

Anxiety and panic – What works?



Part 2

In part 1 we looked at what anxiety is all about and how it manifests in our body, mind and behaviour. What we move on to now is to address how we can change aspects of all those areas in order to relearn different habits that are ultimately more effective in managing anxiety.

○ **Manage the body.**

Some general things to start with.

The response you most notice when anxious is often in your body, and the body and the mind are intimately and inextricably linked. Anxiety is about the arousal system, so what we need to do is calm that system down. Firstly, there are some very basic things you need to be aware of that you can change that will impact anxiety. They are **CATS**: Caffeine, Alcohol, Tobacco, Sugar.



As mentioned, anxiety is about your arousal system being in overdrive. So things you put into your body that also hype up your arousal system will have a significant impact on your anxiety levels. Keep a journal of your anxiety and panic for a few weeks and also these four things and you may notice a pattern. It is worth noting that many artificial sweeteners have a similar effect to sugar. Therefore, eliminating or reducing these four things will have a calming effect on your body and mind, and therefore your anxiety levels. It is always difficult to change habits, but the effort is well worth it.

One of the best ways to change something is to start by being aware of it and tracking it. This alone can actually change behaviour. So start to monitor and record your intake of these things. You can use an app on your phone or note them on a calendar.



Some people are more sensitive to caffeine than others. For some no caffeine is the best amount. Others can tolerate more. Experiment. But ultimately be aware that anxiety and caffeine are not a good mix. To avoid caffeine withdrawal headaches cut down gradually. If you like the taste of coffee, then try a decaf but be aware that often chemicals are used to decaffeinate and these are often not doing you much good either! However, there are decaf coffees available that are water decaffeinated. Read labels or ask at cafes. Also avoid or limit drinks like Red Bull and Coke which have caffeine in them.



Alcohol may appear to “calm your nerves” and make you drowsy but a few hours later it can often stimulate the arousal system and interfere with sleep particularly in the second half of the night and can even mimic the symptoms of anxiety.



Tobacco – well you don’t need me to tell you it is not good for you, but you may not be aware it is not a good bedfellow to anxiety – it may calm you initially but in the longer run it actually increases anxiety!



Be aware there is a lot of hidden sugar in food especially in packaged food and drinks. “My Fitness Pal” is one app that can be used to track your sugar consumption easily as it lists sugar content (in grams) as well as other nutrition data for most food and beverages. A useful goal is to keep sugar consumption to under about 30-35g per day. Sugar contained in vegetables and some whole foods are less of a concern.

As well, while we are on the topic of what you put in your body, there is growing evidence that at least some people are more sensitive than others to additives in food and drinks. It may be useful to try eliminating various additives - preservatives and flavourings – for a week or so and see if it has a beneficial impact.

The other habit that can help your body manage debilitating anxiety is **regular exercise**. It helps to burn off any adrenaline and uses the arousal for something productive. It also helps your body to relax after the exercise. Do anything that you will keep up. It can be as simple as going for a brisk walk. The key is



to do it regularly. What you do or where is less important than just getting going on something. As an added bonus the most effective thing to ward against dementia is regular exercise. Walking being a key one that has been researched. However, one caution is that if you tend toward being competitive and perfectionistic it can creep into exercise as well and make it anxiety provoking and stressful. Be aware of this, and dial it back rather than avoiding doing it.

Nature can often be stress reducing, so if you combine your exercise with being out in nature you get a two-for-one deal!



Okay, that is the basics. Now to more specific strategies regarding the body.

Breathing!



Remember we said all those things that the sympathetic nervous system ramps up when we are in survival mode. Breathing is one of them. And importantly, it is one that we have fairly easy and fast conscious control over – unlike our heart rate or chemicals our system is releasing. So that is the best place to intervene. And because everything is interconnected in our system, if we impact one it will impact the others. There are lots of different recommendations for how to breathe when anxious. It doesn't really matter which one you use. The main aim is to slow your breathing down and get your breathing to a slow steady rate. Here is one simple method:

Step one. Notice your breathing and roughly notice the speed. Start to breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth.

Step two. Start to slow your breathing down, with each breath being a little longer than the one before, until you can get it to about 4 seconds to breathe in and about 3 to 4 seconds to breathe out. If you can't get it to 4 seconds at first that's fine, just do the best you can. When you breathe out imagine you are letting the breath go. You may have a slight pause at either end of the breath, but if that is not comfortable don't worry about it. Your breath may sometimes speed up again. That's fine. When you notice, just start to slow it down again. Once your breathing is that slow you will notice your breathing is now also deep and you are using all of your lungs. Well done!

Step three. Once your breathing is slow and even take a few breaths like that. At least a couple. More if you feel like it. Notice how you are feeling and you will note that you are now feeling less anxious and more calm.

You need to practice this many times a day. As an exercise as outlined above you can do it for a few minutes once or twice a day. But additionally, make it something you do whenever you think about it, *not just when an anxiety episode occurs*. A short version you can do often is to take **one slow breath**. Do it often - When you are at a traffic light, in a lift, waiting in line, in a meeting, sitting watching TV, washing up etc. This is helping to retrain your body to be more calm and for it to become a reflexive and easy thing to do. Then when you are feeling anxious or panicky it will be easier to do. As soon as you notice you are feeling anxious think – “Breathe” and do the above exercise.

Relaxation

If you are trying to retrain your body how to be more relaxed and not so 'on alert' then it makes sense to do some relaxation. The breathing exercise above is a good start. Slowing your breathing down will start to relax your body and mind as it moves you from Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS) to Parasympathetic NS. You can add in a muscle relaxation. As you breathe out imagine you can let all of your tension go in one flop. Maybe imagine your limbs like cooked spaghetti.

If this is too hard then try doing a progressive relaxation starting with your feet and moving up. First tightening muscles for a second or two and then letting them go.



There are numerous **apps** you can access and most of them are free. Spend time looking on your phone or tablets app store. Some good ones to try are *Headspace*, *Calm*, *Stop Anxiety and Panic*, *Smiling Mind*, *Breathe2Relax*. You can also choose guided meditations that focus on various things including help with sleeping. As an added benefit you can use guided meditations if your mind is racing and you can't get it to slow down enough to sleep for instance, then a guided meditation can give your mind something relaxing to focus on.

Drop anchor

This is another simple exercise to centre yourself and connect with the world around you. Practice it throughout the day, especially any time you find yourself getting caught up in your thoughts and feelings.



1. Plant your feet into the floor.
2. Push them down—notice the floor beneath you, supporting you.
3. Notice the muscle tension in your legs as you push your feet down.
4. Notice your entire body—and the feeling of gravity flowing down through your head, spine, and legs into your feet.
5. Now look around and notice what you can see and hear around you. Notice where you are and what you're doing.

Notice 5 Things

This is something to do when you find you are highly anxious or panicking. Along with slowing your breathing, look around and list off 5 things you can see around you. Any five things will do. You can also mix it up by noticing 5 things of a certain colour – eg. 5 blue things. You can also notice 5 sounds, depending on the environment (some environments might be too quiet to notice 5). Also 5 things you can feel: like the feel of your feet on the floor; your body touching things like a seat cushion or back; the feel of something in your pockets; a ring on your finger; the fabric of a chair arm under your hand and so on. Notice temperature, texture, pressure etc. What this does is takes your attention from the internal feelings and thoughts of panic to eternal non-threatening things. Once you have done a few rounds of noticing 5 things and slowed your breathing you will find you have calmed down significantly.

We have started with managing the body, which is the best place to start. In Part 3 we move on to managing the mind, emotions, and behaviour.