

MINDFULNESS MATTERS TIP SHEET

WHEN ANXIETY RISES ... RIDE THE WAVE



Mindfulness techniques can help change your experience of anxiety & manage it more effectively.

Here are a few tips to help you “ride the wave of anxiety” rather than getting sucked into it (tips on page 1 were adapted from J. Brewer, author of *Unwinding Anxiety: New Research Shows How to Break the Cycles of Worry and Fear to Heal Your Mind*. The tips came from a 10% Happier podcast discussion between Brewer and Dan Harris, 3-1--21). The techniques are pretty straightforward, and the key is to practice, practice and practice – including times when you’re not feeling super anxious. That way, you build “muscle memory” to use these strategies and improve how you respond when anxious feelings and thoughts arise.

1. Become aware of your present moment experience.

PAUSE and ask yourself:

- What am I experiencing right now?
- What are my bodily sensations? Rate the intensity of the sensations on a 1-10 scale.
- What am I thinking and feeling?
- What triggered the anxiety?

Striving to be aware helps you be more cognizant of what happens in your body and mind as anxiety rises, and the ways you habitually cope with it.

2. Get curious about the anxiety.

Investigate. Ask yourself: What happens to me when I feel my anxiety?

- Breathe into the anxiety (take several slow and deep breaths – in through the nose and out through the mouth). Notice what happens in your body and your mind.
- Feel the sensations. Rate the anxiety intensity again on the 1-10 scale. Has it changed?

Over time, the habit of curiosity in response to anxiety can lead to increased clarity about your experience with it.

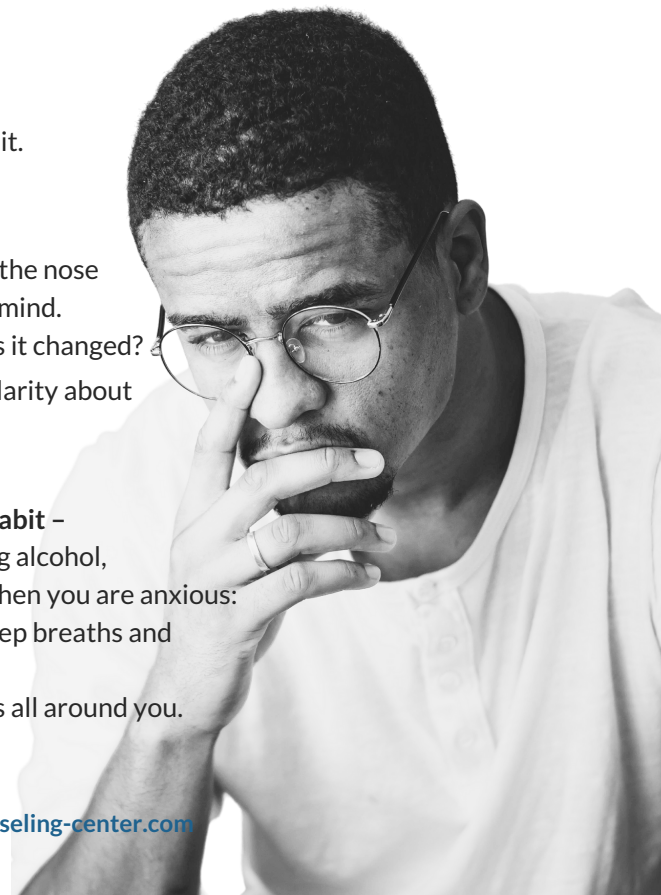
3. Ask “What might feel better?”

Experiment with substituting a new behavior instead of the default coping habit – a better option, something more rewarding. For example, rather than drinking alcohol, binge eating or falling into other numbing or potentially harmful habit loops when you are anxious:

- Mentally pause when you feel yourself becoming anxious. Take several deep breaths and remind yourself that the feeling will pass.
- If possible, take a walk outside in nature, focusing on the sights and sounds all around you.

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Feeling Panicky?

More on Riding the Wave of Anxiety

Here are more examples of strategies that people have used that help ride the wave of anxiety. You may gravitate toward one particular idea or use a combination of strategies. You are encouraged to experiment to see what works best for you at different times and in different situations.

Focus on the Breath

We talked a bit already about using the breath to get centered. To focus on the breath: Sit or lie down, whatever feels more comfortable. Take a slow, deep breath in and then out. Feel the sensation of the breathing wherever you notice it – the nostrils, the chest or the abdomen. Feel the rise and fall of the breath. Repeat this practice several times. (When you first start focusing on the breath, it may be hard to stick with it beyond a few seconds or minutes. As you continue to practice, your ability to focus for longer will likely grow.)



Channel Calm

While continuing to take slow deep breaths, you can soothe yourself. For instance, remind yourself “this is just adrenaline running through my body” or “this is how it feels when my heart is pounding – it’s just adrenaline” or “I know the feelings will pass” or whatever reminders are helpful to you.

Remind yourself that you have felt anxiety before and have managed it. Think about the anxiety like a cloud overhead – remember that it will pass.

As mentioned, some people find it helpful to rate the intensity of their anxiety (on a scale of 1-10) and then noticing their rating how it changes over time.

Engage Your Senses

You have options here. For example, on the colder side – get an ice cube and rub it on your wrists, or splash cold water on your face for a few minutes. Keep breathing. Massage your neck, shoulders and head. Rub your temples gently.

Listen to music, guided imagery or progressive relaxation – many related apps and videos are available online. You could also take a walk or a bike ride and take in the sounds, sights and smells of nature.

Find something that is soothing to the touch; a piece of fabric, something with texture, a hot mug of tea, a smooth stone, a stress ball. Engaging an object can be quite helpful when feeling anxiety. Don't forget about taste. For example, the taste of a peppermint in your mouth or the feel of chewing gum may be comfort you.

Within 20-30 minutes of practicing these and other techniques, rate the anxiety again and notice if it has changed.

Patience Please!

Be patient and kind with yourself as you learn to ride the wave of anxiety. It takes considerable practice for these techniques to become useful habits.



Contact the Mindful Counseling Center at (609) 377-5859 or mindfulcounselingcenter@gmail.com for assistance in applying mindfulness techniques to cope with life stressors and live more fully.

We offer mental health therapy and wellness education services.