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## **Anxiety**

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Have you said or thought any of the following recently?

*“I’m losing control...I’m cracking up...I can’t cope...I’ve got to get out...Everything bothers me...I can’t stop my heart from beating...I can’t breathe...All my muscles ache...My palms are constantly sweaty...I’m jumpy and I can’t get rid of the butterflies in my stomach.”*

You are more than likely experiencing symptoms of anxiety. Here you will find three tools to better help you handle the anxiety you are feeling.

Being, living with, or caring for a person with a serious illness is an inherently stressful undertaking that affects both individuals and families. It is an extremely rare person who does not experience some form of worry and concern when someone they care about – themselves or another – is declining physically. The classic sign of anxiety is tension, both physical and emotional. Anxiety comes upon us when our bodies and minds respond to threatening and frightening occurrences. While much anxiety is often unpleasant and uncomfortable, it is important to remember that it is our body’s *normal* response to perceived danger.

However, when anxiety becomes **severe, persistent, and unrelenting**, it can become disabling and interfere with our ability to perform normal activities and tasks. Please consider speaking to someone on your health care team about the anxiety you are experiencing. Sometimes this simple act of sharing can have an enormous impact when you hear from an objective, non-judgmental observer that your feelings are a normal and understandable reaction to a highly stressful situation. Sometimes, if the anxiety is more severe, medications can help you get over a difficult stretch.

### **Two Exercises**

Below are two exercises that can help you relax. They often work in just a few minutes.

#### **1. Abdominal Breathing**

Abdominal breathing is the one of the most effective ways to relax quickly. By breathing with your diaphragm, you will immediately signal your autonomic nervous system to relax. Place one hand on your belly and one on your chest. Take some slow, deep breaths into the belly. It’s helpful, but not essential, to

breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth. If you are doing abdominal breathing correctly, the lower hand should move as much or more than the hand on your chest. Continue this slow, deep breathing for a couple of minutes, imagining the breath calming your body and clearing your mind. When you are practicing relaxation, choose an image that conveys peace and comfort. For example, think about a favorite spot in nature or a favorite vacation place. Some patients have told me that they think about a person, perhaps God. Every time you do the abdominal breathing, call up that image or person as you become relaxed. Let all of the qualities of that picture fill your awareness. Practice calling up that picture at various points during your day.

## **2. Changing Your Thoughts with Positive Self-Talk**

The way we talk to ourselves about a situation greatly affects our coping ability. Each of us “talks” to ourselves about a variety of situations and we offer unheard commentaries on an ongoing basis. This is called “self talk”. “Self talk” can be either positive or negative. If we can learn to increase our positive self-talk when we feel anxious, our ability to cope will be greatly enhanced. Here are two examples of this change in thinking:

- Instead of, "Oh no - here it comes again - what's the matter with me?" consider saying, "I'm experiencing anxiety symptoms. I'll be ok".
- Instead of, "I'm weak for not being able to handle this situation", substitute the following, "It takes courage for me to face this problem".

Abraham Lincoln seemed to understand the importance of self-talk. In an address on September 30, 1859, Lincoln told the audience, “It is said an Eastern monarch once charged his wise men to invent him a sentence, to be ever in view, and which should be true and appropriate in all times and situations. They presented him the words: ‘And this, too, shall pass.’ How much it expresses! How chastening in the hour of pride! How consoling in the depths of affliction!”

### **Practice Your Lines**

Like an actor in a movie, it helps to learn your lines before the big scene. Practice saying some of these statements before anxiety strikes--whichever are most meaningful to you. Then, when the real thing occurs, you will know your lines and can start changing your verbal response to your feelings.

- “So, I feel a little anxiety now, SO WHAT? It’s not like it’s the first time. I am going to take some nice deep breaths and keep on going. This will help me continue to get better.”
- “I’ve gone through this before so I know I can do it again.”
- “All these things that are happening to me seem overwhelming. But I’ve caught myself this time and I refuse to focus on these things. Instead, I’m going to talk slowly to myself, focus away from my problem, and continue with what I have to do. I can manage this situation.”
- “If this seems more than I can handle, I can ask God to help shoulder the load.”
- “Anxiety is not dangerous—it is just uncomfortable. I know how to relax.”