



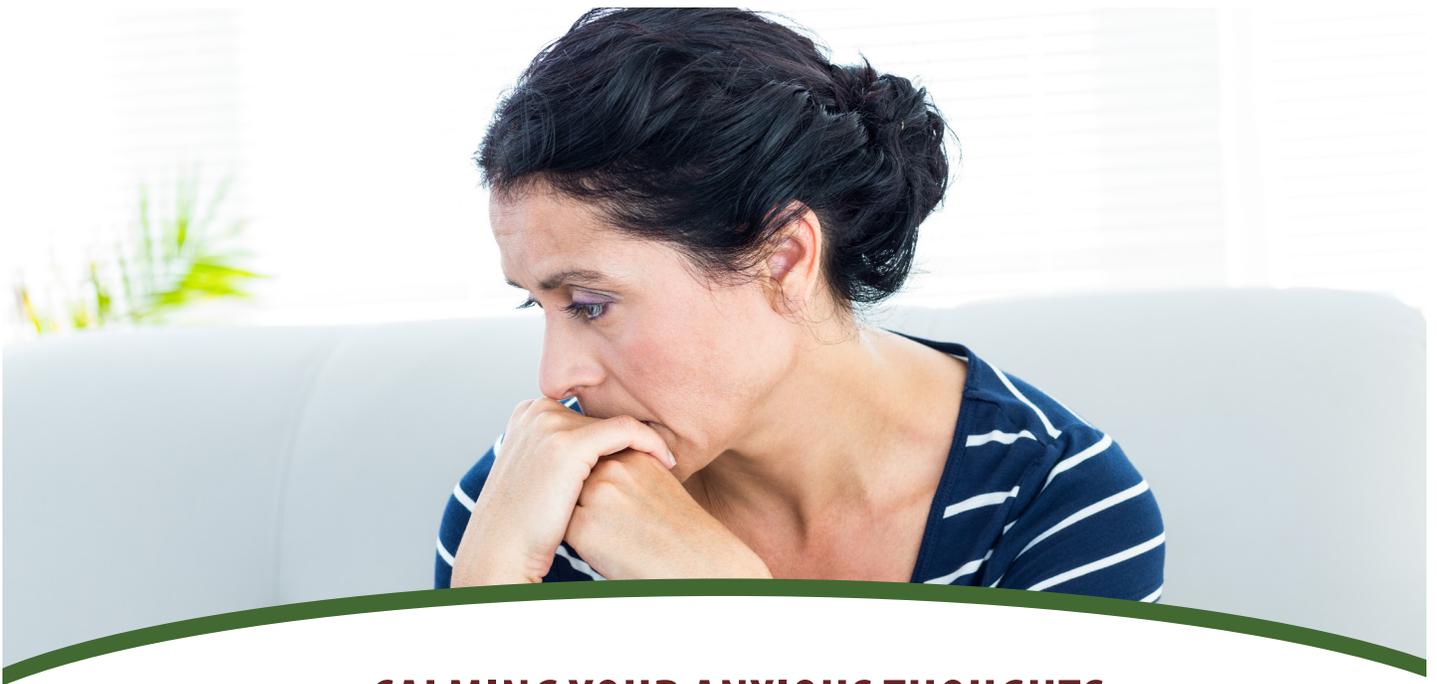
# CALMING YOUR ANXIOUS THOUGHTS

by Hal Baumchen, PsyD, LP, LADC

*Anxiety changes the way you think and feel. When you are anxious, it is easier to look at everything with a negative view and imagine unpleasant and frightening things are about to happen. Anxious thinking is filled with worry, apprehension, obsessive thoughts, and ruminations about the future. Anxious thinking is distorted thinking and creates an expectation the worst will happen, allows worry to set in prematurely, and encourages a belief that coping with the situation will be difficult. Unrealistic and negative thinking can needlessly trigger anxiety and compromise your emotional health. Learn what fuels your anxious thoughts, how to counter those patterns, and ten skills to help you face your fears.*

**This mental health e-lesson is available at  
[journeytorecovery.com](http://journeytorecovery.com)**





## CALMING YOUR ANXIOUS THOUGHTS

### IN THIS CHAPTER

- *Identify avoidance patterns*
- *Recognize and replace anxious thoughts*
- *Develop skills to face your fears*

### WHAT IS ANXIOUS THINKING?

Anxiety changes the way you think and feel. When you are feeling anxious, it is easier to look at everything with a negative view and imagine unpleasant and frightening things are going to happen. Anxious thinking is filled with worry, apprehension, and obsessive thoughts and ruminations about the future. This pattern of thinking makes you even more anxious.

We all look ahead, down the road, and into the future a bit, planning our days, looking forward to the good things, and watching for potential problems and obstacles. With anxious thinking, the balance between anticipating the positive and expecting the worst leans heavily toward the negative. Anxious thinking is distorted thinking. It creates an expectation that the worst will happen, allows worry to set in prematurely, and encourages a belief that coping with the situation will be difficult. Unrealistic and negative thinking can needlessly trigger anxiety and compromise your mental health.

### INACCURATE THOUGHTS

Anxious people often imagine other people are judging them critically, unfairly, and harshly. Unrealistic and inaccurate beliefs about themselves, others, and the world are common, and these inaccurate views create distortions that can leave people seeing themselves as inadequate, incompetent, undesirable, and unable to fit in with others. These insecurities and fearful thoughts must be identified and replaced with healthy, reality based, and true statements.

Following are some examples of thoughts and beliefs that increase anxiety:

- When people look at me, they are examining what I do.
- If I am criticized, it means that I am wrong.
- Being anxious is a sign of weakness.
- If I show emotion, it means I am weak.

**IDENTIFY** distorted thoughts and **CHALLENGE** them.

## NOTES

- If I make a mistake, it means I'm stupid.
- If I don't agree with people, they won't like me.
- To be a good person, I have to be nice to everyone.
- If someone is hurt or offended by what I do, it means I am a bad person.
- If they see I am anxious, people will think something is wrong with me.
- The opinions other people have about me are very important to me.
- I'm afraid I look or sound silly to other people.
- I can tell people will evaluate me negatively.
- I have to be very careful about what I say so I don't offend someone.
- Approval from others is very important to me.
- When people see me behave poorly, they will speak badly of me to others.

## OTHER THOUGHTS THAT FUEL ANXIETY

Anxiety is fueled by "what if" thinking and feeds on negative thoughts, perceptions, sensations, and feelings. Repeating negative thoughts over in your mind creates distress and increases worry. When you focus on what can go wrong, even the smallest amount of evidence that supports a possible negative conclusion will increase anxiety.

Following are some sample thoughts that may increase and fuel anxiety. Review the list below and check the items that best describe your past thinking.

- What if no one can help me?
- What if this condition continues to get worse?
- What if this is just too hard for me?
- What if it's not anxiety, but a different medical or emotional problem?
- What if there is something else wrong with me such as a heart problem or cancer?
- What if I lose control?
- What if he or she rejects or doesn't like me?
- What if I have an anxiety attack and pass out?
- What if I can't escape?
- What if I can't breathe?
- What if I look stupid?
- What if I stumble over my words?
- What if they find out what I'm really like?
- What if I lose my job or can't work again?
- What if I wear the wrong thing or look silly?
- What if I have to live like this for the rest of my life?
- What if my anxiety doesn't get better?
- What if I can't get back to the way I use to be?
- What if it's just me that feels like this?
- What if I am unable to enjoy the things I used to?

Learn to recognize unrealistic and frightening thoughts. It is important to balance them with more realistic and reassuring ones. Changing how you think can be quite difficult at first, but practice helps. Identify distorted thoughts and challenge them. Add positive and encouraging statements to your vocabulary. Resist the urge to review what might go wrong.

## HOW DO YOU CHANGE THE WAY YOU THINK?

It is likely you have been thinking in an unrealistic, distorted, or negative way for some time. You may base many decisions on strong emotions such as anxiety, fear of rejection, worry, disappointment, and sadness. You may find it difficult to change the way you think, and this may trigger more negative thoughts, such as "I'm useless. I can't do anything right." You may need help from a friend or a counselor to challenge your thoughts and beliefs. Give yourself time to practice; look for improvement, not perfection.

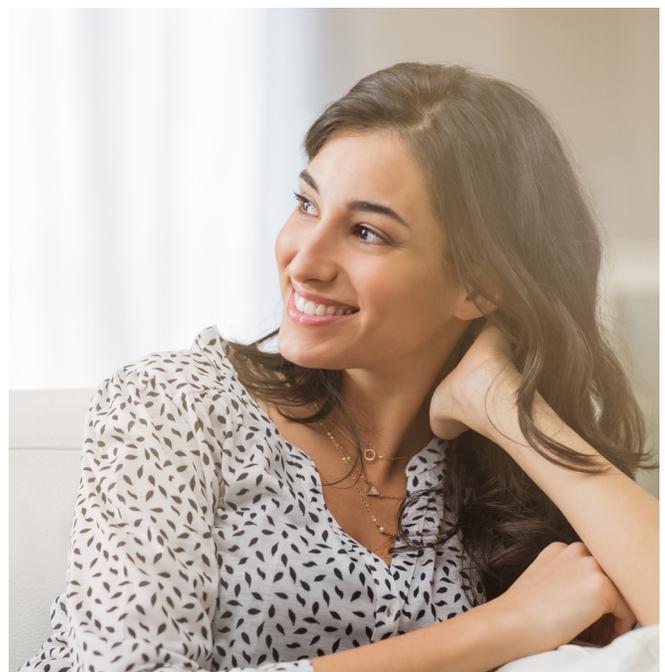
## USING POSITIVE THOUGHTS

Review the list below and select several positive statements to reduce anxiety and strengthen your resolve to move forward. Remember to review these thought-challenging statements regularly.

- It is unlikely others noticed my anxiety.
- It is more noticeable to me than them.
- If they were to think anything about my behavior, they would probably just think I am shy.
- Even if they did think I was anxious, they would not think badly of me.
- Not everyone is looking at me.
- I'll try to stay focused on the meal and our conversation.
- Not everyone constantly thinks about me, even though I think they do.
- I can get through this.
- I am making progress.
- I've managed this kind of difficulty before.
- I've got good people around me.
- I am gaining strength and confidence.
- This is just an inconvenience of everyday life.
- This is distressing, but not dangerous.
- I don't prefer this, but I can survive it.
- I can cope.
- I'm doing pretty well right now.

## CONFRONTING YOUR ANXIOUS THOUGHTS

It is important to make positive statements about yourself, even when you do not fully believe them. If you make reassuring or positive statements often, you will find the fearful or self-critical thoughts that used to automatically occur will gradually disappear. As you get stronger, working through anxious situations becomes faster and easier.



## NOTES

In the following table, write a past situation that made you anxious. In the second column, record thoughts you had in that situation. List your resulting feelings in the third column. Next, look at each fearful thought you recorded and write a challenge to the negative thought. Add any new or positive feelings. You will find, as you practice this technique, you will get better at it and feel less anxious.

ANXIOUS SITUATION	THOUGHTS	FEELINGS	CHALLENGE THOUGHT

## UNDERSTANDING AVOIDANCE BEHAVIORS

When people are anxious, they have strong, overwhelming feelings and are extremely uncomfortable. These physical sensations add to the fear something real and distressing is happening. As anxiety goes up and continues to fuel itself, desire to escape, avoid the pain, discomfort, and whatever caused the worry also increases. Most people, by nature, avoid the uncomfortable.

## THE PROBLEM OF AVOIDING ANXIETY

Anxiety is not a pleasant sensation, so it is only natural to attempt to avoid the experience. One way people do this is to sidestep situations that make them anxious. For example, if someone has a fear of driving on the freeway, they may go miles out of the way to avoid an interstate. Another may call in sick to avoid giving a presentation in a work-related meeting. Avoiding whatever brought on the fear can complicate life and increase anxiety. It can keep someone from practicing the skills they need to face and overcome their fears. And as more and more situations are avoided, it becomes increasingly difficult to live a normal life. The world can begin to shrink as anxiety grows and behavior accommodates it. Avoiding what makes you anxious often makes the fear stronger.

## COMMON AVOIDANCE PATTERNS

Which do you avoid?

- |   |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Confronting others             | <input type="checkbox"/> Talking about finances    | <input type="checkbox"/> Going to bed                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Speaking in public             | <input type="checkbox"/> Traffic and driving       | <input type="checkbox"/> Getting up                       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Stating how I feel             | <input type="checkbox"/> Structure                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Performing in front of others    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Expressing my needs or desires | <input type="checkbox"/> Interacting with children | <input type="checkbox"/> Someone disapproving of me       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Repeating a request            | <input type="checkbox"/> Visiting relatives        | <input type="checkbox"/> Having my faults exposed         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Protesting unfair treatment    | <input type="checkbox"/> Conflict                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Having my addiction exposed      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Asking for a favor             | <input type="checkbox"/> Holiday activities        | <input type="checkbox"/> Asking for money                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Interrupting someone           | <input type="checkbox"/> Travel                    | <input type="checkbox"/> Asking for help                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Opening the mail               | <input type="checkbox"/> Water                     | <input type="checkbox"/> Asking for sex                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Making purchases               | <input type="checkbox"/> Flying                    | <input type="checkbox"/> Cleaning                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Paying bills                   | <input type="checkbox"/> Accountability            | <input type="checkbox"/> Throwing things away             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Doing taxes                    | <input type="checkbox"/> Daily tasks               | <input type="checkbox"/> Meetings                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Crowds                         | <input type="checkbox"/> Starting a new job        | <input type="checkbox"/> Disappointing others             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Family activities              | <input type="checkbox"/> Talking with an employer  | <input type="checkbox"/> Showing a weakness or insecurity |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Closed spaces                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Making demands on others  |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dark places                    |  |   |

Using the list above, or writing some of your own, identify the things you try to avoid.

---

---

---

---

How has this added to your stress and worry?

---

---

---

---

## TEN SKILLS TO HELP YOU FACE YOUR FEARS

Avoiding difficulties makes us less anxious at first. But it is necessary to face our fears and struggles head-on. Consider the following strategies to gain strength, increase your confidence level, and approach problems without worry, fear, or doubt.

## NOTES

*It is necessary to  
**FACE** our **FEARS**  
and struggles  
head-on.*

*Learning to  
**MANAGE** your  
**ANXIETY** is better  
than trying to  
never be anxious.*

## NOTES

- 1 Increase the amount of time spent in trustworthy, non-judgmental relationships.**  
Decrease the amount of time you are involved in negative, unreliable relationships.
- 2 Be willing to be held accountable.**  
Announce your intentions in advance so others can help you along the way.
- 3 Get stronger by practicing activities that bring confidence and self-assurance.**
- 4 Find and label your successful steps.**  
Build on your recent successes to increase distress tolerance.
- 5 Repeat positive affirmations.**
- 6 Use a buddy system.**  
Facing fears is easier with an encouraging friend involved in your recovery journey.
- 7 Set realistic goals.**  
Do not be surprised by occasional setbacks.
- 8 Break difficult tasks into small, manageable parts.**
- 9 Practice anxiety management skills.**  
Meditation, breathing exercises, and progressive muscle relaxation are good techniques.
- 10 Create an action plan, not an escape route.**

Looking over the list again, write out several items you can put into practice.

---

---

---

---

## USING THE TOOLS OVER TIME

Facing your fears is not easy, especially at first. Most people want to avoid anything that makes them feel uneasy, scared, or anxious. Avoiding something might bring quick relief, but in reality, increases problems down the road. Confronting a situation while it is still small is a great place to start and will strengthen your resolve to face future problems. Learning to manage anxiety is better than trying to never be anxious. Practice using the tools in the previous list to gain self-assurance, improve self-reliance, and increase your strength to face the future.