

Five Strategies that can Help Distract from Anxiety

Almost everyone, at some time in their life will experience Anxiety.

Research has shown that, in any given week in England, 6 in 100 people will be diagnosed with Generalised Anxiety Disorder.

In CBT, clients are taught distraction techniques to shift their attention away from negative thoughts or feelings. By actively distracting yourself from feelings of anxiety you are then able to take your mind off of the anxiety you are experiencing.

When you're anxious, your mind can become flooded with worries. Distraction techniques provide a break from these thoughts, helping to calm your mind instead of dwelling on anxiety-inducing thoughts and enabling you to focus on a more positive or neutral activity. For this technique to be most effective, *you need to choose* to distract yourself, rather than someone else distracting you.

Here are 5 of the best distraction techniques you can use to help calm your anxiety.

Diaphragmatic Breathing

Diaphragmatic breathing activates the parasympathetic nervous system, which sends a signal to your brain to tell the anxious part that you're safe and don't need to use the fight, flight, or freeze response. Using the deep breathing technique gets more oxygen to the thinking brain.

4-6-8 is one of the best techniques aimed at reducing anxiety. It involves breathing in through your nose for 4 seconds, holding the breath for 6 seconds and exhaling out of your mouth for 8 seconds, in a slow and controlled manner.

The slower you exhale, the more you'll engage the parasympathetic nervous system, which is responsible for calming the body down. Focus on lengthening your exhale to get the most out of it. The long exhale is what tells your body everything is OK.

You can do this exercise until you feel calmer and less anxious.

Connect with Nature

We don't always take the time to appreciate nature and the environment around us.

Getting outside and spending time in nature has been shown to relieve anxiety. Just twenty minutes in nature could significantly reduce your levels of cortisol - your stress hormone - and decrease your heart rate.

You could go for a walk in the countryside, where you can enjoy the sounds of the natural environment such as the wind blowing through the trees, bird song or the smell of nearby wildflowers. You might take a stroll along the beach where you can enjoy listening to the waves, or take a few minutes to feel the warmth of the sun on your face, smell the sea air, or you may just enjoy sitting outside in your garden enjoying the fresh air.

If you can't get outside, close your eyes and visualise yourself sitting on a beach or standing in a forest surrounded by nature etc,...

Crafting

Crafting is a great way to distract from the negative thoughts and feelings connected with anxiety. Engaging in creative activities can promote mindfulness, which can help reduce stress levels. Focusing on the present moment and the creative process can help reduce anxiety and promote relaxation, promote positive emotions and decrease cortisol levels, a hormone related to stress.

The range of crafting ideas are so vast, from jewellery making and pottery, to photography and macramé and from crocheting to creating mandalas to découpage and making mosaics; the list is endless.

The repetitive and rhythmic nature of crafting aids in reducing our levels of the stress hormone, cortisol. Simultaneously, our dopamine levels are stimulated when we are partaking in crafting – dopamine contributes to feelings of pleasure, reward, and motivation. Being wholly focused and immersed in a craft project can have an effect like meditation - also referred to as *flow*, which research suggests can help in the management of anxiety and depression.

All these activities can help to improve your mood and lower stress. The effort, multi-sensory engagement, repetitive actions and anticipation of satisfaction involved in making something are related to the release of neurotransmitters that promote joy and wellbeing, while also reducing stress hormones.

Connection

Human connection is a deep bond that's formed between people when they feel seen and valued. Within an authentic human connection, people exchange positive energy with one another and build trust helping you to build stable and supportive relationships. Human connection makes you feel heard and understood and gives you a sense of belonging. The benefits of social connections and good mental health are numerous. Proven links include lower rates of anxiety and depression, higher self-esteem, greater empathy, and more trusting and cooperative relationships.

Spending time in the company of friends and family can work wonders as a distraction for those with anxiety and being in the company of those we love and trust can increase oxytocin levels in the brain and other feel good hormones. Oxytocin helps to reduce stress and anxiety, increase feelings of bonding and promotes general well being.

To break out of a negative mindset, you have to take the initiative and put yourself out there. Be proactive and reconnect with friends and family, or build new relationships. Call an old friend, join a club, or join a class related to an interest or hobby. Make your wellbeing a priority and try new activities to build fulfilling human connections.

Making a connection can be as easy as phoning a friend, meeting up with a family member or friend for a coffee, brunch or a little retail shopping or even connecting with people through the power of hobbies or interests, all of these suggestions will help in distracting from stress and anxiety.

Exercise and Sports

Exercise is not only good for your physical health but for your mental health also. When you exercise it not only reduces levels of the body's stress hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol, it also stimulates the production of endorphins; chemicals in the brain that are the body's natural painkillers and mood elevators that help improve your sense of wellbeing.

Exercise can distract you from negative thoughts and provide opportunities to try new experiences, offering an opportunity to socialise and get social support if you exercise with others. Exercise increases your energy levels, and can be an outlet for your frustrations.

Studies have shown that 20 to 30 minutes of exercise each day can make people feel calmer and that any type of exercise that improves how well your heart and lungs deliver oxygen to your muscles during a workout can reduce anxiety. There are plenty of exercise options, from running and swimming to rowing, cycling and even brisk walking. Every little bit helps!