Anxiety and Panic

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal emotional and physiological response to feeling threatened, ranging from mild uneasiness and worry to severe panic. It is not unusual to feel anxious when in a stressful situation. Not all anxiety is negative. It can be exciting or invigorating, helping to motivate us to get things done. However, if anxiety becomes too severe or chronic, it can be debilitating.

We experience anxiety in different ways:

Psychologically: Fear, nervousness, not being able to concentrate, feeling numb
Physiologically: Breathing fast, trembling, dry mouth, heart racing, stomach churning
Cognitively: Frightening or negative thoughts (e.g. "I'm going to fail or make a fool of myself.")

These can affect our behavior by causing us to put off or stop work, avoid people or situations, not sleep well, not eat, eat for comfort, drink too much, or take illegal substances. Too much stress can interfere with living a normal life, although acute anxiety states are time-limited and will start to fade away in a relatively short period of time.

How You Can Help Yourself

Review the stressful circumstances in your life. Think about what causes you to feel stressed and try to find ways to reduce these sources of stress.

- Learn to say no to things you don't want to do.
- Give up unnecessary, time-consuming activities and responsibilities.
- Discuss a relationship problem.
- Use a realistic plan of action to tackle projects.
- Ask for information or feedback from a friend, family, academic advisor or supervisor.

Acknowledge what feels right for you and allow yourself to respond to your needs. Taking care of your emotional well-being will help you cope with stress.

- Eat well, be physically active, get enough sleep, be social.
- Have a support network around you—spend time with friends or family.
- Do activities you enjoy.

Challenge Negative Thoughts

Anxious thoughts cause us to exaggerate how threatening a situation is and underplay how effectively we can cope. Our thoughts are distorted by our emotional state, and it can help to evaluate the situation more realistically when we feel calm. Ask yourself:

Am I judging myself harshly?
Are you focusing on failures and forgetting your successes? Are you dismissing similar situations in the past that you have coped with?

Am I catastrophizing?
Are you seeing things in all-or-nothing terms or assuming that to not succeed would be an absolute catastrophe? Are you exaggerating the chance of something going wrong or minimizing the possibility of your working it out fine?

Am I worrying about the future?
Are you making assumptions about what will happen in the future? Are you frightening yourself about situations that you aren't actually facing at present and which may never happen?

Am I comparing myself to others?
Are you assuming that everyone else is doing fine when you don't actually know how others are feeling or managing? Are you blaming yourself for things that you cannot control or are not your responsibility?

Try using your rational mind to challenge your irrational thinking. For example:

> Irrational: "I'm going to fail my exams."
> Rational: "The work is supposed to be more challenging, and I've passed exams before."

Distract Yourself

Some people find it more effective to distract themselves from their frightening thoughts by repeating a calming phrase (e.g. "Stay calm and relaxed. I will feel better soon."), doing mental arithmetic, or saying the alphabet backwards. You can also try to distract yourself by focusing your attention on some external stimulus such as listening to a conversation, watching television, or becoming aware of what is going on around you. If you can stop paying attention to frightening thoughts, they won't be able to fuel your anxiety.

Face the Situation

Confronting anxiety-provoking situations rather than avoiding them can help. If you let yourself stay in the feared situation for long enough, the anxiety will reduce over time until it passes. You might start by confronting a situation that is not too demanding so that you experience the resulting reduction in anxiety. Then, gradually address more anxiety-provoking situations.

Learn to Relax

The physical symptoms of anxiety occur because adrenaline is released by the nervous system into the bloodstream. Relaxation and breathing exercises can help you control these symptoms. You can learn how your body feels when it is relaxed if you tense different parts of your body (e.g. arms, hands, legs, neck, shoulders, forehead) for a few seconds and then allow them to relax. Try to keep your breathing slow and regular so that you do not hyperventilate, as this makes the physical symptoms worse. Relaxation exercises need to be practiced initially when calm—you will become better able to relax in stressful situations with increasing practice.

Where to Get Help

- Speak to a close friend or family member.
- Visit with your advisor or medical doctor.
- Speak to a counselor at Health and Wellness Services to help you understand and deal with your anxiety.