A SPIRITUALITY & HEALTH E-BOOK

Conquering Anxiety



Spirituality & Health

Contents

Sometimes things happen in the world that we have no control over. We can, however, work on how we react to unexpected crises. Discover tips, practices, and strategies to help you tap into your internal calm.

5 New Ways to Fight Anxiety 3

A Spiritual Approach to Anxiety 5

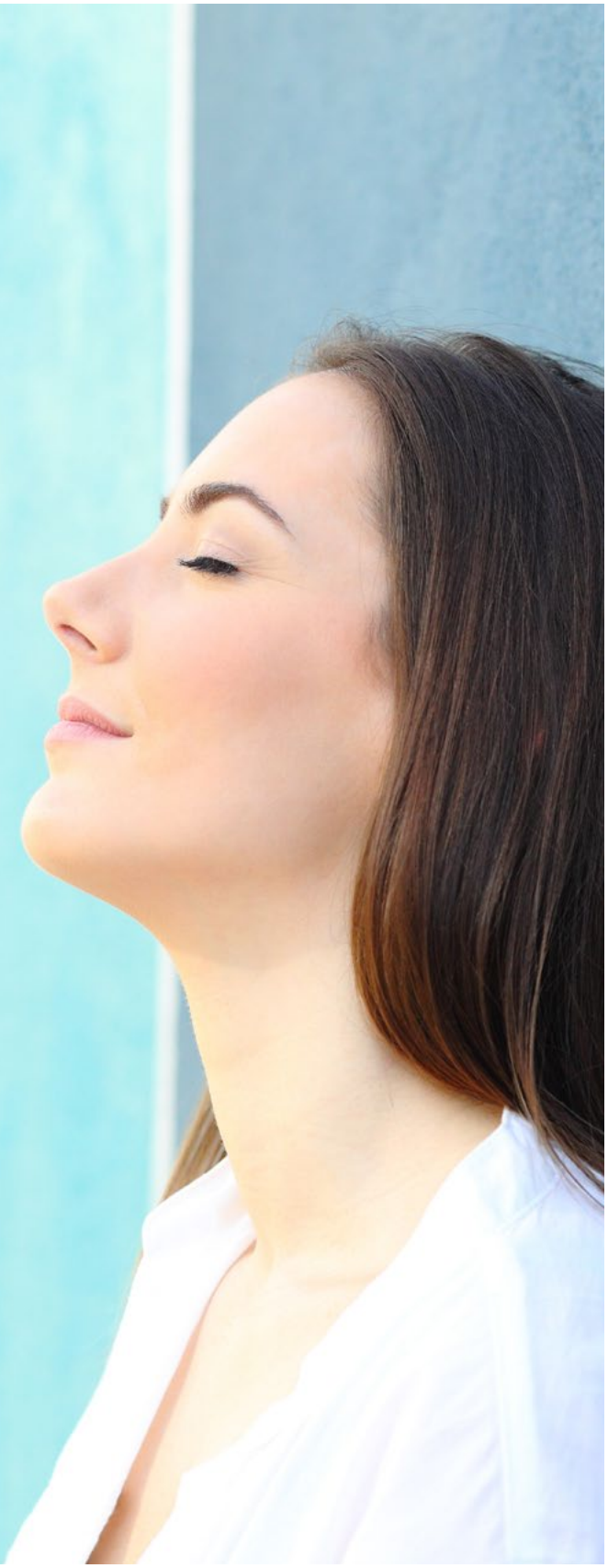
6 Ways to Deal with Nighttime Anxiety. 8

How Listening to Your Gut Can Curb Anxiety . . 10

Train Your Nervous System for Calm. 12

18 Affirmations for When You're Overwhelmed 14

Keys to Unlock the Wisdom of Anxiety 16



All photography courtesy gettyimages.com



5 New Ways to Fight Anxiety

Do you experience low levels of anxiety daily? Try these five tips to help find regular stress relief.

BY KATHRYN DRURY WAGNER

ARE YOU FEELING ANXIOUS LATELY? Aren't we all? As the *New York Times* recently noted, "Anxiety is easy to dismiss or overlook, partially because everyone has it to some degree." To be human is to be anxious, at least on some level. Anxiety can rise to the point where it becomes considered a disorder, such as panic disorder or social phobias, and medical attention can help. But what to do about garden-variety, lower levels of anxiety? You may have tried the chamomile tea, the lavender oil, and the meditation already, so for this week's Healthy Habits, here are five more novel ways to tamp down daily anxiety.

1 **Try shankpushpi.** Ayurvedic medicine turns to this herb for its support of the central nervous system, as a brain tonic, basically. It is often used to relieve stress and anxiety. The herb is available in preparations as a tea, syrup, powered or in juice.

2 **Ride a horse.** A 2015 study looked at participants in equine-assisted therapy programs. They were working with horses for six weeks, in two-hour sessions. By the final session, participants reported less generalized anxiety and better coping mechanisms, such as using less alcohol.

3 **Boost magnesium.** Nearly 70 percent of Americans are deficient in this mineral, according to a 2016 meta-review of magnesium and anxiety. Foods high in magnesium include kelp, almonds and brown rice, or you can take a supplement. The daily dose recommended varies by gender and age, so check with your doctor to ensure your levels are optimal.

4 **Get a coach.** Soccer players have coaches, entrepreneurs have coaches, and yes, there are coaches for people with anxiety. You can find one in your area doing one-on-one or group sessions. Another option is a podcast by a coach. Try "Not Another Anxiety Show" or "The Anxiety Coaches Podcast." Recent topics include "Where Did Your Beliefs About Anxiety Come From?" and "4 Steps to Avoid Anxiety by Being Aware of Your Expectations."

5 **Rolfing.** Rolfing, or structural integration, is known for freeing up muscle movement, but a lesser touted benefit includes anxiety relief. As with massage, rolfing can help reduce stress, anxiety and depression. It lowers blood pressure, aids in restful sleep and improves immune function. S&H





A Spiritual Approach to Anxiety

Approaching anxiety with self-compassion and mindfulness may help you reach peace.

BY KEVIN ANDERSON PHD, PSYCHOTHERAPIST

HAVE YOU EVER had a smoke detector that kept going off, maybe because it was too close to all that intentionally or unintentionally blackened food you whip up in your kitchen? Or maybe it kept chirping because its battery was low. We rely on smoke detectors to warn us when there is a serious problem. We can put up with a few false alarms, but no one wants to live in a house with a smoke detector going off every few minutes. Yet, that's what it's like to live with persistent anxiety.

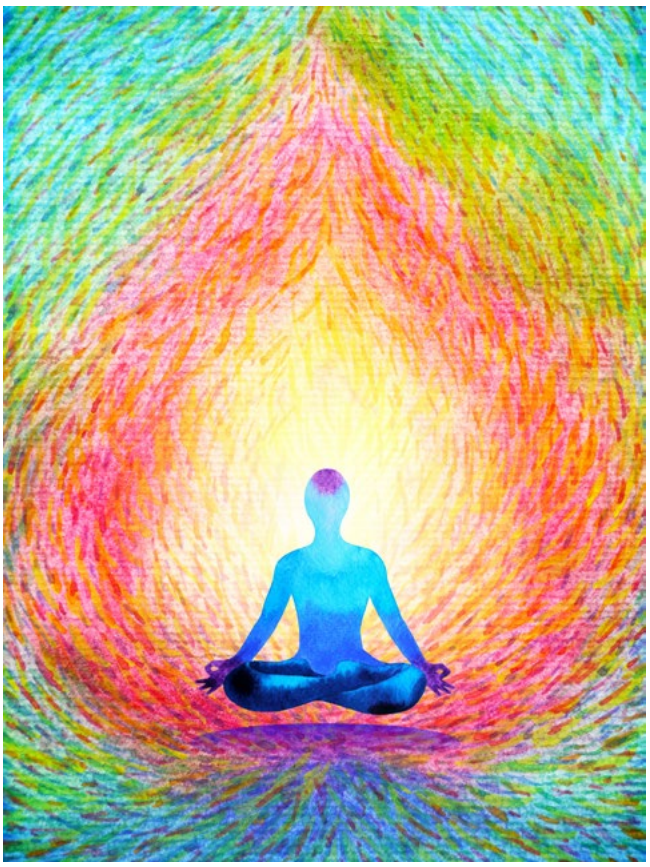
Our brains have a "smoke detector" called the amygdala. Its job is to keep a constant lookout for danger. It's been shaped by millions of years of evolution. Our ancestors were the ones that survived long enough to propagate, thanks in no small part to their vigilant amygdalas. **We are, it turns out, genetically predisposed to be chronic worriers!**

Our amygdalas, however, can become trigger-happy and signal danger too often for us to be at peace in our own skin. Tragic world news, a nagging health concern, tension with a loved one, fears about children, daily traffic, an overstuffed to-do list, and old wound reopened by a difficult interaction—all of these and more can loop through our brains and trigger our alarm systems many times per day. How can we live in an anxiety-provoking world with a brain evolved to be vigilant for danger and live anywhere close to inner peace?

First, it's important to realize that trying to solve the problem of anxiety so that you're almost always at peace is a recipe for more anxiety. Anxiety is not a solvable problem. We don't expect to eat a meal and solve our hunger pangs once and for all. Why, then, should we expect some sort of medicinal or spiritual breakthrough that puts us beyond the reach of anxiety forever? Not even Buddha or Jesus claimed that they were so spiritually advanced that they were able to banish anxiety from their experience. **A spiritual approach to anxiety starts with accepting that it is part of being human.**

A few miles from where I live a major bridge over a wide river is being replaced. The new bridge is beginning to take form alongside the old one. When the new bridge is complete, traffic from the old one will be diverted onto the new structure and then the old bridge will be closed permanently. This is a good visual for dealing with the anxiety of being human. The old bridge represents our familiar, overused anxiety response system. We can't just tear that system down because we don't like it. Instead, we can begin building a new system alongside it. This new system flows with nonjudging acceptance of life as it is and a commitment to choose our best responses to what triggers us, not our fastest ones.

The bridge metaphor needs to be tweaked a bit, however, because with anxiety we never really finish building the new bridge and we never really permanently close down the old bridge. Instead, we live with two, side-by-side systems: a tendency to trigger into anxiety and a way of being nonjudging and accepting of the present even when anxiety is here. Even though we can't eliminate the old bridge, we can have a good deal of influence over which bridge is used most heavily.



We can't just tear that system down because we don't like it. Instead, we can begin building a new system alongside it.

When anxiety shows up, a stream of anxious thoughts and emotions begins to flow over the single, well-worn lane of the old bridge. What good is the new bridge to us when this happens? Instead of trying to stop the flow over the old bridge, we can activate a different flow over the new one. In fact, because we constructed the new bridge with two lanes, we can activate two different flows over it: top-down and bottom-up. The top-down flow is the intentional re-framing of anxiety-provoking thoughts. Instead of thinking, "Oh no, I just can't take this today!" we can think, "This feels like too much, and I'm aware I feel like I can't take it, but I accept the moment as it is." This is called mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT). As soon as we accept anxiety

and surround it with nonjudgment, there is traffic flowing over both bridges. The original anxiety is still present, but now we also have a flow of awareness, acceptance, and nonjudgment.

When we're anxious, we can also begin a bottom-up flow over the new bridge. This activates something deeper than our top-down thoughts. When we begin to breathe slowly, especially if we have regularly practiced pairing breathing with a state of mindful acceptance, the body begins to move toward what researchers at the HeartMath Institute call "psychophysiological synchronicity." This fancy term just means that as we surround anxiety with acceptance and nonjudgment, the body begins to realign its basic rhythms (such as heart rate variability and blood pressure) in a way that leads to a bodily state that we experience as more calm and centered.

Stanford neurosurgeon James Doty, M.D. has explained how mindfulness practice works to help us live closer to peace. "The brain is basically a lazy organ," he says. "It likes to keep doing what is most familiar to it. So if we want it to do something new, we need to make that new thing very familiar to it." Doty's words make it clear why we cannot just read about mindfulness or attend an occasional mindfulness retreat if we want it to affect our daily life. The dose of our mindfulness practice matters. The more familiar our brains and bodies are with pairing the breath with calming, accepting thoughts, the more likely the new bridge will carry the majority of the traffic when anxiety shows up.



If mindfulness practice were a medicine, the dosing instructions would say: *Take as often as possible—the best dose is always more than you think you need!*

But who has the time to practice mindfulness all day? Here's the trick: Begin to look at *everything* as practice. Every red light, every stressed thought, every inner "should," every irritating behavior of other human beings—everything is practice. A period of formal mindfulness practice each day helps you make your brain more and more familiar with the connection between your breath and accepting, nonjudging thoughts. Formal practice is a great foundation for the new bridge. Looking at everything else in the day as informal practice puts pillars up to support the span from waking to bedtime.

There's one thought that may seem to have the power to topple the new bridge. It's not what we think we're afraid of that is the most anxiety-provoking, Susan Jeffers says in *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway.* It's the thought *If what I'm afraid of happens, I could never handle it* that scares us the most. *I could never handle it* is the deepest fear of the small, fear-based self. That fear is like a huge truck that keeps testing how strong our new bridge is. But we each have the capacity to live from what I call the large self, the version of us that is always aligned with the highest possible energies (or, if you prefer, God). Each time we change *I could never handle it* to "My large self will accept life as it arises and respond from the highest possible energies" we reinforce and strengthen the new bridge. S&H

** This article is intended for information purposes only and is not intended as a guide for any reader's specific mental health situation. If you are struggling with mental or emotional symptoms, see your physician for a physical checkup and consult a mental health professional.*



6 Ways to Deal with Nighttime Anxiety

Use these six tools to vanquish middle-of-the-night stress

BY KATHRYN DRURY WAGNER

WAKE UP! It's 2:40 a.m., prime time for feeling panicky and dyspeptic. Let's ruminate! Let's go over everything on the to-do list! Let's feel overwhelmed, maybe with a little side sauce of guilt. What's that, brain? You want to go deeper, ponder the very point of our lives? Sure... Until 4:55, when we finally doze back off. Ugh. My internist told me that insomnia like this is sometimes caused by our brains being "too full," which certainly resonated with me. So, what to do with a too-full brain at 3 a.m.? For this week's Healthy Habit, let's look at a few ways to deal with anxiety that strikes in the wee hours.

1

REPEAT A MANTRA

There is a mantra specifically for invoking sleep. Try repeating *Om Agasthi Shahina* (Om Ah-gah-stee Shah-ee-nah).

2

TRY AFFIRMATIONS

Instead of freaking out—or trying to force sleep into your life, which will backfire, gently steer your mind back to a calm state with affirmations such as, "I fall asleep easily and naturally." Or, "I love to sleep and do so easily."

3

FENG SHUI PLACEMENTS

In order to sleep well, feng shui philosophy would be that you need to ensure the chi is flowing. Remove all clutter: paperwork, books, digital devices. Cover computer monitors with a dark cloth. Dana Claudat, of the blog "The Tao of Dana," notes that any lighting such as chandeliers should not be hanging directly over the bed, and that some people find they sleep better if they remove stored items from under their bed. Yep, that "baggage" on your mind can be literal.

4

AROMATHERAPY

Lavender and bitter orange both improved the quality of sleep in studies, according to a 2017 published review in the *International Journal of Pharmaceutical Science* called "Effectiveness of Aromatherapy in Insomnia." The trick is to have essential oils ready, so that when monkey brain starts pinging around at 3 a.m., you're not stumbling in the bathroom looking for your bottle of lavender. Keep a bottle of aromatherapy spray near the bed to spritz the pillow or linens. In times of severe restlessness, set up a diffuser before retiring for the night so it's ready to go, and when the brain starts churning, flip on the fragrant mist. Ahh.

5

LIFE MANAGEMENT

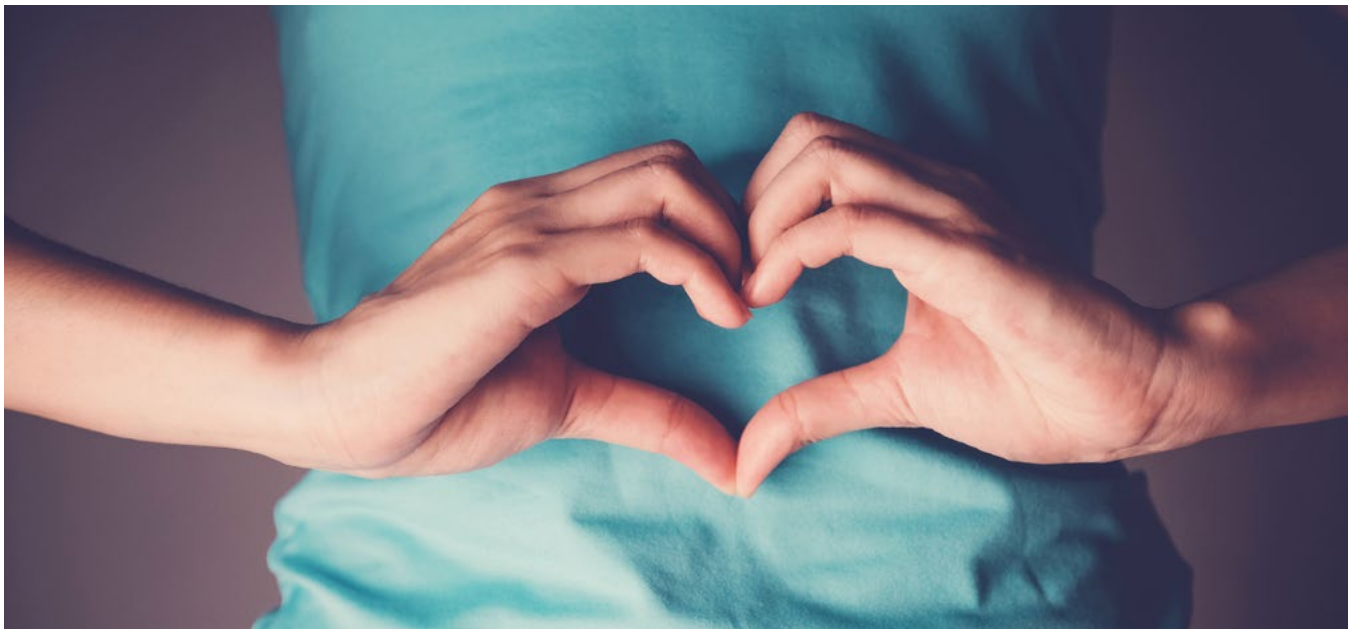
Don't give an anxious mind any more fodder. Avoid stressful tasks and topics right before bed, such as paying bills, going over the household budget with your partner, booking a multi-leg flight, dealing with your mother-in-law, etc. Create a buffer zone prior to sleeping that is dedicated to relaxing activities such as a hot bath, reading a good book or meditating.

6

WHAT'S IN THE CABINET?

An imbalance—either too much or too little—of some vitamins, such as D and B, can cause sleep quality to erode. Check with your health care provider to ensure you're getting the right levels, especially if you have started taking a new medication or supplement. S&H





How Listening to Your Gut Can Curb Anxiety

Discover how creating balance in your gut can help to alleviate your anxiety.

BY SERENA POON

MOST OF US ARE pretty familiar with how anxiety feels in our body. When you have anxious thoughts, your body responds with a tightening in the stomach, nausea, gas, heartburn, and indigestion. The connection between your brain and your gastrointestinal tract goes the other way as well. If your digestive system is disrupted, it can send signals to your brain that may cause you to become anxious. This bidirectional connection is called the gut-brain axis.

We are still learning a lot about the digestive system's effect on the body and the mind, but what is coming to light through scientific research is that your gut is truly a center of immunity, mental agility, and vitality. Taking the time to foster a healthy gut is a great way to improve digestive issues, emotional and mental ailments, and overall health.

HOW TO SUPPORT A HEALTHY GUT

Your digestive tract is full of trillions of microorganisms. These live organisms create an environment, not unlike a climate system on planet earth, in your intestines. This internal ecosystem is referred to as the gut microbiome, and plays a crucial role in how the body functions. The health of this system guides the immune system, delivers important nutrients and contributes to healthy brain function and mood.

There are a lot of reasons your gut microbiome can become imbalanced. Diet, lifestyle, genetics, and environment can all contribute to gut health. A stressful period of time or a shift in diet for a few days can throw the fragile balance of this ecosystem off track. The good news is that balancing your gut microbiome may be as simple as changing your diet and lifestyle.

From a dietary perspective, there are many foods that support a healthy gut microbiome that include:

- A wide variety of fruits (in moderation) and vegetables (in abundance)
- Whole grains
- Fibrous foods
- Fermented foods

I almost always recommend probiotics and prebiotics. Probiotics are concentrations of beneficial microorganisms and prebiotics are a type of fiber that feeds probiotics. You can find both in either whole foods or in supplement form.

Some food-based probiotics include:

- Kimchi
- Kefir
- Sauerkraut
- Miso

Some food-based prebiotics include:

- Apples
- Flaxseed
- Dandelion greens
- Garlic
- Onions
- Jerusalem artichokes

If you are taking probiotics or prebiotics in supplement form, be sure to consider the quality of the product that you are purchasing—does the manufacturer have integrity? Do they use organic ingredients? The efficacy and sourcing of the products are also important considerations.

If you are feeling anxious, you may also want to eat grounding foods. Foods like root vegetables and hearty soups can help to ease your anxious energy and allow you to feel more centered. Yellow foods may also help alleviate anxiety. The third chakra, located in the solar plexus, guides empowerment and the gut. This chakra is ruled by the color yellow. Eating foods such as lemon, squash, mangoes, and bananas can help balance your energies in this chakra.

HOW TO AVOID AN UNHEALTHY GUT

The foods that wreak havoc in the gut tend to be common in the standard American diet, so it's not so surprising that so many people suffer from the symptoms of gut imbalance. Foods that lead to a sick digestive system include:

- Fried foods
- Packaged foods
- Alcohol
- Refined sugars

The consumption of too much of these foods can disturb the delicate ecosystem of the digestive system, causing your body to take a turn toward disease. It is possible that this imbalance will show up as chronic discomfort, chronic disease, or mental illnesses—including anxiety. It's best to abstain from or moderate intake of these foods.

Making mindful changes to your diet can undoubtedly support your gut health and effectively reduce symptoms like anxiety. It is also important to also look at any sort of wellness challenge from a holistic perspective. Sleep, exercise, hydration, and stress levels also play crucial roles in gut health for anxiety. A few approachable lifestyle changes that can help improve your gut health and reduce anxiety symptoms are:

- Get at least 7-8 hours of sleep each night.
- Exercise, walk, or do some sort of movement every day.
- Drink at least 100 ounces of water per day.
- Practice meditation, gratitude and relaxation techniques.

Once you begin to make some of these small changes, start to notice how you feel. What are the sensation in your digestive system? Has your energy increased? What foods specifically work to ground your energy and which ones have the opposite effect? As you become more in tune with your body, you will become more empowered to take charge of your overall energy and well-being. S&H



Train Your Nervous System for Calm

Explore two ways to access calm strength within ourselves.

BY KALIA KELMENSON

RECENTLY, ON A VERY GOOD DAY, I was talking to a friend about the experience of feeling fantastically alive, and also having a deep sense of calm. My well of patience felt bottomless and I was able to handle all of the twists and turns the day handed me.

A few days later, however, I was operating on less sleep, more caffeine, and markedly less calm.

Turns out, we can all cultivate a sense of 'still waters run deep' within ourselves. Rick Hanson, senior fellow of UC Berkley's Greater Good Science Center, describes how the ability to regulate our sense of inner calm has great bearing on our ability to bounce back from life's inevitable setbacks. In his newest book, *Resilient: How to Grow an Unshakable Core of Calm, Strength, and Happiness,* he describes key capacities we can hardwire into our nervous systems so we can better handle the stresses of living in our fast-paced modern world.

Hanson writes that we can meet our basic needs of safety, satisfaction and connection, by "*recognizing* what's true, *resourcing* ourselves, *regulating* our thoughts, feelings, and actions, and *relating* skillfully to others and the wider world." He explores capacities such as grit, intimacy, generosity, and courage. At the core of regulating ourselves, he insists, is our ability to remain calm through the storms of life.

When our sympathetic nervous system is activated by a real (or perceived) threat, we will generally have one of three reactions: fear, anger, or helplessness. Hanson explains, "because the need for safety is so vital, it's equally vital that we regulate ourselves to meet pain and threats with calm strength." When we can do this, we will be able to navigate whatever twists and turns we face along the way. Here are two ways to access this calm strength within ourselves:

RELAXING AND CENTERING

We all know how crazy life can get. Sometimes saying 'no' to things is wise, but there will be times when we need to keep going, maintaining our level of engagement in life, but in a calmer way. To do this well, we have to be able to access our parasympathetic nervous system (PNS), which governs our ability to relax, digest, and settle down. Hanson suggests that in order to "establish a calmer baseline for yourself plus recover more quickly after stress, set aside a few minutes or more to relax deeply many times a week." He also suggests finding moments in your daily life, especially when things are getting heated, to calm yourself down. Some ways to activate your parasympathetic nervous system are:

- **Extend the exhalation.** Your exhalation and PNS are closely linked, so by simply making your exhale longer than your inhale, you activate your ability to be calm.
- **Release tension.** You can focus on one body part, perhaps your jaw or your shoulders, and imagine your breath filling that space and draining away any tension in the exhale.
- **Use imagery.** We have the ability to amplify and lessen stress to a larger degree by how we handle the internal dialogue we have around different situations. Focusing on images can short-circuit this internal, often negative feedback loop.

RECOGNIZE PAPER TIGER PARANOIA

We have evolved to have a heightened awareness of potential dangers. Our ancestors that did not fear the tiger that could be lurking in the tall grass did not survive. Fear of the unknown, often showing itself as anxiety, is harmful to our health in the modern world. Hanson writes, "to feel safer, we need to stop inflating threats and start recognizing all our resources. Then we don't have to be afraid of not being afraid." Try these steps to harness runaway fear:

- **See threats clearly.** Hanson suggests choosing a worry—any worry. Try journaling or talking with someone about the following: How big is it—get down to the nitty gritty, exploring the worry fully. Then consider how likely it is to happen, and be honest with yourself about the chances of this big worry really happened. Next, consider how bad it would actually be if it did happen. Finally, take all that in. Hanson insists you will most likely be relieved after this exercise, and that the scary, nebulous fear might not be that bad after all.
- **Once you see the problem** from a truer perspective, consider the resources you have to handle it. Consider resources in your mind—inner strengths that you've harnessed to handle past difficulties. Then mine resources in your body—ways you feel strong, capable and full of energy. Finally, look to resources around you in the world—friends, family, and mentors are all great places to draw strength from.

At the end of each of these processes, consider using Hanson's HEAL technique to access the full experience of feeling calm and capable, and to effectively rewire your brain's response. Taking these steps to reshape our habitual patterns will support us in feeling more able to weather the invariable storms of life. S&H



18 Affirmations for When You're Overwhelmed

When your daily life starts feeling overwhelming, try these affirmations to bring you back to center.

BY KATHRYN DRURY WAGNER

BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR, they say. Poof! A wonderful new burden has arrived, in the form of a promotion, a new job, a baby, or planning an elaborate trip. Or perhaps the two tons of stress you're lugging about comes from a darker place, such as a toxic work environment, caregiving for someone with dementia, or facing your own medical challenges. But the sensation is the same: I can't breathe. I am buried. I am being swept out to sea. They call this, "the Overwhelm."

In their book *Organize Tomorrow Today,* authors Dr. Jason Selk and Tom Bartow discuss human mental "channel capacity"—that is, we can only handle so much information at a time. There's a reason, they note, that phone numbers are seven digits long. Any longer, and people can't remember them. When we are overwhelmed, whether it's by a flood of data, or trying to take care of a million details, or facing many choices, we have exceeded our mental channel capacities, the authors explain. "Saturating people with information actually paralyzes action. Think about it: When people are overwhelmed, they typically freeze. Self-doubt slows action."

Doesn't that make so much sense? That's why we feel buried. That's why we feel like we simply cannot breathe. We have frozen in place, our poor brains frizzled to a crisp.

Now that we know the why, let's use the powerful tool of affirmations to deal with the Overwhelm. S&H

Today I am strong and healthy.

I choose carefully what goes onto my calendar.

I release the need to dwell on bad feelings.

This too shall pass.

One task at a time is enough.

I draw on the support that surrounds me, in whatever form.

Peace and joy are filling my life.

I am doing the best I can.

I release the need for perfection.

I choose to be calm and centered, regardless of the situation.

I exude strength, grace and flexibility.

Today I allow time for self-care and rejuvenation.

I have faith that this will all work out.

I am living in grace.

The right decisions are coming to me easily now.

I don't worry about other people's acceptance or opinions.

Today I choose joy.

I can communicate my needs and feelings.



4 Keys to Unlock the Wisdom of Anxiety

Anxiety is not necessarily a handicap.
Make it work for you by recognizing the profound opportunity for awakening that approaching anxiety from a mindset of respect invites.

BY SHERYL PAUL

A 60-YEAR-OLD MAN BOLTS AWAKE each morning at 3:00 a.m., worrying about his financial future, even though he's financially secure. A 7-year-old girl worries that her parents will die. A 25-year-old woman ruminates that she doesn't love her boyfriend enough (even though he's everything she's ever wanted in a partner). These are all people who are suffering from anxiety. While most people know what anxiety feels like, they often have a hard time describing what it is. Being able to define anxiety is one of the ways that we contain and soothe it, for what we can name and identify holds less charge than a nameless experience.

Here's my definition of anxiety:

Anxiety is a feeling of dread, agitation, or foreboding associated with a danger that does not exist in the present moment. It can also be defined as a general and pervasive sense of dis-ease without an identified source. Anxiety, while often experienced in the body, is a head state that keeps its prisoners trapped in the realm of unproductive and fear-based thinking. Anxiety keeps you on high alert, and at its core lies the belief that you're not OK, that you'll never be OK, and that you're not safe physically, emotionally, or spiritually. Anxiety and trust are mutually exclusive.

Anxiety is the catchall diagnosis du jour. Nearly everyone I know who has been sifted and sorted through the mainstream medical and psychological systems has been diagnosed with a generalized anxiety disorder. And it's not that mainstream doctors and therapists are wrong: Most people are, indeed, suffering from anxiety, and the official criteria that qualify someone as having an anxiety disorder—as outlined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (known in psychological circles as the DSM)—is very close to the definition I shared above. While I agree with most components of the psychologically accepted definition of anxiety, where I diverge is in how I understand and work with it. I don't see it as a "disorder" at all, for when we refer to anxiety as a disorder, we label ourselves with the stamp of "problem" and fail to recognize the profound opportunity for awakening that approaching anxiety from a mindset of respect invites. When we see anxiety as evidence of something "wrong" we miss the wisdom, the metaphors, and the opportunities for growth encased in its symptoms.

Again, as commonplace as the word anxiety is in today's world, many people don't know what the thoughts, feelings, and sensations are that indicate anxiety. (See the box "Manifestation of Anxiety.") And that lack of understanding leads to more anxiety. If someone had told me, the night I ended up in the ER after my first panic attack, that I was suffering from anxiety, it would have saved me months of agony—on top of the initial agony of trying to figure out what was wrong with me.

Of course, there was nothing wrong with me; my soul had just brilliantly sent me the message through the messenger of panic that it was time to begin the process of individuating and breaking through the layers of my conditioned self. I wouldn't have expected the ER doctor to say, "Welcome, you've just entered your dark night of the soul." But if he had sent me on my way with information about what was happening, it would have been easier for me to arrive at the why.

UNLOCKING ANXIETY

The first key to unlocking anxiety is to make a conscious shift from protecting against your pain, pushing it away, and hating it to becoming curious about your inner world. This is not a one-time shift, but a daily, if not hourly, reset—a reminder of setting the compass of your intention to the dial of curiosity. In order to do this, it's essential to understand that the initial thought—be it "What if I don't love my partner?" or "What if I hurt my baby?" or "What if I have a terminal illness?"—is the distress flare; it's your inner self sounding the alarm bell. It's all the parts of you that you swept into the basement of your psyche—the messy, dark parts that struggle with uncertainty and lack of control, clamoring for your attention. It has become overcrowded down there, and it's time they come out. If you take the thoughts at face value instead of becoming curious about the deeper messages, you will miss the opportunity for healing. But when you recognize the thought as an alarm bell, you can become curious about the places inside that need your attention.

For example, a coaching client scheduled a session to talk about her conflict around moving back to her home country with her husband and six-month-old baby or staying in the United States. The recurring thought, which sounded like We should move back, otherwise my daughter will grow up to be a horrible human being, had been elevated to a place of obsession where it dominated her thoughts, night and day, and was causing an immense amount of anxiety and aloneness. Taken at face value, her conflict seemed reasonable enough: She wanted her daughter to be raised around her extended community—her mother, sisters, and cousins—the way she herself had been raised. Instead, she was raising her daughter in the isolation of a big city.

But when a question becomes obsessive and

fear-based, as evidenced by the fear that her daughter would grow up to be a horrible person if they didn't move home, we know we're in the realm of anxiety—and that the question itself carries storehouses of gold that need our attention. If we try to answer the question—making lists of pros and cons, asking people for advice, obsessively thinking about it—we remain caught in our heads. We not only miss the deeper wisdom about ourselves that is waiting to be gleaned, but we also eclipse the opportunity to find true direction based on deeper knowing. As Einstein famously said, "No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it"—meaning that when we try to find an "answer" about an anxiety-related question from an anxious place, we only create more anxiety.

For the first part of the session, I encouraged my client to take her focus off the presenting question. This was difficult to do, since she had been perseverating on the question for months, so she had developed well-worn neural pathways in her brain that reinforced the message that answering it was a matter of life and death. This is how anxiety works: It hooks into a question or theme like a dog with a bone, and you become hell-bent on answering it in the belief that if you could only answer this one question, you would find peace.

But as we spiraled in and dropped down out of the realm of thoughts, my client began to make connections. She could see that the thought had taken on mythic proportions the moment she got pregnant—as often happens in transitions—and she could see many areas embedded in the thought that needed her attention. These included her grief about being far from home; a layer of sadness that she had moved away 10 years earlier to preserve her sense of self; the longing to return home as a metaphor for her longing to return to her internal home as she made sense of some painful aspects of her childhood; her grief about leaving her daughter to go back to work; and more. Once she attended to these areas, she could make a decision based on clarity instead of frantic anxiety. Once the messages encased in anxiety are discovered, the initial thought dissolves and clarity is achieved.

Key #1

BECOME CURIOUS BY NOTICING AND NAMING

Begin by taking 15 to 20 minutes to write down what anxiety feels like and how it manifests for you. Be curious! Remind yourself that anxiety is not your enemy but your messenger, and begin to inquire what messages it wants to deliver.

The first step toward breaking free from anxiety is to notice when it appears, and then name how it shows up for you. To encourage the mindset of curiosity, ask yourself questions like: Where do I feel anxiety in my body? What thoughts or themes are connected to my anxiety now and in the past? What is my first memory of anxiety? How was my sensitivity and then my anxiety handled by my caregivers as a young person?

Every time an anxious thought or feeling arises, name it out loud by saying, "Anxiety. That's an intrusive thought." If you can, make notes throughout the day when you notice your anxiety. The notes section of your phone works well to this end, but keeping a handwritten journal is even better.

Key #2

BECOME COMPASSIONATE

The second key element in finding healing is to learn to meet your anxiety with compassion. This means replacing the lifelong habit of responding to your difficult feelings and experiences with shame with a kinder response that allows you to be wherever you are. Given that most people received the message growing up that difficult feelings are "bad" and are to be ignored, shamed, or silenced, this isn't an easy task. But for now, I would like to teach you one of the most effective practices for reversing the habit of pushing away unwanted feelings and meeting yourself with kindness— the Buddhist practice of Tonglen, which was introduced to this country by the American Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön.

This on-the-spot practice is very simple. Breathe in what we normally think of as "not wanted" and breathe out what's wanted or, as Pema Chödrön teaches on her website, "When you do Tonglen on the spot, simply breathe in and breathe out, taking in pain and sending out spaciousness and relief." What's so powerful about this practice is that it goes against how we habitually respond to painful feelings, so when we practice it over time, we retrain our minds to accept and even welcome pain and fear (in all their manifestations).

Next, see if you can connect to the second step of Tonglen: Breathe into the pain of everyone else on the planet who is feeling lonely, sad, disappointed, overwhelmed, and heartbroken at this very moment, and breathe out love and connection. If you think you're the only one having a hard time with life, think again. In some strange and beautiful way, we're all in this together, and when you can connect to the invisible web of heart-strands that connect us in pain and in beauty, something opens up inside and anxiety quiets down.

Key #3

USE MEDITATIVE QUESTIONS TO HELP YOU SLOW DOWN

The third key for healing from anxiety is to carve out time and space every day to slow down into stillness. We cannot decipher the messages of anxiety when we're moving at light speed, for the soul moves in organic time, not technological time. When we fill every free moment with busyness, work, distractions, perpetual motion, texting, talking, listening to music, scrolling, clicking, and watching, we lose our capacity to hear and connect with our inner selves. In fact, one of the messages that anxiety brings is an alarm bell that says, "Slow down! I can't hear myself think. I have no time for self-reflection. When I lose touch with my inner world, I don't know who I am, and I feel anxious." Our culture is moving faster by the day, and our souls can't keep up.

You can slow down for a brief pause, where you engage in a mindful moment, like at a stop light when you choose to breathe deeply and notice your surroundings instead of checking your phone or changing the

MANIFESTATIONS OF ANXIETY

INTRUSIVE THOUGHTS

What if I'm with the wrong partner?

What if I've missed my calling?

What if I hurt someone?

What if I hurt a child?

What if the world ends?

SOMATIC SYMPTOMS

tightness in chest

constricted throat

shallow breath

antsy feeling in body—like you can't sit still

insomnia

dry mouth

headaches—including pressure in the head

muscle aches

general feeling of dis-ease

rapid heartbeat

sweating

pit in stomach

digestion issues

lightheadedness

BEHAVIORAL SYMPTOMS

anger

irritation

addiction

perfectionism

incessant talking

compulsive rituals, including online activity, in an attempt to seek reassurance

What might happen if, at the day's end, I pause at an open window long enough to look up into the night sky and receive the wisdom of the moonlight?

music. You can slow down for longer periods, like at the beginning and end of each day when you take time to journal, meditate, or simply be in quiet reflection. Part of the work of breaking free from anxiety includes positive action, like committing to the practices that I teach, and some of it includes taking time to slow down into a space of nourishing silence and literally doing nothing, like sitting next to a tree or lying in the grass without your phone in sight. In the space of stillness, the keys of curiosity and compassion constellate as allies to aid you on your journey of healing.

From a place of curiosity, ask yourself:

What happens if I take time to sit under the umbrella of a sacred moment? When, instead of taking a photo of the moment and posting it on Instagram, I listen fully to my solitude and silence until I can hear the raindrops of my soul watering my own soil?

What happens if, when I wake up in the morning—when my eyelids slowly, achingly open to meet the morning light—instead of reaching for my phone to scroll and click, I reach for the dream image that is still playing on the edges of consciousness before the image evaporates like bubbles in air?

What might happen if, at the day's end, I pause at an open window long enough to look up into the night sky and receive the wisdom of the moonlight? What secrets might she whisper down on silver threads?

What happens is that you come face-to-face with yourself in this moment, in present time. In those brief moments of silence and solitude, you meet your pain. Yes, these are the parts of you that you've stuffed away because they were deemed unlovable in early years, but also, if you can dare to imagine, they are your places of light: the poem that longs to be written, the song that needs to be sung, the sweet tears of grief that are waiting to fall into your cupped hands.

The fourth key, and one that helps you shift into curiosity and develop more self-compassion, is to set the dial of your inner compass to gratitude. This means being grateful not only for the obvious blessings that abound in your life, but also for the challenges. As Brother David Steindl-Rast shares in his audio series A Grateful Heart: "Coming alive is becoming alert and aware to the thousands and thousands of blessings that we receive—even on a day on which we have to go to the dentist or on a day we are really sick."

Key #4

BECOME GRATEFUL FOR THE GIFT IN ANXIETY

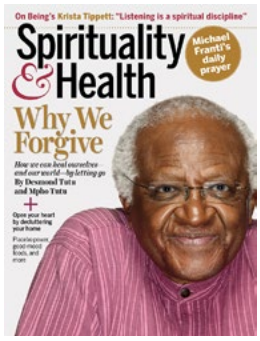
It's through our challenges that we learn and grow the most, which means embedded in every anxious feeling or intrusive thought, hidden inside the nightmare of a panic attack and the grueling path of insomnia, are diamonds that, when properly mined, lead to healing and serenity. This can be difficult to imagine at the outset of your journey. But every course member and client I've worked with who has embraced this path of approaching their anxiety with the keys of curiosity, compassion, and stillness comes back to say, "I didn't believe you when you said that I would feel grateful for my anxiety, but I really do. Meeting my anxiety in this way has brought me home to myself in ways I couldn't begin to imagine when I was in the thick of it." The same can be true for you.



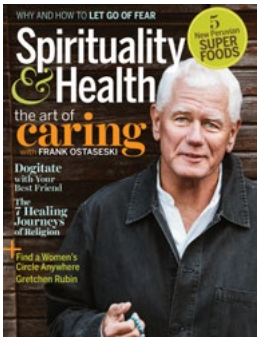














Please support what we do. Subscribe today!

SUBSCRIBE





