How to Really Manage Anxiety

Why Reducing Anxiety Shouldn't Be The Goal



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Left unchecked, anxiety negatively impacts your relationships. Ever feel like you have to worry enough for the whole world? Do your family and friends seem to float through life, leaving you to carry the burden of looking for life's dangers? Has your approach to regulating your anxiety left you frustrated and with less than stellar results?

When one member of the family suffers from anxiety, the whole family suffers. Some of the effects of anxiety are good. However, left unchecked, anxiety isolates and separates. How can you keep the positive effects of anxiety without letting it poison your relationships?

Ask anyone about how to manage anxiety, and you will get an answer about what works. That's because all anxiety reduction strategies work some of the time for some people. But a "some of the time solution" doesn't work for an "all of the time problem."



Instead of managing anxiety, work on changing your brain

You have likely learned several strategies for regulating your anxiety. The problem is knowing which ones to apply when. Why do some techniques work for others but not for you? When you understand the two major pathways to anxiety, you begin to see how different strategies affect different areas of the brain.

Rather than focus on reducing anxiety symptoms, focus on changing the parts of the brain that cause anxiety.

The reason these techniques are unreliable is that they are trying to solve the wrong problem. Effective anxiety regulation starts with changing our brain. I want to teach you the two major pathways in your brain that cause anxiety. When you understand these pathways, you will better know which emotional regulation strategies to apply.



An Overview Of How The Brain Processes Information

To understand the two pathways to anxiety, let's look at a gross oversimplification of how your brain creates an anxiety experience in your body. The brain consists of two big operating systems. The first is your cortex, which produces thoughts. The other, your limbic system, works on emotions. Understanding how each one contributes to an anxiety experience is a vital element in helping your brain to manage anxiety. To keep things simple, let's look at three areas of the brain that contribute to the anxiety response: the thalamus, the amygdala, and the cortex.

The Thalamus - Think grand central station. The thalamus brings information and sends it on to the **amygdala** and the **cortex**. The pathway to the amygdala is short and quick. It needs to be. If the data coming in is dangerous, the amygdala needs to respond quickly. When information comes to your amygdala, it doesn't want details. The amygdala is a "just the facts please" kind of person.



The pathway to the cortex is a little slower. The cortex takes information in, process the details, and either sounds the alarm bell to the amygdala or sends the "all clear signal."

For example, you walk through the woods and see a stick. Your thalamus takes in this information from your eyes and sends the message to your amygdala and cortex. Remember, the road to the amygdala is shorter, so it responds first. Not being much for details, your amygdala only sees something thin, curvy, and brown and treats the threat as a snake, causing you to jump.



Meanwhile, your cortex, which is far more detail-oriented, processes the information, and recognizes it as a stick. Your amygdala now realizes that it was a false alarm and starts to calm down. But by this time, the damage is done. Your heart rate, blood pressure, and adrenaline are all elevated. Your body is prepared to jump into action.

With that bit of brain chemistry as a backdrop, let's look at the two pathways to anxiety.



The Amygdala Pathway to Anxiety

Inside of your limbic system is your amygdala (actually, there are two amygdalae, one each side of your brain), but for simplicity, I will refer to the singular form. Your amygdala is responsible for the fight, flight, or freeze response. Think of it as a bodyguard. The amygdala continually scans your environment for threats, and it's good at its job. Sometimes, it's too good. Rather than assess every detail, your amygdala does a version of profiling on every experience. Have a bad health scare? Your amygdala begins to generalize threat to all doctor's offices. Have a car accident? Your amygdala will send messages of a danger to your body next time you drive past that intersection. Get scared by a guy in a red sweater? Your amygdala will never look at Santa the same again.

When your amygdala sense a threat, it begins preparing your body to respond to the challenge. Your blood pressure rises, heart rate increases, eyes dilate, stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenalin flood your system. It also increases your blood sugar. Using all this sugar for energy is why we can become tired after calming down from a scary event.



Fight-or-flight response

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One more critical aspect of the amygdala is how dominant it is to your brain's functioning. When it comes online – it takes over, and the effects on the body last long after the threat is over.

This amygdala response to threat is often what we experience as amygdala-based anxiety. When the amygdala gets activated, you can't talk it down, which is why telling yourself you are safe or your spouse telling you not to worry doesn't work.

To calm anxiety, friends and spouses often try to remind us of "truths" or "reality." Sadly, while what they are saying may be true, and their efforts to help are undoubtedly pure, our amygdala doesn't respond to logic. It lives in the realm of emotion, specifically fear and anger. Your friends are talking to your cortex, but your amygdala is running the operation.



Further complicating this is how the amygdala communicates with the cortex. All roads are one way. If ten one-way streets are going from the amygdala to the cortex, there is only one one-way street going from the cortex to the amygdala. The job of the amygdala is to prepare you to run, prepare you to fight, or make you freeze. Later, I will discuss some specific interventions to calm your amygdala. But first, let's look at how the anxiety that originates in the other part of our brain, the cortex differs from amygdala driven anxiety.

The Cortex Pathway to Anxiety

If the amygdala is the hot-tempered, extremely emotional child who lives in the emotional extremes, then the cortex is the responsible sibling who always thinks things through. The trouble with thinking things through comes when we overly think through things. Overthinking can cause an anxiety experience.



Your cortex is the curvy, gray, grooved matter that people generally think of when asked to picture the brain. The cortex is a mega processor that attaches meaning to your perceptions and sensory experiences. In essence, your cortex constructs your reality. By itself, the cortex does not cause anxiety response. The cortex, however, does initiate an anxiety response by sending messages to the amygdala.

Thoughts, interpretations, and perceived meanings pave the cortex path to anxiety. The cortex can interpret non-threatening events as threatening. It can also create threatening events from nothing by constructing scary images or thoughts.

Managing anxiety experiences initiated by the cortex is often more familiar to people. Anxiety regulation strategies involving thought monitoring, cognitive reframing, thought replacement, etc. are strategies that are not new to most people. Many tell me that these responses just don't work. They do work. They just don't work to help with an anxiety experience that originates in the amygdala. Why Reducing Anxiety Shouldn't Be The Goal An example of this could be lying in bed at night and hearing your front door open. The sound of a front door opening is not threatening, so your amygdala doesn't respond. Your cortex, however, realizes that the front door should not be opening at this time of night. Since you are not expecting visitors, the cortex begins thinking about a home intruder. Violent and scary images go along with the home intruder story. Your amygdala notices these images and beings the fight, flight, or freeze response. In this example, the cortex is helpful and responding in a manner to create useful anxiety. Responding to a door opening in the middle of the night is a good time for the fight, flight, or freeze reflex.

Things get squirmy when the cortex starts construing innocuous things as dangerous. For example, you notice a dog running down the street. The dog is a neighborhood dog who is known to escape. In and of itself, this is not a threat, so there is no amygdala response. However, the cortex begins thinking that maybe the dog escaped because it has rabies. Perhaps the dog escaped after attacking its owners in the manner of Cujo from a Stephen King novel. The amygdala notices the threatening thought patterns and sends the anxiety response to the rest of the body. Fear causes you to freeze, run (flight), or grab the most massive stick possible to attack the dog (fight).

Understanding in which part of the brain the anxiety originates is crucial to regulating the anxiety response anxiety that begins in the amygdala happens 500x faster than the perceptions in the cortex. An amygdala-based anxiety experience happens before the cortex has a chance to register meanings.

When we understand how our brains create anxiety, we can begin to understand how best to regulate the response. Sometimes regulating anxiety requires working with the amygdala. Other times, regulating anxiety requires working with the cortex. The next sections will give a brief overview of some strategies for working with these two different parts of the brain.

Calming the Amygdala

One of the many beautiful things about the human brain is that it can learn. Your amygdala can learn not to over-respond. Here are three tips for helping your amygdala not be so responsive.

Sleep

Get the right kind of sleep

The amygdala has a much higher capacity fro regulating the anxiety response when it is rested. Sleep is one of the most undervalued and taken for granted aspects of our life.

Not all sleep is created equal. To help our amygdala be less responsive with need REM sleep. REM stands for Rapid Eye Movement and is the dreaming stage of sleep. REM sleep comes at the end of our sleep cycles. If your rest is cut short, it is likely the REM stage of sleep that is getting sacrificed.

Good Sleep Hygiene

Sufficient sleep begins with good sleep hygiene. Good sleep hygiene involves going to bed at the same time every night and doing the same things before going to bed. Ideally, this bedtime coincides with your natural circadian rhythms for sleep and rest. Additionally, try getting up at the same time every day.

Eliminate screens

Many of us like to watch a show to wind down at the end of the day. However, if you are having difficulty sleeping, it may be time to cut out all screens for at least 1 hour before going to bed.

Watch your alcohol consumption

Another way many people choose to relax is by having a drink at the end of the day. Alcohol interferes with our REM sleep. In turn, limiting our ability to regulate anxiety. We become more stressed the next day and thus creating the vicious cycle of wanting another drink to relax. Substance abuse disorders are dangerous and real. If you find yourself unable to control your alcohol intake, get some help.

Breathe

Breathing is a crucial but often overlooked part of regulating the amygdala. Breathing to relax involves more than taking in oxygen to stay alive. Many of us have discounted the effects of deep breathing because we were never taught the neurobiology behind it. Correct breathing causes a physiological response in our nervous system.

Imagine your car alarm inadvertently going off. You press the panic button to tell your car to stop honking the horn and flashing the lights. Correct deep breathing is the physiological equivalent of turning the car alarm off.

Start with your core

Deep breathing is about more than moving our belly out when we breathe in and moving our belly in when we breathe out. Deep breathing starts at your core. Think of beginning your breath with the muscles lining the bottom of your pelvis. From here, slowly expand the muscles of your inner core to pull in the air. Contract these muscles to slowly expel the air from your lungs. By contracting and relaxing these muscles, you are putting pressure on something called the vagal nerve. The vagal nerve is the longest in the body. It starts at the base of your skull, splits into two branches, and runs down you back. It is responsible for activating the parasympathetic nervous system. The parasympathetic nervous system is that part of our nervous system that causes us to relax.

Practice Parasympathetic Dominance

The more you practice, the better you get. It's true of just about every activity that humans undertake, including taming the amygdala. Don't wait for an anxiety response to practice your breathing. Practice deep breathing throughout your day. There are various forms of breath practice, such as simple breath meditations, yin style yoga, tai chi, box breathing, and many others. It doesn't matter which one you do. Find something that works for you and practice.

Calming the Cortex

To change your cortex, you must use it differently. Think of your thoughts like wheel ruts in a welldriven trail. At first, it is difficult to get out of the grooves, your wheels keep wanting to go back to the old familiar paths. The more you stay out of the old ruts, you begin creating new ways of moving. Below are three strategies for calming your cortex. None of these strategies is a silver bullet. They take time, repetition, and practice.

However, the benefits are worth it.

Cognitive Reframes

A cognitive reframe is a new way of thinking about a familiar situation. Think of it as finding the bright side, leveraging opportunity. Instead of worrying about the news, be amazed that we have so much information at our fingertips. Instead of a gloomy rainy day, be thankful for the watering of the grass and plants. In almost every situation, there is a way to think differently about it.

Instead of being frustrated that your in-laws continuously violate your boundaries, be thankful that they give you a chance to practice holding boundaries. Think ahead to the anxiety-provoking situations to come this week and think of a way you can positively reframe them.



Challenge predictive thinking

Cortex based anxiety often begins with thoughts that predict what will happen in the future. Once these thoughts enter our cortex, the amygdala responds to them as if the ideas were reality. Notice the areas of life in which you begin to forecast future events.

Many of these predictive thoughts revolve around being the target of rejection, criticism, and judgment. Other predictive thoughts can be around doubt, failure, death, deteriorating health, or contamination. Learn that thinking something doesn't make it real. Learn to see thoughts for what they are – just thoughts.



Replace your thoughts

Our minds can do many things, but one thing they can't do is to think two thoughts at the same time. Take some time to identify which thoughts are causing you anxiety and decide on an opposing helpful thought. For example, if you are anxious about deteriorating health and appropriate replacement thoughts might be, "At this moment, I am healthy." If you are concerned that people will reject you, try reminding yourself of the many people who love you.



Changing your thoughts begins by assessing what you currently believe about a situation. If you're thought it about the outcome of an event don't just assess the possibility of it happening but also the probability. You cortex responds to logic and education so use this to your advantage. Next identify what you would like to believe or a more helpful belief for the current situation. Try replacing the old thoughts with the new thoughts. Again, this doesn't happen overnight, but by reminding yourself of the new thoughts your brain is learning to look for something different. When you focus on new beliefs you are creating new pathways in your brain. This isn't a one and done exercise, like most things worth while it takes time and repetition.

Moving Forward

Managing anxiety and emotional regulation are lifelong tasks. No one lives a stress-free life. The antidote to the adverse effects of anxiety lies in changing your brain. Specifically, changing the part of the brain that is causing the anxiety.

Instead of focusing on managing your anxiety, focus on changing your brain.

Become familiar with from where your anxiety response initiates. Does your anxiety follow the amygdala pathway or the cortex pathway? Stop trying to manage your anxiety and work on changing the part of your brain that is responsible for causing your anxiety.

If you are unsure where to begin, start by asking yourself how you would like your life to be different? Reducing anxiety for the sake of it is fruitless. As mentioned earlier, some anxiety is a good thing. Rather than trying to live a worry-free life, focus on the type of experience you would want if you could inhibit or reduce your anxiety response. Note how your anxiety affects your quality of life and begin today, improving your quality of life.



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