

## Managing Anxiety *(Adapted from 'heretohelp.bc.ca')*

Although there are different types of anxiety problems and specific strategies aimed at helping people cope with different types of fears, there are some general strategies that can help any person who is experiencing anxiety problems.

### Helpful Hints

**Listen!** Make sure you take the time to listen to the person's thoughts and feelings. Simply feeling heard can be very helpful to your loved one.

**Normalize!** It is important to let people know that they are not alone. Lots of people have problems with anxiety.

**Educate!** Let the person know that anxiety is normal, harmless, and temporary.

**Model it!** Model facing fears and provide support and encouragement. Motivate your loved one through supportive coaching. However, be careful not to push them too far too fast. Let the person work at his or her own pace.

**Avoid Giving Excessive Reassurance!** Resist giving excessive reassurance, instead encourage the person to use his or her coping strategies (for example, calm breathing or challenging scary thoughts)

**Praise!** Don't forget to praise the person for his or her efforts! Remember, facing your fears is not easy!

## Four steps to learning about anxiety

### Step One: Learning about anxiety

This is a very important first step as it helps people understand what is happening to them when they experience anxiety.

#### What you need to know about anxiety:

Anxiety is **normal**. Everyone experiences anxiety at some point in time. For example, it is normal to feel anxious when on a rollercoaster or before a job interview.

Anxiety is **adaptive** as it helps us prepare for real danger (such as a bear jumping out of the woods) or performing at our best (for example helps us get ready for a test or big game). When we experience anxiety it triggers our "fight-flight-freeze" response and gets our body ready to defend itself (for instance, our heart beats faster to pump blood to our muscles so we have the energy to run away or fight off danger). Without it, we would not survive. Anxiety can become a problem when our body reacts in the absence of real danger. It can be helpful to think of anxiety as a smoke alarm. We don't want to take the batteries out of the alarm in case there is a real fire, but we do want to fix the alarm so that it doesn't go off every time we make toast.

### Step Two: Learning to relax

The second step involves helping the person or learn to relax. Two strategies can be particularly helpful: calm breathing and muscle relaxation.

**1. Calm Breathing:** This is a strategy that the person can use to calm him or herself down quickly. You can explain to them that we tend to breathe faster when we are anxious. This can make us feel dizzy and

lightheaded, which can make us even more anxious. Calm breathing involves taking slow deep breaths. Encourage the person to breathe in through the nose, pause, and then breathe out through the mouth, pausing several seconds before taking another breath. For younger people, have them imagine that they are blowing huge bubbles that slowly rise and float away. Make sure the person's breathing is slow and gentle.

**2. Muscle Relaxation:** Another helpful strategy is to help the person learn to relax his or her body. This involves having the person tense various muscles and then relax them. You can also have the person use "the flop," which involves having the person imagine that he or she is a rag doll and relax the whole body at once.

### **Step Three: Challenging scary thoughts**

When we are anxious, we tend to see the world as very threatening and dangerous. However, this way of thinking can be overly negative and unrealistic. One strategy for helping the person manage anxiety is to help him or her replace "anxious" or "worried" thinking with realistic thinking. This involves learning to see things in a clear and fair way, without being overly negative or focusing only on the bad. Have the person take some time to learn and practice these skills.

### **Step Four: Facing fears**

The final step in helping the person manage anxiety involves helping the person face his or her fears. If they've been avoiding certain situations or places due to fear, it will be important for him or her to start entering those situations or places. However, it can be easier for the person to start with something that is not as scary and work up to situations and places that cause a great deal of anxiety. Working with the person, make a list of feared situations or places, such as going places alone, entering a crowded grocery store, or riding the bus. Once you have made a list, try and arrange them from the least scary to the most. Starting with the situations that cause the least anxiety, encourage the person to repeatedly enter the situation and remain there until the person notices his or her anxiety start to come down. Once the person can enter that situation without experiencing much anxiety, he or she can move on to the next thing on the list.

## **Helpful Tips for Family Members**

**Reduce Stress!** Excessive stress and tension in your home (for example, arguing, fighting, too many financial stress etc.) can have a negative effect on a person. Look at ways to reduce stress. For instance, plan some fun time each day (even if it is only five minutes) to play a video game, go for a walk, watch a favorite TV program together, or listen to music. Also, try to deal with conflict between family members when it arises (have family meetings to discuss problems). Be careful not to express frustration or anger by arguing or raising voices around their people.

**Make a Routine!** Establish a routine by setting specific times for meals, work, socialising, and bedtime. Help the person establish a routines can set the stage for helping the person develop better ways to manage anxiety.

**Be Supportive!** Recognize that it is difficult for people to face their fears. It is important not to laugh at the person or minimize his or her fears (for example, "don't be silly" or "you're being stupid"). Rather, let the person know that it is normal to have fears (we're all afraid of something), and that it is possible to "boss back" your fears. When the person is upset, make sure to listen to him or her, to send the person the message that it's okay to talk about feelings. Let the person know that he or she is understood, and help him or her figure out ways to cope with upsetting. It can also be helpful to use

some humor when dealing with the world. We all benefit from finding the humor in things and being able to laugh at life's mistakes.

**Build Self-Confidence!** It is important to praise the person for his or her accomplishments and for facing fears! Encourage the person to get involved in activities that help him or her feel proud. Find activities that reinforce that he or she is good at something (sports, music, or art) and helps instill a sense of belonging and pride.

**Realistic Expectations!** It is important to have expectations for the person and help him or her meet those expectations; however, understand that an anxious people will have some trouble doing things, and may need to go at a slower pace. Help the person break down goals into smaller steps that he or she can accomplish. It is important that the person is taking steps forward, even if the steps are small. Try not to push too hard or too fast, but let the person go at his or her pace.

**Reactions!** Although it is important to be understanding and caring, do not overreact or let anxiety trick you into thinking that something is too hard or impossible for your loved one (for example, thinking it's too hard for the person to run errands). Keep things in perspective. Yes, it might be challenging, but it can be done! On the other hand, sometimes we have a hard time understanding people's anxiety or why something is so difficult for them. When we don't acknowledge that a person is having a hard time with anxiety, people may try to hide it (and suffer alone) or the symptoms may become more pronounced, in order to get the attention, he or she needs.

**Dealing with Your Reactions!** It can be very difficult dealing with an anxious person. Make sure you manage your own reactions. Do some things for yourself (call a babysitter, run a hot bath, read a book when the kids go to bed, talk to a friend about how you're feeling, go for a walk, or whatever helps you keep a positive perspective). Remember the basics: eat well, get enough sleep, and exercise! Also, give yourself permission to take time off. You can't be helpful to your loved one if you don't take care of yourself. You also need to be careful not to pass fears on to your loved one. Try to present a neutral reaction to situations and let you people know it's safe to explore things.

**Take Risks!** Anxious people need to try new things and take some risks, in order to build confidence and develop the necessary skills for dealing with the world. Encourage the person to try some experiments, such as making a phone call, talking to an unfamiliar co-worker, or asking a question to a store clerk. Remember, you can model brave behavior by trying new things too!

**Avoid Avoidance!** Anxious people tend to want to avoid things that cause them anxiety. Although avoiding things temporarily reduces distress, it also allows fears to grow and makes things more difficult in the future. Avoid letting your loved one avoid things. Instead, encourage him or her to try things and take small steps towards facing fears!

### **Healthy Habits for the Home**

Anxious people prefer to have a sense of control in their lives. They do not cope well with a disorganized, "spontaneous" family style. They feel calmer when:

- life is predictable
- they know what is expected of them
- they know what the consequences will be

**Encourage physical activity:** For the anxious people exercise may help reduce stress and induce relaxation. They often feel "tired all the time" because they are always exhausting themselves with

worry, and don't feel like exercising. But exercise will improve energy and reduce worry. Try to find something fun to do together rather than making this a chore. Ongoing participation in a physical activity program encourages self-discipline, leadership, as well as opportunities to socialize with peers. Get the whole family involved!

**Food and Nutrition:** No one copes well when they are tired or hungry. Anxious peoples often forget to eat, don't feel hungry, or have upset stomachs. They rarely eat a large full meal. It's okay for the person to "graze" as long as the snacks cover the basic food groups in a day. Offer frequent, nutritious snacks. Instead of stocking up on chips and soda, have fresh fruits and vegetables and low-fat dairy foods available in your fridge or kitchen.

**Last but not least, be a good role model!** One of the first steps in creating a positive and predictable environment is to take stock of your own daily habits and ways of coping with your own anxiety.