

Coping with Anxiety in an Unprecedented Time

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Abstract

A low level of anxiety is common, as it is a healthy reaction to the unknown for most people. However, unforeseen circumstances such as a pandemic, can heighten anxiety to unhealthy levels thus impacting an individual's ability to function. Germani et al. (2020) states, "Uncertainty and instability are emotions... that generate worries about the present and future and are a source of anxiety that impacts negatively on personal and interpersonal functioning. Anxiety seems a central part of the pandemic..."(p. 1). Strategies to cope with heightened anxiety are geared towards providing a calming effect or to change focus on what is causing the anxiety. Traditionally, many chose activities such as massages, travel, or socializing, to unwind and take their minds off the general stressors in their lives. However, these options were not available for the majority of 2020. This paper discusses the strategies of exercise, meditation, and laughter, which may seem basic, but can serve the purpose of easing anxiety. These strategies do not replace therapies but could be used in conjunction with other treatments.

Key Words: anxiety, coping strategies, pandemic, exercise, meditation, laughter

Introduction

Anxiety is a typical response especially when uncertainties such as poor weather conditions, exams, and trying something new are experienced. The American Psychological Association (2021) defines anxiety as "an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts, and physical changes like increased blood pressure." In some instances, anxiety is heightened to the point where it impacts our ability to function typically in our established state of normalcy. For example, many students experienced heightened anxiety marked by rapid heartbeat, panic and, perhaps, unexplained emotions or changes in mood, because of changes experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The immediate move to remote learning from face-to-face classroom instruction had a tremendous impact on regular routines for both students and teachers. This was ascribed to unfamiliarity using online platforms like Zoom with teaching. Furthermore, the introduction of restrictions such as limited social gatherings, the cancellation of family holiday celebrations and traditions, curfews, and set days to visit the grocery store heightened anxiety. These restrictions were trending not only locally but worldwide. Very few living individuals had experienced such unprecedented events. As a result, the main question was how do we remain focused and adjust to the unknown? What will happen next and how do individuals remain patient and calm? However, as concerned students seek answers on how to cope, there are some common strategies to assist them with this new found experience of anxiety.

Exercise

Exercise is essential for overall wellness. However, during a crisis, when anxiety arises, one of the first stops is often to a grocery store to purchase an abundance of comfort food. Unfortunately, these foods are often high in sugar and calories. Additionally, emotional eating can lead to the gain of unwanted pounds. Therefore, exercise combined with healthier food choices helps to get rid of undesirable weight and serves to relieve anxiety. There are numerous workouts and sports activities to choose from on land, water, or virtually.

Any form of exercise is helpful to relieve anxiety. A walk, bike ride, swimming, or dance can be low intensity. High intensity options such as High-Intensity Interval Training is another option. Low intensity is best for those who are beginners or do not exercise regularly. Exercise redirects the mind to focus on positive outcomes such as relieving tension and leaving individuals feeling energized, especially after completion. Find joy in the activity that is selected; there will be motivation and willingness to continue.

If restricted to a particular area or distance, walking is an excellent choice. A brisk walk will increase the heart rate and enjoyed while listening to a playlist of favourite songs. Alternatively, strolling along a scenic route while listening to the sounds of nature will clear the mind of whatever is causing the anxiety and replace it with a more pleasant, stress-free experience. Overall, there are many positive effects of exercise that contribute to how one feels. Atkug and Demir (2020) state, exercise creates “a sense of calmness and mental relaxation” (p. 1733) as a result of the secretion of endorphins that trigger a positive feeling in the body. To maintain this feeling, Atkug and Demir recommend to try activities and continue with them at least three times per week for thirty minutes, even if not experiencing anxiety (p.1733). After a good workout and, as a daily practice, drink water to rehydrate the body. This practice helps with overall body function which leads to feeling better physically and mentally.

Meditation

Quiet reflective time helps to clear the mind but can be difficult if there is preoccupation with feeling anxious. According to Saeed et al. (2019), “It is generally agreed that mindfulness is a form of mental training that requires calming the mind” (p. 624). Meditation and mindfulness are sometimes used interchangeably. Meditation is a form of mindfulness of breathing.

Listening quietly to yourself breathe in and out promotes stillness and improves self-awareness. Using quiet time to breathe deeply has a calming effect. As an additional bonus, essential oils to the room or space for meditation. This enhances the calming effect and also activates good feelings. Choose from many forms of meditation. Behan (2020) discusses walking meditation “where the focus is on awareness of our feet in contact with the earth and grounding to the present moment” (p. 2).

Practicing yoga is another way to meditate. This allows for mindfulness while gently exercising or stretching. It also helps to ease anxiety when combined with meditation. The combination of stretching and deep breaths slows down anxiety and, in turn, reduces cortisol (stress hormone) levels. Saeed et al. (2019) concluded that “practicing yoga frequently with 40-minute sessions daily or at least once per week is associated with reductions in anxiety symptoms” (p. 622). The slow deep and intentional breaths promote calm. Closing your eyes visualizes a pleasant or happy place. Ultimately, all of the muscles in the body are relaxed, creating an incredible peace of mind. Lemay et al. (2019) hypothesized and concluded, “Yoga and meditative practices may provide a skillset to assist college students in their coping mechanisms, both in and out of the classroom” (p. 748). Many online programmes and apps are available to demonstrate different forms of meditation.

Laughter

Media coverage of the pandemic was extensive and continuous. People were attentive to television and social media sites throughout the day, watching press conferences and listening to news updates on the number of cases, deaths, and the economic impacts of COVID- 19. The Mayo Clinic (2019) found that negative thoughts manifest into chemical reactions that can affect your body by bringing more stress into your system and decreasing your immunity.... This added to anxiety because there were no solutions or signs of improvement. To minimize anxiety, view less television, turn it off, or focus on programmes that will ease the mind. According to the Mayo Clinic,

“When you start to laugh, it doesn’t just lighten the load mentally, it actually induces physical changes in your body” (p. 2). A good laugh has both short-term and long-term effects. In the short term, organs such as the heart, lungs, and muscles are stimulated. The long term outcomes of a good laugh helps to soothe tension and results in a relaxed, happy and improved mood.

Family and friends

Sharing thoughts with family and friends is an effective way to relieve anxiety as well. Isolation from friends, family, and everyday social activities leads to loneliness, especially among older people. Living alone exacerbates anxiety, fear, and feeling trapped (Ivbijaro et al., 2020, p. S395). An important factor is realizing that others are having the same or similar feeling. It is also a way of expressing feelings to get a sense of relief. Additionally, they can offer support and advice. Happy memories can be created and shared via social media if an in-person meeting is not feasible.

Conclusion

The article presented strategies which can become normal routines to cope with heightened anxiety. Therefore, when the unexpected happens, individuals are better armed to cope with anxiety. The goal is self-awareness and knowing when the anxiety is negatively impacting the body. Exercise, meditation, laughter and a support system move attention away from what is causing the anxiety and replace it with positive, calm thoughts, and feelings. The Mayo Clinic (2019) concludes, “Positive thoughts can actually release neuropeptides that help fight stress” (p. 1).

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