

Lowering Background Anxiety

Keys, check, wallet, check, mobile, check, anxiety, check. Okay, let's go.

Each day as you head out the door to work, study, or have fun, you carry with you a level of background anxiety. This is the anxiety level that is your resting state – the base from which your anxiety will spike up when something stressful and/or unexpected happens. Anxiety is normal, but it is important to be aware of how much anxiety you are carrying. And if you are carrying a lot of background anxiety it is worth taking steps to lower this resting anxiety level.

So how do you know if you are carrying too much background anxiety? Why does it matter? And what can you do about it?

If your background anxiety levels are high then it won't take much stimulation for your anxiety levels to spike up into the uncomfortable range. For example, if you are already anxious then a loud, unexpected noise like a door slamming will trigger a much more uncomfortable response than if you had a lower background anxiety level. Higher background anxiety levels can also make sleeping more difficult – either getting to sleep, or waking up during the night with your mind racing. And trouble concentrating during the day, lethargy, and heightened irritability can also be signs that you are carrying too much anxiety around with you.

There are risks if you have significantly heightened anxiety levels for long periods of time. As well as the day to day symptoms listed above, living with elevated background anxiety levels places you at much greater risk of developing an anxiety disorder (such as a phobia), and also can place you at greater risk of developing depression.

“Great, one more thing to worry about,” I hear you say. The good news is that understanding anxiety is the first step to taking control. And there are a number of simple strategies that will give you immediate improvements in lowering your background anxiety levels.

Anxiety is something that we carry with us in our mind and body, and the two are inter-related. Our minds and our bodies talk to one another. Anxiety is carried physically in areas such as tensed muscles (for example tight shoulders and neck, or knotted stomach); elevated heart rate; and shallow, fast breathing.

The physical manifestations of anxiety are the result of our fight or flight instinct. At the first hint of danger we release adrenalin in preparation for potentially life-saving action. Our bodies start responding to this chemical awakening in preparation to run or fight for our lives. We are alert and activated. During periods of activation (fight or flight preparation) our senses become hyper-vigilant. We notice noises and movements, and our brains race to make sense of our environment.

These physical responses to danger happen more quickly than our conscious thought processes. Our brains notice our bodies in this heightened state of activation, and start to search for possible reasons. Sometimes these explanations are accurate and helpful, but other times our brains add one and one together and get three. Once we are convinced that the danger has passed our bodies start to slow down again.

This process of stimulation, chemical release, body activation, and then slowly calming down, happens every day. The activation phase happens very quickly, and the calming phase happens much more slowly as the chemicals released during activation gradually wash through your body. If you get stimulated again before you return to your resting anxiety level, your body will spike up higher than before because you started from a point of heightened anxiety. The risk is that you continue to get re-stimulated before you get a chance to calm down, and over time your resting or default anxiety level becomes higher and higher.

The good news is that there are many things that can be done to lower your background anxiety levels.

Twenty minutes of vigorous exercise that elevates your heart rate can help to use up the chemicals released during your period of activation. This speeds your return to your resting anxiety level. Vigorous exercise means different things for different people. If you are new to exercise then a fast walk for 20 minutes will do the trick. If your body is fitter then you will need to run for 20 minutes to get the same anxiety reducing benefit. Massage and yoga (self-massage) are also great strategies to calm your body and lower your background anxiety levels. Cutting down on caffeine is another way to lower your background anxiety levels, but I'm not advocating coffee abstinence (that would be impossible!).

Calming your mind can also help to break the anxiety cycle, and regular, guided meditation can help. So can other pursuits that get you out of your head and into the moment. I find riding my motorbike has the same effect – you have no option but to live in the moment. And I'm told surfing works, too.

So in summary, we all carry with us a level of background anxiety. Over time our background anxiety level can ratchet up through repeated stimulation and not enough time to calm down between these spikes. Heightened background anxiety can create uncomfortable symptoms like difficulty sleeping, but over time can lead to more serious problems like anxiety disorders and depression. Exercise, yoga, massage, and reducing your caffeine intake can all help in lowering your background anxiety levels.

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