

Taming Anxiety From Within

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All of us have experienced anxiety at some point of our lives. For many, that feeling of being overwhelmed by nerves, the struggle to get enough sleep, and constant stress to juggle commitments, are all too familiar. The stress keeps building up until we clear the very last exam for the semester.

But do we always have to feel this way during the demanding periods of our lives? What else could we do to alter this negative state, and perhaps even reframe it into a more positive experience?

Understanding Anxiety

Anxiety in itself, is not a bad emotion. A little anxiety is actually helpful in making us more alert, and rouses us to undertake the necessary steps to achieve desired outcomes for a task or a goal. Nevertheless, anxiety brings about unpleasant feelings, and if left unchecked, anxiety can seriously interfere with performance.

Hence, it is important to recognize the different signs of anxiety as early as possible, and nip it in the bud before it becomes too overwhelming to manage.

With a quick search online, it is easy to find many comprehensive and well-written resources on how to cope with anxiety. However, it is not always apparent how changing the way we think about anxiety optimises those strategies, making all the difference between successful performance or not.

This article focuses on two aspects:

- 1) recognising the different signs of anxiety,** and
- 2) cognitively reframing anxiety as a positive motivating force.**

After all, coping strategies often work better when cognitive appraisal and cognitive change is already present.



LEARN TO RECOGNISE SIGNS OF ANXIETY

Physical Signs

Anxiety can take many forms, and oftentimes we may not readily recognize it.

Apart from the more common symptoms of anxiety, such as a racing heart, sweaty palms, shortness of breath, shaky hands, and dry mouth, there are other tell-tale signs. Some of these may be more acutely experienced, yet others are subtler and easily overlooked:

- Aches and pains, such as headaches, muscle aches and tension
- Feeling easily tired or fatigued
- Lightheadedness
- Insomnia, waking up in middle of night and difficulty falling asleep again
- Gastrointestinal issues
- Panic attacks

Psychological / Emotional Signs

- Excessive worrying
- Racing or ruminative thoughts
- Brain "Fog" - Difficulty focusing and concentrating, difficulty remembering things
- Increased negative thoughts, increased negative affect
- Feeling restless or irritable
- Feeling helpless or pessimistic about outcomes
- Feeling de-motivated
- Procrastinating more often
- Social withdrawal - avoiding things and activities you usually enjoy doing
- Spending more time on negative coping habits to distract self
- (e.g. staying up late, gaming, smoking and alcohol, or engaging in numbing behaviors such as prolonged mindless scrolling through social media or youtube)

REFRAMING HOW WE APPROACH ANXIETY - THE 5 RS



1. Recognise the false alarm

Acknowledge that you are feeling uncomfortable and anxious because this task is going to take more from you (in terms of time and effort) than the usual day-to-day tasks, or that it is happening in a context different from what you are most comfortable with. However, by reminding yourself that anxiety is just a friendly signal to prepare you for this task, and not as a sure sign that things will turn out badly (i.e. catastrophizing thoughts), will be the first step to keeping anxious feelings in check. Allowing negative thoughts to run unchecked only triggers stronger feelings of anxiety, and a vicious cycle ensues.

2. Reframe anxiety as excitement

Anxiety often brings about unpleasant sensations in the body, as well as unhelpful thoughts in the mind. Studies have found that reframing this anxious energy and channeling it as feelings of excitement helps people perform better eventually. To do this, one can think or say aloud to oneself "This is going to be exciting. I am looking forward to it!", or "I can see that it could be difficult, but I'm excited to see how it works out!". Using positive self-statements channels unsettling feelings in a positive direction, spurring yourself on at the same time.

3. Rehearse the scenario

Do the opposite of catastrophising. Mentally prepare yourself by walking through the scenario, visualizing the processes and steps in your mind, and see yourself succeed at the task. It is helpful also to imagine both success and failure, so as to anticipate what

could go wrong. However, always challenge catastrophising thoughts. For e.g., ask yourself: How do you know for sure that missing one question in this exam would affect your progress in studies? Or perhaps it was a difficult paper and you felt you did not attempt it very well, but how do you know for sure that others did not feel the same way?

4. Release the anxious energy

Pent-up nervous energy often finds its way into your thoughts, creating negative cycles of anxious thoughts and feelings. It is crucial to express and ventilate these feelings through exercise, through talking about your feelings with someone, through music, or writing down your worries and crushing up the paper. Humour can be a powerful antidote to anxiety! Have a good laugh by watching a comedy or some funny clips on Youtube. Chat about it with your friends and laugh off your worries.

5. Set up Routines and Rewards

Decide how you are going to achieve your goals. Assign the time and resources you have on hand, and create a schedule to revise for your exams.

Do this realistically and manage your expectations so that you can set yourself up reasonably for success. Don't forget to include time for rest, respite, and reward yourself for each mini-step achieved. Many people underestimate how helpful setting up a work-reward schedule can be, yet if done properly, it can have a tremendous effect on helping you stay focused on your goal, and freeing your mind from undue worries and negativity.

To conclude this article, perhaps it is worthwhile saying that having the **right mindset matters**. So before diving into all the strategies to cope with anxiety, it may be helpful to first reflect on what we make of our anxiety, what meaning(s) does it hold for us, and how might we better channel it such that it becomes helpful rather than debilitating.

References and Suggested Further Reading:

<https://learningcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/tackling-test-anxiety/>

<https://www.healthline.com/health/breathing-exercises-for-anxiety>

<https://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/taming-anxiety-techniques-work/>

