



SUPPORTING THE HEALTH AND
WELLBEING OF THE ARMED
FORCES COMMUNITY AND
CIVILIAN FAMILIES IN
CORNWALL



ANXIETY – WHAT IS IT AND HOW TO CONTROL IT



The feeling of anxiety is a result of an interplay between physical sensation, thought and feeling that can result in symptoms ranging from the mild to the severe including; tension, panic attacks, stress, physical ailments, an inability to cope and PTSD (post- traumatic stress disorder), obsessive compulsive disorders, and, in some cases, a breakdown in reality (psychoses.)

Anxiety is usually caused by, a particularly stressful event, stress build-up over a long period, a trauma or associated fear. We can be anxiety free on one day, and then the next day anxiety can overwhelm us, taking us by surprise, in a seemingly irrelevant context. This happens because the seemingly irrelevant context *reminds* us of an event which caused anxiety and has triggered a similar programmed reaction and emergency state of mind. The mind remembers and the body reacts giving us little time to think about our options.

Anxiety has a useful purpose in survival by activating our 'fight or flight' mode. It allows us to assess a situation and take decisive action; to stand and confront or to run away and avoid. To manage anxiety, we therefore need to learn how to create a space, or a pause for thought, before the 'fight and flight' mode is activated. Obviously, the 'fight and flight' mechanism is appropriate in emergency situations.

The following are some ways to manage anxiety:

- 1) **3 Minute Breathing Space** – this gives your mind the opportunity to focus on your breath or some part of your body for 3 minutes when you feel anxious. You can follow the process for the 3 Minute Breathing Space explained in the Mindfulness Meditation paper. This meditative activity can potentially give you the mind space to assess and think about any situation calmly and with more clarity.

2) **7/11 way** - Breathe in for 7 counts and then breathe out for 11 counts. By doing this, you should find that your body automatically relaxes, and your body cannot be anxious and relax at the same time.

3) **Panic Attacks** - If you experience panic attacks, where your heart beats quickly, hands are clammy, and your breathing is fast and erratic, and you have an out-of-body experience (dissociating) (you can think you are dying from a heart attack.) Try sitting on the floor with your back to the wall or corner, touch the walls and feel the surfaces against your body to remind yourself that you are actually present in reality or count backwards from 5 to 1 with your eyes closed, and then focus on the number 1. Drink some water. If you can 'ground yourself' and be in the present moment, the panic attacks should reduce and disappear.

4) **Clench your fists** (if you have long fingernails, just clasp hands together) – find a comfortable spot and make your hands into tight fists. Look at your fists and see the difference in colour of your knuckles and fingers and the tension moving up your arms. Closing your eyes to focus on the physical sensation of tension, relax your fingers and hands and the rest of your body. Visualize a blowhole at the top your head and breath in through this blowhole and then visualize the breath leaving a blowhole under your feet. This method works on the principle that your body will be in a more relaxed state after tensing.

5) **The effect of water on our minds.** If you are comfortable with it, immerse yourself, swim or paddle in water, get in the bath or shower and listen to it or look at it. There is an interaction between the water and the mind which has a calming effect on people to reduce anxiety and improve wellbeing.

6) **Visualise a place of your choice** which brings you calm and peace where you can go when you close your eyes, in the event of feeling anxious. Try to imagine what it would be like in this place, the colours, sounds and what would be around you. We cannot relax and contract a muscle at the same time; so too, we cannot be calm and anxious at the same time.

7) **Systematic Desensitisation** - In the event of a phobia (fear) of something, such as heights, for example, you can use systematic desensitisation or flooding as a way to alleviate the symptoms. Systematic desensitisation is a process of gradually introducing yourself to the situation which you fear. So, if it is heights, you would first get up on a chair, then a ladder and then walk to the top of a hill, preferably with someone who can support your efforts.

8) **Rewind Therapy** – as the name suggests, this therapy involves rewinding one's experience, possibly traumatic, and extracting the emotion from it, so that it does not appear as traumatic as it has been. This is performed as follows: relax by visualising a place of peace, and in this place, imagine that in this place there is a tv, video or dvd and remote control, float to one side (dissociate) and watch yourself watching the screen but not actually seeing the picture – this aids emotional distance from the traumatic memories, watch yourself watching a film of the traumatic event (the scene starts just

before the event when you were not aware of the oncoming event and ends when the event is over and you are safe again), then float back into your body and experience yourself travelling quickly backwards through the traumatic episode, from safe exit to safe entry, then watch the images again on fast forward, do this fast forward and rewind sequence as many times as it takes so that the viewing no longer associates any emotion. If this scenario is one which will be experienced again, visualise a point in the future where the scenario occurs and imagine that you are confident and relaxed. This method can retain confidentiality as it is only you who are watching the film and only you will know the detail.

A common theme in the above activities is calmness and relaxation, which gives our minds space in which to think and process information, to question 'all or nothing' thinking and to challenge our programmed minds which have been etched into our processing through continuous thought cycles. These activities, if practiced regularly, and with belief, have the potential to manage anxiety when it visits. They can give the thinking part of our brains (neocortex) the time to challenge the emotional part of the brain, the amygdala, which sometimes uses a chemical concoction, dopamine, to ensure that the programmed routine behaviour is carried out.

There are many other processes and techniques that deal very effectively with anxiety, but these are some which can be performed on your own and some would best be undertaken with the supervision of a trained practitioner.

Further Reading:

- 1) How to master Anxiety by Joe Griffin and Ivan Tyrrell (2007).
- 2) Post Traumatic Stress Disorder – Reduce and overcome the symptoms of PTSD by Belleruth Naparstek (2004)

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