5 Practical Ways to Manage Anxiety in Everyday Life

Anxiety, although uncomfortable, is a normal and natural part of life that everyone experiences. Although we can expect to feel anxious at times, identifying coping skills to use in the moment can be incredibly difficult. In order to set your future self-up for success in pushing through every-day stressors, here are 5 great techniques to combat anxiety:

Mindfulness

Ever the buzzword, mindfulness is something we have all heard of, but what does it really mean? At its core, mindfulness is simply focusing on the present moment without judgement. Often times when noticing anxious thoughts or feelings, our first reaction can be to shame our brains for the distressing, uncomfortable feelings. However natural this response may be, it is also counterproductive to the goal of calming an anxious mind and/or body. Mindfulness on the other hand, can be extremely helpful and effective.

A helpful way to illustrate mindfulness in practical terms, is the “leaves on a stream” analogy: Imagine your mind is a river and each of your thoughts a leaf floating by with the continuous flow of the current. You might pause to briefly notice its shape or color, but the leaf will continue its flow down the river. The leaves will enter your awareness as you see them pass by, but rather than grabbing or holding onto them, you will simply let them continue to flow with the natural current. As such, you will let your thoughts continue to flow down your stream of consciousness with non-judgmental awareness.

Movement

Moving your body is an excellent way to manage anxiety for many different reasons. Not only does it release endorphins, which are the body’s natural mood boosters, it can also reduce the release of cortisol, which is one of the body’s main stress hormones. By moving and exercising, you are utilizing the extra energy and activation that gets produced by the body’s stress response, which decreases the uncomfortable symptoms of anxiety. Additionally, many forms of movement are also bilateral brain activation— When we use both our right and left brain to complete a task or engage with an activity, it increases the ease with which the whole brain can communicate and pass messages. That means processing anxiety faster! Movement such as walking, swimming, dancing, yoga, running, stretching, etc. can be a game changer for both immediate and long term anxiety management.

Identifying and challenging negative thoughts

Anxiety is often paired with negative, distressing thoughts about ourselves, others, or the world. An effective way to manage anxiety is by labeling and challenging these negative thoughts through the use of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, CBT. One example of a common negative thought pattern (also called cognitive distortion) in CBT is mind reading, or assuming to know what others are thinking without sufficient evidence. There are over 10 different cognitive distortions in CBT. Learning to name, recognize, and challenge yourself to think outside of these negative patterns when they come up in your day-to-day life is a great way to reduce anxiety.

Grounding with sensory interventions

Grounding techniques, which bring your attention away from negative or distressing thoughts, and towards your physical sensations in the moment (for example, to your feet on the ground), are another easy, great way to manage anxiety. Trying a new grounding technique is as easy as picking one of your 5 main senses to tune into. For example, sound: listening to music, ambient noise, or stepping outside and noticing the sounds of nature around you. For taste, perhaps eating something very sour. Essential oils or other aromatics can be a great way to use smell to ground yourself. A fun way to use your sense of sight for grounding can be playing a game of I-Spy and focusing on finding items that are red or shiny or soft. The options are endless! My personal favorite sense to ground with is touch: holding an ice cube in my hands or putting a cold washcloth to the back of my neck always feels calming and grounding.

Breathing exercises

Remember when we briefly talked about stress response in the second about movement? That stress response is the product of our sympathetic nervous system, the network in the body which prepares us to fight, flee, or freeze when we face a threat. Breathing exercises activate our parasympathetic nervous system, which works to relax the body and combat the effects of the sympathetic nervous system. It can lower heart rate and blood pressure, decrease muscle tension, improve lung function, and enhance the flow of oxygen to the brain— all of which work together to greatly improve anxiety. There are many, many different kinds breathing exercises to try. For example: 4-7-8 breathing: inhale through your nose for 4 seconds, hold your breath for 7 seconds, and exhale for 8 seconds through your mouth.