



Is My Anxiety Normal?

by Kathy Taylor-Rogers

In my experience working in the field of Employee Assistance – Anxiety is among the most common mental health issues that employees seek assistance to gain control over. Anxiety is talked about in ever-increasing rates and most people will question at some point whether they have a “normal” amount of anxiety or not. For the most part, anxiety is very normal, and most people experience it from time to time.

Some situations where it would be normal to experience anxiety are prior to a job interview; before a big presentation; when writing an exam; when a deadline is looming for a project that is not finished; when meeting new people; in a new social experience and when you have to perform a task that is unfamiliar. Any teacher who is given a new work assignment to teach a subject that they do not feel overly comfortable with will likely experience anxiety. Some teachers, particularly when they are new to teaching, will experience anxiety when parent teacher meetings are planned. Some may experience anxiety when going to teach in a new school for the first time. We often experience anxiety in a situation where any degree of conflict might be expected.

Anxiety is essential to our survival and is our natural “flight or fight” response that protects us when we perceive a threat or danger. Historically it was developed as a protective mechanism and caused us to either fight the danger or flee from it. It can give us the push we need to prepare better for situations to increase our confidence and reduce the anxiety level.

It does take some reflection to determine whether our feelings of anxiety are typical or whether the anxiety has become so intense and constant that we need to seek help. When we reach a point where the anxiety is frequent, intense, prolonged, and causes frequent distress and interferes with our overall functioning on a regular basis then we do need to discuss it with our physician and likely need some professional help to learn how to manage it. Some of the most common physical symptoms of acute anxiety are heart pounding, shortness of breath, sweating, shaking, nausea, dizziness, chest pain or tightness, numbness or tingling sensations. Anxiety can also impact our thought processes in a negative way where it causes us to constantly expect or dread

that something bad will happen. It can also cause us to have a “brain block” where we are unable to think straight. Experiencing persistent and excessive worry could be a sign that you have Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD). Those who suffer from GAD should seek assistance so they can learn strategies to control the anxiety. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy can be very helpful to assist those suffering from GAD to stop the worry cycle. GAD often starts gradually and there is some evidence that biological, family background, and life experiences can play a role. Anxiety can be related to childhood trauma or lack of feeling safe and loved as a child. It has been documented that people can start to believe that worry prevents bad things from happening, so they view giving up worrying as risky. Therefore, they often need counselling support to stop that worry cycle.

Often people who experience anxiety can be more prone to panic attacks. Panic attacks are sudden, unreasonable feelings of fear and very intense anxiety that can cause symptoms like racing heart, fast breathing and sweating. It can feel like you are having a heart attack. According to the Canadian Mental Health Association, one third of adults will experience a panic attack at some time in their life.

Experts have not figured out why some people experience panic attacks but your risk increases if you have:

- Family history of Anxiety disorders
- Mental health issues
- Substance abuse problems

Signs of a Panic Attack can include:

- Chest pain
- Chills
- Choking or smothering sensation
- Difficulty breathing
- Fear of losing control
- Feeling like you are going to die
- Intense feeling of terror
- Nausea
- Racing heart
- Sweating
- Tingling sensation

While all or some of these symptoms are common with panic attacks, they could also be indicative of

other serious health problems such as: heart attack, thyroid disease and respiratory illness. Hence, if you experience these symptoms you should go to see a health professional for an assessment.

There are several quick ways to relieve anxiety. Here are some more common ones that you may want to try:

- Remember to breathe – relax in a chair, sit up straight, take a deep long breath through your nose, hold it for 3-4 seconds and slowly exhale. Relax muscles in your face, jaw, shoulders, neck as you continue breathing, taking deep long breaths and holding them for 4-5 seconds.
- Take a mental step back – make a conscious effort to focus on the moment and divert your thinking from worrying thoughts
- Follow the 3-3-3 rule: look around and name three things that you can see, then listen and notice three things that you can hear and move three body parts, i.e fingers, toes and head
- Physical Activity – any forms of activity is good. Walking, biking and hiking outdoors are exceptionally good because nature is included
- Music – music has been proven to lower heart rate and blood pressure and singing has also proven to release endorphins and oxytocin
- Meditate – lay down or sit comfortably, deep breathe and try to release any thoughts from your mind and just bring your attention to your breath
- Laughter – the act of laughing feels good and increases oxygen levels and helps with muscle relaxation
- Avoid stimulants like coffee and alcohol
- Question and challenge any thoughts that create worry

I'd like to examine that last concept a little more in depth as I think that it is very important. Often when we experience significant anxiety our thinking can become unrealistic, and we can see everything in a negative light. Understanding and learning ways to overcome anxiety is all about being present in your own body and mind. When we start becoming negative in our thinking, it becomes important to examine some of our thought processes and possibly do some journaling so we can identify what our negative "worrying" thought patterns are. We need to develop ways to challenge these thoughts so we can learn how to stop them and rewire our brain. Changing thoughts requires Thought Balancing. When we have a negative thought such as "I am terrible at my job", take a look at the argument to support this thought and then look at the argument against it. Hopefully this will help you balance the thought better and your balanced thought might be – "Work is very

stressful right now but I am good at what I do and will learn from the current challenges and get back on track."

Anxiety is a normal emotion that we all experience. It is important to do some critical self-reflection to determine whether our anxiety is normal or whether it might be disrupting our daily life. If it gets in the way of being content with your life, then it might be time to gain control of the anxiety instead of letting it control you. If you need help to learn strategies to be able to control your anxiety more effectively then contact your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and one of the EAP Coordinators will help find a therapist that will assist you in learning to manage your anxiety and change that negative thought cycle.

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Resources for this article:

- Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH)
- Cleveland Clinic.org
- Canadian Mental Health Association
- Anxietycanada.com

Education Week 2023

March 13-17

Better Together



More information will be forwarded to schools in the coming weeks.