



## **REDUCE YOUR STRESS – tips and ideas to relieve anxiety**

You may be someone who spends a lot of your time feeling anxious –or you may be someone who rarely feels stressed but something has triggered it off and you have got in to a spiral.

I am going to talk about anxiety, explain what happens in our bodies when we are anxious, offer exercises to do and ideas on ways to reduce your stress.

When we're stressed we tend to find ourselves going round and round in circles getting nowhere and we feel fearful. Fear can be paralysing. We feel panicked and stuck. When we're frightened or alarmed by either an external factor or something in our head, a physiological response is triggered in our body. This is known as the flight or fight response. If you were to meet a tiger on a street corner, you'd know to run!

I am going to explain the biology of this as it will help you to see that it happens to us all and to show how you can manage this. When we perceive stress it activates our pituitary gland releasing adrenocorticotrophic hormone into our system. This tells the adrenal glands to get busy and to produce cortisol.

Simultaneously danger stimulates our autonomic nervous system – to release noradrenalin and adrenalin itself. These in turn tell other parts of our body to react so our pupils dilate, our heart rate increases, our breathing becomes faster and shallower, insulin is released into our blood system, our blood pressure rises, our palms sweat, blood is diverted away from our digestive system and skin and our muscles tense.



Fear is useful if it is alerting us to danger giving us an opportunity to avoid it. However, our bodies don't always know how to distinguish between real danger and imagined threats. If you have this reaction when no physical action is needed – for example, feeling nervous when you're at a party and don't know anyone – you have no choice but to suppress it. What follows is a build-up of anxiety which is no good for your health or emotional state. It leaves you panicked and without the ability to make choices.

What propelled you into thinking like this? Very often, there's a trigger that starts us on this route and we then get caught in a spiral of negative thinking and anxiety.

Many of us think that the best way to make decisions and process information is to keep turning over whatever it is that is troubling us. We worry that, if we stop thinking, we'll forget what we need to do. The fact is that we think using both the conscious and unconscious parts of our brains. One useful trick is to leave things alone in our heads for a while and get on consciously with something else. When you return to the problem, you may be surprised to discover you've got the answer.

A further danger when we have got into this spiral is that thinking of one minor worry triggers off another often loosely connected worry, which multiplies out of all proportion. It's important, therefore, when we're worrying, to identify if there's anything we can do about it. If there is, then being relaxed so you can coolly and calmly come to a solution is essential. If you're in a high state of



angst, the answer will elude you. If you can't do anything about it, you need a break from the thinking. When we come back to it with fresh eyes and thoughts we often come up with the answer. If you're really stuck, seeking some help to talk through the problem is a very helpful solution.

I'm going to give you some very simple techniques that can help you to reduce anxiety and get you back on an even keel.

The Emergency relaxation technique is very useful when you're getting really worked up: You can try it you read through the exercise or you may want to do it later,

1. Say, 'Stop!' firmly to yourself – aloud if the situation permits, mentally if not.
2. Breathe in, becoming aware of your jaw and shoulders as you do so. Breathe out slowly, making the exhalation longer than the inhalation, allowing your shoulders and jaw to relax as you do so. Mentally say to yourself, 'Let go' Repeat this 3 times
3. Breathe in, focusing your awareness on your chest, arms and hands. Breathe out slowly, relaxing your chest, arms and hands as you do so. Mentally say, 'Let go.' Repeat this 3 times
4. Breathe in, focusing your awareness on your stomach muscles, thighs and buttocks. Breathe out slowly allowing stomach muscles, thighs and buttocks to relax as you do so. Mentally say, 'Let go.' Repeat this 3 times



In the time it takes to breathe in and out three times, you can become aware of tension in the body and let it go. If your breathing is very shallow or you are panting, try cupping one or both your hands over your nose and mouth so that you're breathing in your expelled air. This alerts the breathing centre in the brain to slow down. Be aware only of breathing out slowly; the body will automatically breathe in for you. Mental stress will lessen when you relax the muscles and slow the breathing.

Other things you can do depending where you are

1. Get up and move around. Our mental and physical states are intertwined. You have all this chemical activity in your body and it needs an outlet. By taking physical action, you can change your mental state very quickly:
2. Or Stand up and sit down five times. Concentrate on your body. Be aware of what you're doing.
3. Or walk briskly either on the spot or go for a walk, really focusing on what you're doing physically
4. Take five really deep breaths and focus on your breathing. As you exhale, see yourself breathing away any negative feelings.
5. Summon up a mental picture that makes you feel good. Put in some music and some movement. Have this picture ready so you can bring it to mind whenever you become anxious. As soon as you're thinking



positive thoughts, different chemicals are triggered and the body relaxes.

6. Now begin to focus on the issue in hand i.e. what is making you anxious. Start by making a list of all the things you want to do to improve the situation. Then sit down and work at how to do it. Start with one tiny thing you'd like to do. You will feel good when it is done  
Success breeds success.

If you practise these techniques, you'll find that your feelings of fear will dissipate and that you'll be able once again to make the choices that are good for you.