



Instructional Guide for Learning About (and Managing) Anxiety

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Anxiety is a natural part of life. When we are anxious about something, it can heighten our awareness of people and sensory input around us, and can assist us in staying safe or being more effective. As children get older, through experience and exposure to the “real world,” they become more aware of bad things that happen to people. They may internalize this as fear or anxiety that any number of things might also happen to them, whether or not these are realistic or likely to happen. Anxiety can be a temporary phase or experience, or a lifelong struggle for an individual.

Most of us know about the “fight or flight” physiological response that is activated when we are afraid, but when it persists beyond a short-term situation, anxiety can have devastating effects on a person’s ability to feel happy, to stay healthy, to learn and develop, and to experience social success. There are many strategies which have been used successfully to decrease anxiety or to help a person cope successfully with the cause of their anxiety. Many of those are detailed in the guides which follow, which can be adapted to fit the needs (vocabulary, comprehension, challenges, and attention span) of the individual. However, before attempting to address a person’s anxiety, it is important to examine the role of the environment and of the social context (other people involved). Some aspects to consider include:

1. Level of exposure to violence or other subjects that could provoke fear or anxiety. Television programs, movies, video games, and even the local news may spark fears of illness, injury, death, or other negative effects. Access to these may need to be significantly limited for those who struggle with ongoing or debilitating anxiety.
2. Chaos of the environment. Busy schedules and being overly involved in various activities, overwhelming sensory input (sounds, smells, sights), and lack of comfortable routine and consistency can make it difficult for a person to relax or stay healthy, increasing anxiety.
3. Over-involvement or unintentional validation of fears by well-meaning support people. It’s important to listen to a person when they are expressing fear or anxiety, and even to validate the existence of their feelings (“Sometimes I feel that way, too,” or “I remember when I used to think that,” or “It sounds like you think about this a lot”). But sometimes the way we respond to them increases their fear by making them believe that we’re worried, too, or that it really is something to be worried about. While this may be true for realistic fears, unrealistic fears (about things that are not likely to happen) may persist through our “coddling,” over-sympathizing, or “dwelling” on the subject. It is important to establish healthy boundaries, where each individual knows his or her responsibilities and rights. For example, a child who experiences anxiety about going to school could be told, “Your teacher knows how to teach you and the other students and take care of you while you’re in school. When your school day is finished, you will come home to Mom and Dad again. Mom and Dad know how to take care of you while you’re at home.”
4. Others in the environment model ineffective responses to fear or anxiety. How do you respond to frightening situations or unpleasant situations that arise? Do you stay calm, or do you “fret?” Children are surprisingly responsive to anxiety and fear in others.

Some anxiety cannot be managed without professional advice and assistance, or perhaps medical intervention. If it persists even with some of the strategies detailed above, please consult with a professional who is able to do a more thorough assessment and provide more individualized treatment.

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ANXIETY RESOURCES:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fearless: Imagine Your Life Without Fear, by Max Lucado - Quotes on anxiety - Books for adults: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Overcoming Fear, Worry, and Anxiety, by Elyse Fitzpatrick o The Worry Cure: Seven Steps to Stop Worry from Stopping You, by Robert Leahy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Books for children (to use with adult help): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Anxiety-Free Kids, by Bonnie Zucker o What to Do When You're Scared and Worried, by James Crist o What to Do When You Worry Too Much, by Dawn Huebner o When My Worries Get Too Big, by Kari Dunn Buron o Wilma Jean, the Worry Machine, by Julia Cook
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What is Anxiety?

“Anxiety” is a word people use to describe a feeling of being worried or afraid. Anxiety can help keep us safe by making us more aware of situations and helping us to respond in a way that works. But anxiety can also cause negative thoughts to play over and over in a person’s mind. And it can cause physical effects such as a stomachache, headache, or a fast heartbeat.

Sometimes people are anxious or worried about a specific person, event, situation, or place. Other times people might feel anxious, but not for a specific reason. They may even wonder why they feel anxious. Most people feel anxious sometimes. Anxiety can last for a short time or a long time. Because most people experience anxiety at one time or another, anxiety is a “normal” part of being a person. However, there are things people can do to feel less anxious. Because anxiety can cause negative thoughts and feelings, it is important to use strategies to decrease anxiety so that people can enjoy life without feeling so worried or afraid.

What Can I Do When I Am Feeling Anxious or Worried?

“Naming” a fear, worry, or cause of anxiety can be helpful. Being able to finish statements like, “I am afraid that _____” or “I am anxious because _____” can help me start to face my fear or anxiety. It can also be helpful to share my fear or anxiety with someone I trust, (called a “support person”) like my mom or dad, or a favorite teacher. That person might be able to tell me about a time when he or she felt anxious, and the strategies that helped him or her feel better. I might choose to talk to _____ or _____.

Sometimes it might help to learn more about the person, event, situation, or place that is causing my anxiety. As I learn more about it, I might find that it isn’t as scary as I first thought, or that it isn’t very likely to happen. I might remember that I faced this situation before, and that it turned out fine. This might help me to realize that in a short time, I might feel better about this person, event, situation, or place. I might be able to learn more by doing research in books or in the Internet, by talking to people I trust, or by thinking of other times I have encountered another person, event, situation, or place like this one.

Sometimes it might help to replace the negative thoughts in my head with positive thoughts. Instead of thinking about the person, event, situation, or place that makes me feel anxious, I can think about a favorite person, event, situation, or place. I might choose to think about:
_____, _____, or _____.

Staying healthy and relaxed might help to decrease my anxiety. Choosing healthy snacks, getting exercise and finding ways and places to move around, getting enough sleep, drinking water, counting to ten while I breathe slowly and deeply, squeezing a “fidget,” and listening to quiet music are some strategies for staying healthy and relaxed. To stay healthy and relaxed, I might choose to: _____ or _____.

Sometimes one of the best strategies for reducing anxiety is just to make a choice to face the person, event, situation, or place that is causing my anxiety. It might help to take my support person with me the first time, or to role-play (pretend to go through it) with my support person. Often people find that the thing causing their anxiety isn’t as hard or as scary as they thought, and pretty soon they feel comfortable again!

Just like learning about and practicing math and reading, people can use strategies to get better at learning to face their fears and decrease their anxiety. People can enjoy life more when they are not feeling so anxious or worried! If I am feeling anxious or worried, using some of these strategies might help me enjoy life more, too!