

Help for Anxiety

There are many different approaches to decreasing anxiety. Therapists often use a set of tools called “grounding techniques” that can help pull us out of our anxious thoughts and into the reality of the present. Anything that stimulates one of the five senses can be considered a grounding technique. Listening to relaxing music, aromatherapy, and taking a hot bath are all means of drawing our attention to the present moment. Spending time outdoors is particularly effective because it stimulates many of the senses all at once. Many church service rituals actually make use of grounding techniques as well. If you have ever listened to a choir, smelled incense, or taken communion, you have responded to grounding cues that prepare you to worship God in the “here and now.”

How Breathing Helps Lower Anxiety

You have probably heard the phrase, “take a deep breath” used to suggest to someone that they relax. Though there are many relaxation techniques that can be used to try to foster relaxation, diaphragmatic breathing may be the simplest relaxation exercise to explain and describe. Though we often think of the lungs when we think of breathing, anyone who has ever played a wind instrument or who has sung in a choir has learned the importance of breathing through the diaphragm, which is the abdominal muscle that contracts involuntarily when we breathe. Science has demonstrated that practicing “deep breathing” through the diaphragm stimulates the vagus nerve. This nerve activates the parasympathetic nervous system, or the network of nerves that relax the body after periods of stress or danger. So there is an actual biological basis as to why deep-breathing works! For instructions on how to practice deep breathing, simply search the web.

Physical Exercise Helps Lower Anxiety

Physical exercise is another simple but important means of fostering relaxation. If you think about it, physical exercise might be considered a combination of deep-breathing and grounding techniques. Physical exertion results in deep-breathing, and grounding is necessary to effectively use our bodies in the here and now. Research suggests that regular exercise (a total of approximately 2 ½ hours per week) can be as effective as taking antidepressants for decreasing anxiety and improving mood. This is because exercise increases the levels of several neurotransmitters in the brain in a similar way to antidepressant medication. And this effect can be achieved by both aerobic and anaerobic physical activity.

Interestingly, when considering individual vs. team sports, team sports have been shown to be superior when it comes to mental health benefits. Most likely this is because team sports add another element of effective relaxation: namely, socialization. Like exercise, direct person-to-person releases a “cocktail” of neurotransmitters that regulate stress and anxiety. Perhaps this is reason that the idea of “fellowship” is so important in the Bible. The ability to share each other’s burdens and encourage one another naturally help us feel more relaxed, heard, and contained. Conversely, a lack of social connection and isolation may make us more anxious.

Prayer and Reading Scripture Help Lower Anxiety

Finally, it is important to recognize the importance of traditional spiritual disciplines in lowering anxiety. You may have seen a lot of press lately about the technique of “mindfulness” or meditation. These are really just generic terms that are used to describe contemplative practices that focus our attention and can be used to train the brain to respond in more useful ways to different kinds of stimulation. Prayer and reading Scripture are two historically recognized forms of meditation in the Christian contemplative tradition. Increasingly, meditation has been shown to be effective not only in managing anxiety but in managing the symptoms of various illnesses. In fact, like exercise, some studies have shown meditation to be as effective in lowering anxiety as antidepressant medication. And in case you are wondering, from a purely scientific perspective, the length of time spent in prayer matters when it comes to noticing its anti-anxiety effect. Thirteen minutes of time spent in prayer appears to be the minimum threshold needed to start feeling more relaxed.

Helping Others with Anxiety

Armed with this knowledge, how can we as individuals strive to help others who are dealing with anxiety? The most important intervention is to simply be a good listener. Of course, listening involves an understanding of the basic content of what someone is saying, but sometimes a more effective way of really listening is to pay special attention to the feelings that underlie the content. Appreciating someone’s feelings may be key to allowing them to feel heard. There are also many cultural aspects involved in listening. Direct expression of feelings may not be encouraged or seen as acceptable in some cultures. So purposefully identifying how a person feels can sometimes give the person more permission to express their feelings and may open up additional topics of conversation that might not otherwise have been shared.

An important aspect of listening is validating what the other person is feeling. When someone feels heard, anxiety is reduced. Validation lets the person know that it would make sense to feel what they are feeling from their perspective. Critically, validation does not necessarily imply agreement. It is entirely possible to understand what someone is saying given their perspective while maintaining your own independent point of view. Too often, we rush to add our own thoughts without bothering to validate. And sometimes, in doing so, a crucial function of listening is lost.

It can often be helpful when listening to someone who is expressing worry to suggest that they consider using some of these healthy coping mechanisms mentioned above (if they are not already using them). On the other hand, it is also possible for a person to be actively engaged in trying to reduce their anxiety with little effect. Additional signs that someone’s anxiety level is proving overwhelming include a change in appetite or difficulty sleeping, difficulty concentrating, increased irritability, trouble keeping up with tasks like housework, difficulty functioning in relationships, or difficulty with parenting. When it becomes clear that someone continues to struggle, it may be in the person’s best interests to seek the help of a

professional. Often, it is easiest to frame this suggestion in terms of your concern for them and in letting them know that seeking help is OK, and a sign of strength versus weakness.

As believers, it is noteworthy that our most important strength for reducing worry is through our unique hope in Jesus Christ. While finding meaning and a sense of identity are challenges that can be daunting for anyone experiencing worry, faith is its own grounding technique. Faith brings us back to the roots of our identity in Christ and reminds us of our value to our maker. Anxiety is no match when everything is possible through Christ who strengthens us.

Resource for Help with Anxiety: National Presbyterian Church's Care Office

If you struggle with anxiety and want some assistance, please reach out to the Care Office. We can offer support through prayer, Deacons or referrals to counselors. Please contact careoffice@nationalpres.org for more information.