

Tips for Managing Anxiety – lessons from my own treatment for my fear of flying

Anxiety is the most common mental health condition in Australia. On average, 1 in 4 people – 1 in 3 women and 1 in 5 men – will experience anxiety (according to Beyond Blue). I am one of the 20% of men who have experienced anxiety.

For many years I worked in a job that required regular air travel. This job was fairly pressured, and I would describe myself at the time as having an elevated background anxiety level (see my other article on this topic - <http://peteryoung.net/articles.htm#anxiety>). Having a heightened background anxiety level made me more vulnerable to a panic attack, which eventually happened on one particular flight out of Canberra. Because I was already very anxious, a loud, unexpected noise after take-off pushed me over the line between manageable and unmanageable anxiety.

I remember what sounded like a deafening noise - at the time I thought it was the noise of the plane exploding - and a certainty that this was the end of my life. I was convinced that I was dying, which is not uncommon for people who have a panic attack. This was the beginning of my phobia about flying.

Even though my job required me to continue to travel I was very resistant to seeking treatment for my fear of flying. I had a suspicion (well-founded as it turned out) that treatment would eventually require me to get back in a plane, and this was something I was unwilling to face. I recall that my fear was less about flying and more about having another panic attack. My anxiety was about the fear of repeating that feeling of being overwhelmingly anxious, and understandably so. Who wants to repeat the feeling that they are dying! This fear of the feeling of anxiety is also very common amongst people with this condition.

I was fortunate at the time to seek treatment from a kind and wise psychiatrist who specialised in the treatment of anxiety. He convinced me that anxiety is very treatable, and that even though the journey might at times be uncomfortable, it would never be unbearably uncomfortable, and eventually it would be successful and I would be able to fly again without having to fear having another panic attack. I might even enjoy flying, he said. The strategies outlined below are an adaptation of those that worked for me, and that I have subsequently used with others seeking help with anxiety. I hope that you find them of help.

1. Understanding what anxiety is

The starting point for my treatment was to understand that anxiety is a normal, helpful survival mechanism. Anxiety in its most useful form keeps us safe. It is the early warning feeling of unease that there is danger – a danger that we may not yet have consciously identified. For example if you are about to walk down a dark and unfamiliar street at night, a feeling of anxiety might help alert you to possible risks that you had not otherwise thought about.

I also found it very helpful to understand the bodily aspects of anxiety. When we sense danger our automatic bodily responses quickly prepare us to run, fight, or freeze as defences against that danger. This automatic process happens more quickly than our conscious thinking process. Before our brain has even made sense of the potential source of danger our breathing, muscle tone, blood supply system, and our vigilance (hearing and seeing) are all activated and ready to keep us safe. This can be very helpful (life saving perhaps) in some situations. But in other cases this hyper-arousal is not needed, and calming ourselves after being activated in this way can take quite some time. Knowing about this bodily arousal process, that it is a helpful survival mechanism and that it happens quickly and unconsciously, was very important in understanding how I developed my fear of flying, and why calming myself physically was so important to fixing this problem.

2. Interrupting the process of becoming anxious due to an event such as an unexpected noise

There are all sorts of potential triggers that can lead to the process of escalating anxiety. For me this was primarily related to flying, but if we are in a very heightened state (if we have elevated background anxiety) even loud noises can trigger an anxiety response.

When you notice yourself starting to become anxious it's possible to interrupt this process with a combination of *physical strategies*, and *strategies related to your thoughts*. Of these two approaches, the physical strategies are often the easiest and most effective, which is why I give this aspect such a lot of prominence in this article.

Some quick and simple *physical strategies* you can use to interrupt the escalation process when you notice yourself becoming anxious are:

- Focus on slowing and deepening your breathing. A natural response when we are escalated is to take quick, shallow breaths. In order to interrupt escalating anxiety, try to slow your breathing down. For example you might take a breath and hold it for a few seconds, then exhale slowly. Deliberately try to exhale more deeply than you might usually do, in order to push out the stale air.
- Lower your field of vision. Another normal response to escalation (anxiety) is to become hyper-vigilant. This process of looking around for danger is a useful survival mechanism, but when you are becoming unnecessarily anxious (anxious for no good reason) looking around for danger contributes to making us more anxious. A good strategy is to look down at something close to you, and resist the temptation to look up and about.
- Scan your body for tension, and tense and relax any parts of your body where you find tension. For me a common response to anxiety is to hunch my shoulders up. I find deliberately pushing my shoulders down helps. If you notice yourself becoming anxious see if you can find where your body is tensing up. Think about your feet, legs, arm, stomach, chest, shoulders etc.
- Do a quick progressive muscle relaxation exercise. If you have time it can be very helpful to go through a quick version of the process described below.
- Score your level of anxiety from 1 to 10 before and after using these strategies. This may seem like a strange idea, but it seems to work. When you notice yourself becoming anxious, give your anxiety a score (say 7 out of 10). Then engage in some of the strategies listed above and then score your anxiety level again (hopefully it will be lower – say, 4 out of 10). This scoring process helps you to realise that you have control over your anxiety, and this helps to challenge the fear of spiralling out of control – the fear of having another panic attack.

3. Lowering your background anxiety levels

Interrupting yourself when you start to escalate (start to become anxious) takes practice, but the physical strategies listed above definitely help. The other longer term work in the treatment of anxiety is to lower your background anxiety levels. This is not a quick fix. It may take weeks or a month or more before you start to notice any real improvements. But I am very confident that these strategies will help if you can stick with them. For me, incorporating regular aerobic exercise in my life has been the most helpful. I am now very aware that if I have not done a 30 minute jog in the last two or three days I start to find it less easy to go to sleep at night. This has become my key strategy for keeping my background anxiety level down.

I talk about this a more in the article on my web site (<http://peteryoung.net/articles.htm#anxiety>) but here are some simple reminders:

- Aerobic exercise. The physical responses to anxiety include our bodies releasing chemicals such as adrenalin. We can speed up the process of these washing through our bodies through regular exercise. Jogging, cycling or swimming are ideal forms of aerobic exercise, however if this is not possible even walking is still helpful.
- Stretching - for example doing simple stretches at home, or going to a yoga class. There are plenty of stretching routines on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com>) if you are new to stretching. Regular massage can also be very helpful. The goal is to release the tension that we hold in our muscles.
- Progressive muscle relaxation. Along with aerobic exercise I think this is possibly the other most useful strategy. This involves making a regular time every day or two to sit or lie down for 10 minutes and engage in a simple process of consciously releasing the tension in each part of our body. This takes practice (new routines are always difficult) but after a while you will have a good skill that you can deploy quickly when you

- notice yourself escalating. Again there are some great free resources on YouTube – just search for “progressive muscle relaxation”.
- Reducing your caffeine intake. I love coffee in particular and therefore find this challenging, but drinking less coffee, cola drinks and chocolate can also help to lower your background anxiety levels.

4. Dealing with anxious thoughts

In terms of strategies related to thought processes, the most common strategies are based on Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) and Mindfulness. Controlling our thoughts is not as easy as controlling our bodies, and sometimes the easiest and most effective method of slowing our racing minds is to focus instead on calming our over activated body. By calming our bodies using the strategies discussed above we will indirectly calm our thought processes. One way of thinking about this is that our brain takes cues from our body. If our brain sees that our body is activated for fight or flight it starts to look for possible sources of danger. We start exploring possible scenarios – in my case scenarios such as a mechanical failure in the plane or pilot error. And quite naturally these catastrophic thoughts result in us feeling more and more anxious. Conversely by calming our body our brain gets the message that the danger must be abating, and we have fewer and fewer catastrophic thoughts.

As part of my treatment for fear of flying I developed a list of thoughts to counter my most common catastrophic thoughts. An example might be, “Statistically the car trip to the airport was much more dangerous than this flight”. I wrote these thoughts on a small card that I carried in my wallet. On the other side of the card were reminders about the physical de-escalation tips discussed above. *This card was a critical factor in the success of my treatment.* I never needed to refer to my card – to take it out and read it mid-flight. But I knew it was there, and I knew that the strategies on this card worked. The card was my physical reminder that I was not in danger of spiralling into another panic attack – that I could interrupt this escalating process through a combination of physical strategies and reminding myself of alternate thoughts.

Treatment for a specific phobia such as a fear of flying can be a little more straight forward than treatment for more general feelings of anxiety. In particular, identifying and refuting the contributing anxious thoughts can be harder with general anxiety, as there is not the same focus such as thoughts related to flying. There are some good on-line programs that can help with this process of identifying and challenging the thinking associated with more general feelings of anxiety. The following link is one such example: <https://thiswayup.org.au/>

I hope this article has been helpful to you. I am aware that my story of success will give hope to some people, but for others it may have the opposite effect – particularly if you have already unsuccessfully sought help with your anxiety. I was lucky in that the first person I went to for assistance was someone who was both skilled *and* who I felt comfortable with. This second criteria (feeling comfortable with the counsellor) is critical in counselling generally, but even more so when dealing with anxiety. When we seek help with the treatment of anxiety we are making a decision to face our biggest fear. For me there was a deep worry that the counsellor would expose me to my fear in an uncontrolled or poorly timed way, and this would trigger a panic attack (my greatest fear). And there was also a degree of shame involved, as I was wrestling with a fear that most people considered to be quite irrational. I therefore had to trust the person I chose to work with on this important and sensitive topic.

Finding the person who is right for you may involve research, seeking recommendations from trusted sources, possibly a degree of trial and error, and ultimately a belief that this problem is fixable. On this last point, please rest assured that there is solid research evidence that anxiety is very treatable. Best wishes with your journey.