overall. For instance, "making some basic lifestyle changes can do wonders for someone coping with elevated anxiety," Corboy said. Below, you'll find 15 small steps you can take today.

1. Take a deep breath.

"Deep diaphragmatic breathing triggers our relaxation response, switching from our fight-or-flight response of the sympathetic nervous system, to the relaxed, balanced response of our parasympathetic nervous system," according to Marla Deibler, PsyD, a clinical psychologist, executive director of [The Center for Emotional Health of Greater Philadelphia](#) and Psych Central [blogger](#).

She suggested the following exercise, which you can repeat several times: Inhale slowly to a count of four, starting at your belly and then moving into your chest. Gently hold your breath for four counts. Then slowly exhale to four counts.

2. Get active.

"One of the most important things one can do [to cope with anxiety] is to get regular cardiovascular exercise," Corboy said. For instance, a brisk 30- to 60-minute walk "releases endorphins that lead to a reduction in anxiety."

You can start today by taking a walk. Or create a list of physical activities that you enjoy, and put them on your schedule for the week. Other options include: running, rowing, rollerblading, hiking, biking, dancing, swimming, surfing, step aerobics, kickboxing and sports such as soccer, [tennis](#) and basketball.

3. Sleep well.

Not getting enough sleep can trigger anxiety. If you're having trouble sleeping, tonight, engage in a relaxing activity before bedtime, such as taking a warm bath, listening to soothing music or taking several deep breaths. (You'll find more tips [here](#).)

And, if you're like many people with anxiety whose brains start buzzing right before bed, jot down your worries earlier in the day for 10 to 15 minutes, or try a mental exercise like thinking of fruits with the same letter. (Find more suggestions [here](#).)

4. Challenge an anxious thought.

"We all have moments wherein we unintentionally increase or maintain our own worry by thinking unhelpful thoughts. These thoughts are often unrealistic, inaccurate, or, to some extent, unreasonable," Deibler said.

Thankfully, we can change these thoughts. The first step is to identify them. Consider how a specific thought affects your feelings and behaviors, Deibler said. Is it helpful or unhelpful?

Unhelpful thoughts usually come in the form of "what ifs," "all-or-nothing thinking," or "[catastrophizing](#)," Deibler said. She gave these examples: "What if I make a fool of myself?" "What if I fail this exam?" or "What if this airplane crashes?"

These are the types of thoughts you want to challenge. Deibler suggested asking yourself:

"Is this worry realistic?" "Is this really likely to happen?" "If the worst possible outcome happens, what would be so bad about



that?" "Could I handle that?" "What might I do?" "If something bad happens, what might that mean about me?" "Is this really true or does it just seem that way?" "What might I do to prepare for whatever may happen?"

Then, "reframe or correct that thought to make it more accurate, realistic and more adaptive." Here's one example: "I would feel embarrassed if I tripped on the stage, but that's just a feeling; it wouldn't last forever, and I would get through it."

5. Say an encouraging statement.

Positive, accurate statements can help to put things into perspective. Deibler gave these examples: "Anxiety is just a feeling, like any other feeling." and "This feels bad, but I can use some strategies to [cope with] it."

6. Stay connected to others.

"Social support is vital to managing stress," Deibler said. Today, call a loved one, schedule a Skype date or go to lunch with a close friend. "Talking with others can do a world of good." Another option is to get together and engage in an activity that improves your anxiety, such as taking a walk, sitting on the beach or going to a yoga class.

7. Avoid caffeine.

Managing anxiety is as much about what you do as what you *don't* do. And there are some substances that exacerbate anxiety. Caffeine is one of those substances. As Corboy said, "The last thing people with anxiety need is a substance that makes them feel more amped up, which is exactly what caffeine does."

8. Avoid mind-altering substances.

"While drugs and alcohol might help to reduce anxiety in the short term, they often do just the opposite in the long term," Corboy said. Even the short-term effect can be harmful.

Corboy and his team have treated countless clients whose first [panic](#) attack occurred while they were taking drugs such as marijuana, ecstasy or LSD. "Panic attacks are bad enough if you are straight and sober, so imagine how bad they are if you are high, and can't get un-high until the drug wears off."

9. Do something you enjoy.

Engaging in enjoyable activities helps to soothe your anxiety. For instance, today, you might take a walk, listen to music or read a book, Deibler said.

10. Take a break.

It's also helpful to build breaks into your day. As Deibler said, this might be a "simple change of pace or scenery, enjoying a hobby, or switching 'to-do' tasks." "Breaking from concerted effort can be refreshing."

11. Problem-solve.

Deibler suggested considering how you can address the stressors that are causing your anxiety. Today, make a list of these stressors and next to each one, jot down one or two solutions.

12. Pick up a book.

There are many valuable resources on anxiety, which teach you effective coping skills. Corboy recommended *Dying of Embarrassment* for people with [social anxiety](#); *The BDD Workbook* for body dysmorphic disorder; *The Imp of the Mind* and *The OCD Workbook* for obsessive-compulsive disorder. Deibler suggested *Stop Obsessing* for adults with OCD (and *Up and Down the Worry Hill* for kids with OCD).

For people with panic attacks, she suggested *Don't Panic: Taking Control of Anxiety Attacks*. For a general overview of [cognitive-behavioral therapy](#) for anxiety, Corboy recommended *The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook*. He also recommended *Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life* and *The Wisdom of No Escape*.

(You can find more book recommendations at Corboy's [website](#).)

13. Engage in calming practices.

According to Corboy, "meditation, yoga, or other calming practices can help minimize anxiety in both the short and long term." Sign up for a yoga class or watch a yoga video online. ([Curvy Yoga](#) is a wonderful resource for yoga for all shapes and sizes.) Meditate right now for just three minutes. (Here's [how](#).)

14. Contact a therapist.

"Sometimes anxiety can be difficult to manage without professional help," Deibler said. Many organizations include databases of providers who specialize in anxiety (along with helpful information). She suggested these organizations: www.ocfoundation.org, www.adaa.org and www.abct.org.

15. Accept your anxiety.

"If you really want to effectively manage your anxiety, the key is to accept it," Corboy said. This might sound counterintuitive. But anxiety, "in and of itself," isn't the real problem. Instead, it's our attempts at controlling and eliminating it, he said. "Not accepting these unwanted inner experiences is the actual source of so much of our self-induced suffering."

Accepting anxiety doesn't mean "resign[ing] ourselves to a life of anxious misery. It simply means that we are better off recognizing and fully accepting the existence of anxiety and other uncomfortable emotional states that are inevitable, but transitory," Corboy said.

So if you experience anxiety today, simply observe it, Deibler said. "Think of it like a wave of the ocean; allow it to come in, experience it,

and ride it out.”

Anxiety can feel overwhelming. It can feel like chains around your feet, weighing you down. But by taking small steps – like the ones above – you can minimize your anxiety and cope effectively.

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