Coping with Anxiety

By Matthew Tull, PhD

People with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) often struggle with frequent and intense symptoms of anxiety. These strong symptoms of anxiety often lead people with PTSD to rely on unhealthy ways of coping, such as through drug or alcohol use. Fortunately, there are a number of healthy ways of coping with anxiety that may help your anxiety go down in intensity, become less frequent, and/or become more tolerable.

1. Deep Breathing

Deep breathing can be an important coping skill to learn. It may sound silly, but many people do not breathe properly. Natural breathing involves your diaphragm, a large muscle in your abdomen. When you breathe in, your belly should expand. When you breathe out, your belly should fall. Overtime, people forget how to breathe this way and instead use their chest and shoulders. This causes short and shallow breaths, which can increase stress and anxiety. Fortunately, it is not too late to "re-learn" how to breathe and help protect yourself from stress. Practice this simple exercise to improve your breathing and combat anxiety.

2. Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Using relaxation exercises can be an effective way to reduce your stress and anxiety. One relaxation exercise called progressive muscle relaxation focuses on a person alternating between tensing and relaxing different muscle groups throughout the body. In this way, relaxation is viewed like a pendulum. More complete relaxation of your muscles can be obtained by first going to the other extreme (that is, by tensing your muscles). In addition, by tensing your muscles (a common symptom of anxiety) and immediately relaxing them, the symptom of muscle tension may become a signal to relax over time. You can learn a basic progressive muscle relaxation exercise in this article.

3. Using Mindfulness to Cope with Anxiety

Using mindfulness for anxiety can be very helpful. Mindfulness has been around for ages. However, mental health professionals are beginning to recognize that mindfulness can have many benefits for people suffering from difficulties such as anxiety and depression. In a nutshell, mindfulness is about being in-touch with and aware of the present moment. So often in our lives, we are stuck in our heads, caught up in the anxiety and worries of daily life. This exercise will introduce you to
mindfulness and may be helpful getting you "out of your head" and in touch with the present moment.

4. Self-Monitoring

Self-monitoring can be a helpful way of getting a handle on your anxiety symptoms. We are all "creatures of habit." We often go about our day without thinking, being unaware of much that goes on around us. This may be useful in some situations, but other times, this lack of awareness may make us feel as though our thoughts and emotions are completely unpredictable and unmanageable. We cannot really address uncomfortable symptoms of anxiety without first being aware of what situations bring up these feelings. Self-monitoring is a simple way of increasing this awareness.

5. Using Social Support for Anxiety

Over and over again, it has been found that finding support from others can be a major factor in helping people overcome the negative effects of a traumatic event and PTSD. Having someone you trust that you can talk to can be very helpful for working through stressful situations or for emotional validation. However, simply having someone available to talk to may not be enough. There are several important pieces to a supportive relationship that may be particularly beneficial in helping someone manage their anxiety. Learn more about what makes up a good supportive relationship in this article.

6. Self-Soothing Exercises for Anxiety

When you are experiencing anxiety, it is important to have ways of coping with those feelings. For example, seeking out social support can be an excellent way of improving your mood. However, the anxiety associated with symptoms of PTSD can sometimes occur unexpectedly, and social support may not be readily available. Therefore, it is important to learn coping strategies that you can do on your own. Coping strategies focused on improving your mood and reducing anxiety that you can do on your own are sometimes described as self-soothing or self-care coping strategies.

7. Using Expressive Writing for Anxiety

Using journaling to cope with and express your thoughts and feelings (also called expressive writing) can be a good way of coping with anxiety. Expressive writing has been found to improve physical and psychological health. In regard to PTSD in particular, expressive writing has been found to have a number of benefits including improved coping and posttraumatic growth (or the ability to find meaning in and have positive life changes following a traumatic event), as well as reduced PTSD symptoms, tension, and anger.
8. Using Distraction to Cope with Anxiety

Purposeful use of distraction techniques can actually be of benefit in coping with emotions that are strong and feel uncomfortable, such as anxiety and fear. Distraction is anything you do to temporarily take your attention off of a strong emotion. Sometimes, focusing on a strong emotion can make it feel even stronger and more out of control. Therefore, by temporarily distracting yourself, you may give the emotion some time to decrease in intensity, making it easier to manage. Learn some distraction techniques in this article.