

# **It's like being chased by a Bear**



1891-1892. George B. Woodbury

**Living and thriving with anxiety**

## This is No Substitute for Getting Actual Help

Between these pages you are going to get some very, very basic information about anxiety – what it is, how it affects you, and some tools to manage it. Why? Because chances are you have had to deal with some anxiety in your life. Because you are human. Multiply that by being a college student. Multiply that by life in the 21st century.

You might have chronic anxiety. That is, you might suffer from nonspecific feelings of anxiousness much of the time, and have done so for some time. This may be a response to a specific trauma or ongoing traumas, this may be due to your body's genetics or epigenetics gifting you with an atypical neurology or biochemistry. This book may have some tips for you, but I am going to suggest that if you are living with chronic anxiety, you should probably talk to a professional to discuss a number of options that may include the use of behavioral, pharmaceutical, and talk therapy treatments to help you develop the ability to live a satisfactory life with your chronic anxiety.

Whatever your situation, I hope this booklet helps, and I hope that you can reach out if you need referrals or help.

## How To Talk About Anxiety

True story: my wife lives with chronic anxiety with a bit of depression thrown into the mix. I live with chronic depression with a little anxiety thrown into the mix. When I am anxious, it helps me to talk about it; but one of my wife's anxiety triggers is *talking about anxiety*. So we need to have code words to talk about anxiety. She described the feeling of her anxiety one day as feeling like she was being chased by bears, so we talk about bears instead of talking about anxiety. As in, "hey, there are a lot of bears around today." You may have *different* problems discussing anxiety, but I find it is still hard to do talk to people about your anxiety.

**Anxiety is not shameful.** It is, in fact, a normal response to stress and danger. That you suffer from anxiety more than others or more severely is not a sign of weakness, it is just something you need to learn how to deal with.

Coping with anxiety usually **involves getting help**. When you need help, it works to let people know **what you are feeling, how it is affecting you, and what you need** from the other person: "Right now, I am feeling overwhelmed, I am having trouble focusing on studying for my exam because I am scared of failing. I need help figuring out my options so that I don't fail the class."

Doug Easterly  
Muir College Dean of Academic Advising

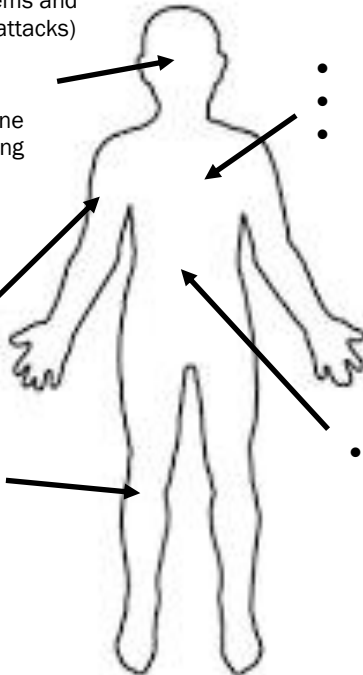
# WTH Do We Feel Anxiety?

Ideally, anxiety is a normal response of the body to danger. If you were an early human exploring a cave looking to see if it make a good shelter and found that it had already been occupied by a hungry cave bear, anxiety would kick in to help you survive. Your body would kick out huge amounts of adrenaline, your body would move blood from your core out to your limbs, your heart would beat faster, your blood pressure would increase, our senses would narrow, and you would become keenly aware of your potential demise, triggering deep instincts to either flee the situation, fight, or freeze to avoid imminent death. A pretty good security system, right?

Well, it is if you are still facing bears. If not, then you might end up with some issues. Because an exam, asking someone else on a date, childhood traumas, or just having a lot to do can still trigger the anxiety response. And the things that made you really awesome in fleeing from a bear look a little less awesome when you are dealing with a Chemistry mid-term.

## How Anxiety Manifests in the Body

- Can't focus well.
- Always looking for problems and danger (including panic attacks)
- General sense of doom.
- Want to fight everyone (irritability), avoid everyone (depression), or do nothing (depression),
- Headaches



- Increased heart rate.
- Quick, shallow breathing
- Blood pressure goes up.

- Adrenaline and increased blood flow make you antsy
- When the adrenaline wears off your limbs are weak, tired, and achy.

- Reduced blood to gut means you might get queasy or have an upset stomach

# Cognitive Distortions from Anxiety

Starting in the 1700s, European academics began to push this idea that reason was the underpinning of Western thought and that humans, at their pinnacle, are creatures that strive toward pure reason and logic. If you have ever argued with anyone ever, you will realize that these academics were overestimating the intrinsic nature of reason. Cognitive scientists, in fact, tend to find that we think as much around irrational elements (emotion, sense of affiliation, bias) as anything else. Not to say that reason is not good, it's just that our brains don't focus first on reason.

In fact, our brains lie to us regularly. The brain is not a computer with a perfect memory for data and which spits out facts. Instead, brains are messy connections of memories that are always changing and being arranged in new ways. That cognitive process is awesome, but we often end up giving incorrect weight or interpretation to memories and thoughts. These are distortions of our cognitive process. Cognitive distortions are a normal phenomenon, but unless we recognize them and address them, we tend to develop a very biased view of the world. I want you to think about these cognitive distortions as unhelpful thoughts that you can address and redirect if you are aware of them.

## Common Cognitive Distortions from Anxiety

- **Catastrophizing**  
This is a form of generalization where your brain leaps automatically to the worst possible outcome of a situation, no matter what. This may look like "if I fail this class I will never be successful at my career" or "if I don't get an A, I will be unemployable." Everyone does this to some extent, but if you live with severe or chronic anxiety, you may do this much more or much more severely than other folks.
- **Dichotomous Thinking**  
Also called binary thinking or black and white thinking, this is when your brain begins to shut down any alternatives and see things only in extremes. "Either I get into a computer science major or I will never get a job" (as if the only jobs available are for programmers). It can also be "I always fail at chemistry", "I can never organize my time", or "I just can't study." If you are using terms like "always", "never", or thinking in all or nothing terms, you are likely dealing with some unhelpful thoughts.
- **Selective Generalization**  
Another way anxiety lies to us is when it tries to make a single negative experience into a general trend. If you ask someone out for a date and they aren't interested, it's easy to think you are undateable based on a single data

point; it's easy to struggle with one class and decide that you are unable to succeed on the subject. This is actually your brain lying to you to give you permission to give up and avoid disappointment and stress in the future. But in actuality, your brain is lying to avoid future stress.

- **Personalization**

We all have an internal dialogue that is typically filled with some negative self-talk. It's like a personal guide sitting on our shoulders giving us bad ideas and reminding us of our insecurities. Mostly it tells us to take all events personally, as if you are constantly watched by people out to get you and that all bad things that happen to you are a personal punishment. When you hear that voice in your head, stop and recognize it as unhelpful thinking.

- **Fortune Telling**

Anxiety feels so important to your brain that it is easy to think that it gives you special insight into how everything will turn out — and that the outcome will always be bad. That usually takes the form of assuming that people hate or judge you, that you will be rejected before you even try, and that you will fail at a task long before you have any information about the task and your preparation. This feels more real than just being pessimistic, but it isn't.

## **Dealing These Thoughts**

Later on, I will talk about mindfulness, cognitive behavioral tools you can try on your own, and getting professional help from a therapist. All of those are tools to have in your toolbox to deal with these mental blocks that add to the physical symptoms of anxiety.

But in addition to all that, it's important to find people you trust — not only therapists, but also friends, family, or mentors — who know you, care for you and can help you do a reality check on a regular basis and will give you real an "I am thinking these negative things. Am I off-base? Because everything seems terrible right now!"

# Some Ways to Manage Anxiety

## Physical Exercise

One way you might be able to address anxiety is through exercise. Exercise helps in multiple ways:

- Gets you out of your head: Engaging in exercise can help distract you from the source of your anxiety by getting your mind focused on physical effort instead.
- Moving your body reduces your muscle tension in your limbs and makes use of the stress hormones and altered blood flow caused by anxiety, helping your body return to equilibrium.
- Exercise releases neurotransmitters that contribute to more positive feelings (think of serotonin, GABA, and endocannabinoids).
- Exercise helps activate your frontal lobe, which makes you more able to control your emotions and tame your fight/flight/freeze response.

## Mindfulness

Several studies have linked mindfulness meditation with reductions in stress. This is likely due to a number of factors — the breathing involved in mindfulness, the focus, and redirecting the mind to the present all have impacts both on your body and on your state of mind, which in turn help activate your frontal lobe, rebalance some of your body's autonomic nervous system, and help you reframe your unhelpful thoughts.

There are a lot of ways to approach meditation, with some methods tied to specific traditions in Hinduism or Buddhism, for example. When I talk about mindfulness meditation, though, my focus is not on a faith-based practice but on a practice that looks at breathing and mental focus, because I personally am an atheist. You can apply some of these methods to your own faith tradition, if you wish and connect the methods of mindful meditation to prayer, for example.

### ***Box Breathing***

A simple meditation-adjacent practice is to use breathing as the only part of your practice to achieve a mindful state where you are aware of yourself and the present and able to step away from your worries about the past and future. You can do this with your eyes open or closed.

- Sit with your back straight in a chair, your feet on the floor. Alternately, you can stand, or lie down on the floor on your back, with a hand under the small of your back.
- Breathe normally, noticing the rise and fall of your chest and stomach.

- ⇒ If your chest is rising but your stomach is not, you are breathing shallowly. This is likely to activate more stress in your sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system.
- ⇒ If your stomach is rising, you are breathing deeply., which can help you achieve more calm.
- ⇒ Adjust your breath to make sure you are breathing by breathing slowly in through the nose to a count of 3, expanding your stomach, then breathing out of your mouth for a count of 3.
- Once you are taking deep breaths, you re ready:
  1. Breath in through your nose, counting to four. Feel your chest and belly expanding.
  2. Hold your breath, counting to four.
  3. Slowly exhale, counting to four.
  4. Repeat this pattern until you feel more calm.

### ***Basic Meditation***

This is my method of meditation, discarding a lot of the formality in many religious practices of meditation.

1. Find a quiet place where you will not be interrupted.
2. Sit in a chair with your back straight and supported and your feet on the ground, or sit cross-legged on the ground or a pillow, or lie down flat on your back. Don't get so comfortable you will fall asleep, but don't get so uncomfortable you can't focus.
3. Keep your eyes open and take a deep breath in through your nose, counting to three, and out through your mouth, counting to three. Do this two more times.
4. Close your eyes and continue that breathing.
  - ⇒ Each time you breath in through your nose, focus on the physical sensation of your breath as it enters your body and expands your chest. Each time you breath out, feel the breath exit your body.
  - ⇒ After three breaths, begin to focus on how your body feels, starting with your head and moving down your neck, into your shoulders, down your chest, arms, hips, and legs.. Notice areas where you feel tense or relaxed, good or bad.
  - ⇒ Once you have done this scan, begin again at the top of your head and try to relax your body, from the head down, letting your muscles relax and your limbs get heavy.
  - ⇒ While you are meditating, individual thoughts and feelings will appear in your mind. You will think about something you need to do or will have an emotional response to your body. That is okay, but as those thoughts and feelings come up, try to acknowledge that thought and think "that is a though" and imagine it floating away. If it is an emotion, think "that is a feeling" and let it float away. Allow your mind to clear of anything but the awareness of your body.

- ⇒ Once you have allowed your relaxation move to the soles of your feet, you may focus only on your breathing, or you may focus on a thought, prayer, or theme you want to consider to set your intention for the day. You can focus on being kind to yourself or others, to allowing yourself to be open to change, or just allow yourself to feel calm while you do not have a storm of thoughts in your head.
- ⇒ Once you find your mind is wandering too much, relax, let your mind wander while you take three more deep breaths in and out, then open your eyes and slowly let yourself be ready to start your day.

I find a couple of things myself. One is that medication helps me more if I start my day with meditation. It tends to center me for the rest of the day. The second thing is that meditation is *hard af*, and it takes practice to do this for more than a couple of minutes per day. Finally, I find it helpful to have guidance on meditation.

I have found success on apps to guide meditation. Two common and easily accessed apps for your smart phone are Headspace and Calm. Our Counseling and Psychological Services office makes the Headspace app available for free to UCSD students, which may help you choose an app.

## **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Tools**

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a common tool used by psychologists for us to recognize triggers for our behaviors and develop methods to redirect our unhelpful responses to those triggers. Here are a few ways you can harness CBT to help you manage your anxiety response.

### **1. Planning**

Anxiety can lead to procrastination and avoidance. We might avoid studying, asking for a raise, or making a change due to stress or fear. One way we can help manage that fear is to remove the burden of deciding by putting the decision or action on your calendar so that it just becomes a thing you have to do.

### **2. Roleplaying**

Playing out a scenario with someone else can help you rehearse your response, get feedback from someone other than your negative inner voice, and lessen the fear from otherwise intimidating situations.

### **3. Reframing**

This involves really examining the thought patterns that lead to your anxiety, chasing down the unhelpful thinking affecting you (remember that whole section on Cognitive Distortions?) and thinking of new ways to con-



sider the situation you find yourself in to get you out of that spiral of negative thought.

#### 4. **Relaxation**

Exercise, meditation, and spending time with others doing positive things can help you re-center when anxiety strikes.

#### 5. **Break it down (or if you are a psychologist, *successive approximation*)**

Taking big, intimidating tasks and breaking them down into smaller tasks can help make them much less triggering. Writing a 10 page paper is less intimidating if you can break it into chunks of writing an thesis statement, researching the topic, writing an introduction, and so on.

#### 6. **Behavioral Experiments**

If you tend to catastrophize or engage in fortune-telling (again with the cognitive distortions!), you could practice doing some thought experiments. Try to predict what is likely to happen and compare the actual result to your prediction. Start with low-stakes risks and work up to things that really freak you out and begin to see how your negative predictions are often the worst that could happen, not what is likely to happen.

#### 7. **Journaling**

To really adjust our behaviors, we need to identify them and recognize them. One good way to do this is writing things down. Therapists using CBT techniques will often have you do this by keeping a journal of your thoughts (a thought record) that keeps track of the negative thoughts you have had, and identifying positive thoughts you could have had instead.

## **Dealing with Test Anxiety**

Test anxiety is when your may leave you with an upset stomach, a racing heart, aches, weakness, trouble focusing, and trouble recalling information. You may freeze or have trouble knowing what to do on the exam. These physical and cognitive impacts of anxiety are real, but can be overcome with work.

### ***Dealing with Realistic Fears***

You may be feeling anxiety due to realistic fears — being unprepared for an exam, or worried that if you fail a class that it may have impacts on your future plans and classes. The way to deal with realistic fears is to talk to an advisor about resources, time management, test preparation, and how to adjust your schedule if the worst comes true. This can help you get out of your own perfectionism, and back into the moment you need to be in to prepare for your exam.

## ***Dealing with Unrealistic Fears***

Typically, it is your *unrealistic* fears that are the most powerful and *feel* the most real. These fears include feelings that your performance in school is going to undermine how people see you, reveal that you aren't really smart or worthy of being in college, or prevent you from achieving any of your future goals. These are forms of unhelpful thinking we talked about when I mentioned Cognitive Distortions earlier in this guide.

The biggest thing that I find UC San Diego students struggle with is perfectionism – the belief that in order to get to UC San Diego, they had to be able to get perfect grades, be the top of their class, and be able to know everything possible for the class. But since college is harder than high school, and many upper-division UC San Diego courses are harder than community college courses, it's easy to feel that that perfection you used to achieve has now slipped from your grasp, and you feel like a fraud.

You aren't. Things are harder now. So you need to make some choices about what to learn and how.

### **Before the exam:**

1. Get some perspective. This exam is important, but only one small part of a bigger picture. It is literally not everything. This test does not define you.
2. Remember your successes. To get here, you had to kick but in the past. And you can in the future.
3. Visualize your success. Imagine yourself doing well.. At the same time, think about what gets in the way of your motivation, and plan how you will overcome those barriers.
4. Remember that a little stress is good for your motivation, so don't expect to let go of all of your anxiety. You just have to control it.
5. When you study, make sure you do practice problems and, when possible, a practice exam to rehearse for your exam.
6. Get plenty of sleep the week of the exam (it helps with reducing anxiety and improving your cognitive functioning and memory) and reduce your caffeine intake (it increases anxiety because it is a stimulant.)

### **During the Exam**

1. Try to get to the exam a little early. If you are not rushing at the last minute exam, you have time to settle in, calm your breathing, and visualize yourself doing the exam. If you are stressed out because you think you might be late, you will already start the exam with a lot of anxiety before you even sit down!
2. Try to sit somewhere with few distractions.
3. Remember that you don't need to get everything right to do well.
4. Remember that there is always a trick question on the exam. Not every question is going to be straightforward. Professors don't play that.
5. If you start having negative thoughts, stop, recognize them, and remind

- yourself of your preparation and past success.
6. When you find yourself thinking about how well or poorly you are doing, recognize that as a negative thought. Stop and refocus.
  7. When you are tense, move your body. Roll your shoulders and your neck, stretch your arms and hands. Get your blood flowing and release some tension.
  8. If you find yourself becoming worked up, use the box breathing technique I covered earlier to bring your pulse rate down. Then finish with a positive thought about your ability to do the exam.

## **Getting Professional Help**

While I have told you that anxiety is normal, so is getting professional help. You do not need to be suffering from a mental illness to talk to a therapist. And as a UC San Diego student, you are already paying for the services of counselors through our Counseling and Psychological Services office, and may have access to mental health care through your health insurance.

One of the best ways to make use of a professional psychologist is to have them help you be more healthy in how you manage your emotions and thoughts. They can serve more as a coach or personal trainer, helping you master your unhelpful thoughts, keep your anxiety in check, and do better in school relationships, and work.

In addition to counseling, our campus makes group advising and telemedicine for mental health available. Don't know where to start? Come in to the college academic advising office and we will help you figure out your options!

