

MANAGING ANXIETY

Developed in partnership with Dr. Jennifer Hartstein, Hartstein Psychological Services

ANXIETY

Anxiety is an emotion we ALL experience. It lives on a continuum, exacerbated by all sorts of different things. Generally, anxiety is triggered by uncertainty. When we feel uncertain, our stress and worry increase, and we often feel at a loss for what to do.

Below are some tips that can help you more effectively manage your anxiety, along with some mindfulness and grounding strategies.

- 1) **Understand your anxiety.** We have difficulty processing information when we are at high levels of emotional distress. At the top of the emotional mountain, we can't think or process effectively. Use breathing techniques or mindfulness strategies to slow down and help yourself focus on what is making you anxious. Identifying the pieces is the first step to changing your mindset.
- 2) **Calm your mind.** Relaxation techniques can be an effective way to calm anxious thinking and direct your mind to a more positive place. Taking time to relax increases your ability to think objectively and positively when it comes to making choices about your health and life.
- 3) **Challenge negative thinking.** When you're anxious, your brain may jump to conclusions, assume the worst, or exaggerate. Catastrophizing and ignoring the positives in your life may occur when you live with the challenges of a chronic illness. One way to manage anxiety is by being aware of the negative thinking, examining it and challenging the irrational thoughts. Counselors/therapists can play an important role in teaching you this important coping
- 4) **Use your supports.** Managing a chronic illness can be a lonely job as it may be difficult for loved ones to understand the unique challenges. It can be hard for others to understand the struggles caregivers experience as well. Support groups are wonderful for creating community and also for providing information that can help reduce worry. They can also connect you to valuable resources for treating your illness. Check with your local hospital or community center to find a local group. You can also search the Internet for online support.
- 5) **Acknowledge successes.** Anxious thinking about chronic illness can keep you from feeling that you have control over anything in life. It's important to acknowledge all successes, both big and small. Keep track of the healthy things you do for your mind and body. Exercising, going to counseling, spending time with a friend—these can all help. Keeping these successes at the front of your mind can help you combat worry. They can remind you that you do have the power to affect your present and future.

- 6) **Recruit the right team.** Patients benefit the most when chronic illness and psychological distress, such as anxiety, are treated with a team of people who communicate regularly. Doctors, pain specialists, psychiatrists, counselors, occupational therapists, and physical therapists are among those who can help you create and implement a treatment plan for your physical and mental health.
- 7) **Identify your limits.** It's understandable to fall into a worry mindset when thinking about what others might expect of you and what you might "have" to do. Take some time to identify what your limits are and express them to others. Just because others don't like them doesn't mean they are wrong. It's okay to do what's best for you.
- 8) **Be reflective.** Re-opening is giving everyone anxiety. Normalize it for yourself and reflect on what you've learned and what you want to take with you out of this challenging time (and what you want to leave behind).
- 9) **Take it slow.** This is a marathon not a sprint. Go at your own pace.

MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness is a word that is being used a lot these days, often with no real explanation as to its benefit. Mindfulness can help us to manage stress mentally and physically by providing us a space to slow down and refocus.

Mindfulness is the ability to be fully present in a given moment, free from judgment and distraction. According to general mindfulness research, being more mindful helps us to mitigate feelings of stress, feel less overwhelmed and more contented and to be more engaged in our day-to-day activities. Mindfulness is a practice that anyone can do at any time. Practicing mindfulness can help us to feel more grounded, which helps us to focus and be less reactive.

Below are three exercises, along with some apps that can be easily accessed and used to help with one's mindfulness practice.

Most mindfulness starts with our breath. Breathing is so important in helping to regulate and calm your body. Following is an exercise focused on that.

SQUARE BREATHING

Take some time and focus on your breath.

Start with 5 deep breaths, in through your nose and out through your mouth. When breathing out your mouth, purse your lips as if you are blowing out a candle. Release the air slowly.

Then move into the below:

Breathe in through your nose counting to five.

Hold at the top of the breath.

Count to five.

Exhale slowly through your mouth, counting to five.

Hold at the bottom of the breath.

Count to five. Repeat up to a round of 1

5-4-3-2-1

Using all five of our senses in different ways can help us to reset, as well. Below is an exercise that pulls on our five senses.

Start with a deep full breath, in through your nose and out through your mouth.

SEE:

Look for 5 things in your environment that you can see. Say them out loud or to yourself.

FEEL:

Pay attention to your body and notice 4 things that you can feel. Say them out loud or to yourself

LISTEN:

Listen for 3 sounds. Say them out loud or to yourself.

SMELL:

Notice two things that you can smell. If you need to move somewhere else to sniff something, go for it. Say them out loud or to yourself.

TASTE:

Notice one thing you can taste. If you can't taste anything, identify your favorite thing to taste. Say it out loud or to yourself.

Take another deep, full breath in through your nose and out through your mouth.

GROUND YOURSELF

Not the kind where you put yourself in time-out because you are punished. When we feel overwhelmed, we often feel unstable. Take a full deep breath, in through your nose and out through your mouth. Notice your feet on the floor. They should be flat and fully engaged.

Lean into your feet, really pushing into the floor. If you're seated, lean forward and push your elbows into your knees. If you're standing, bend your knees slightly, really putting weight into your feet. Really notice that you are engaging your feet.

Take another full, deep breath in through your nose and out through your mouth.

HELPFUL APPS USING A MOBILE DEVICE

Headspace: a wonderful and easy mindfulness app for a smartphone or tablet. They have some deals for businesses that will provide support to all employees.

InScape: another easy meditation app that allows you to do a variety of timed meditations, including many for sleep

Simple Habit: for many of us, starting mindful meditation is challenging. Simple Habit has some as short as 5 minutes to get you started.

For more information, be sure to watch Dr. Jen's webinar on "Managing Anxiety in the "New" Normal" for the Soft Bones HPP Community at www.softbones.org/resources