

Free yourself from

Women are twice as likely as men to suffer from anxious thoughts. So how can we learn to let go of our worries? Follow this expert advice to help beat those panicking thoughts...

Anxiety is a word we often use casually – when we're nervous about an important meeting, or worried about being late. But for many of us, it's a debilitating set of disorders that can impact on our lives. 'Anxiety has been responsible for our primitive fight-or-flight mechanism,' says cognitive behavioural therapist, Rowan Newby. 'But you might say our brains haven't evolved to always detect the difference between a real threat and a perceived one, so we can experience the same physiological symptoms of tension, breathlessness and fast heart rate caused by adrenaline release.' This is fine in isolation because we then recover. But, for many of us, anxiety can start to dominate and change the way we live, such as avoiding social occasions, stopping driving, or worrying about the future.

Why are women more affected than men? Dr Natasha Bijlani, consultant psychiatrist at the **Priory Hospital Roehampton**, says, 'There is a strong influence of female versus male sex hormones, and the effects of neurotransmitters, such as serotonin.'

Psychotherapeutic counsellor, Audrey Stephenson (attheppractice.com), adds, 'Every individual's reason for feeling anxious is unique, but there is the backdrop of worry caused by uncertain political times. We've replaced speaking on the phone with texting and emailing. The voices of our friends and families soothe our nervous system, but we no longer get that emotional feedback and haven't been rewired to deal with that.'

MAKE CHANGES

'Try to prevent anxiety from escalating in the first place,' advises Dr Natasha Bijlani. 'This is best achieved with a healthy work/life balance – be assertive with your employer and others if you are taking on more work or activities than you feel comfortable with. And the benefits of regular exercise, drinking minimal amounts of caffeine (which can increase your heart rate and worsen anxiety), good-quality sleep and avoiding alcohol, as well as allowing time for rest and relaxation, are well established.'

FEEL THE FEAR AND DO IT ANYWAY

It might be easier said than done, but it's important not to avoid the things that make us anxious, as this mentally reinforces the message that they're dangerous when they're not.

'Avoidance doesn't work – all it does is keep you anxious,' says Rowan Newby. 'If the activity seems insurmountable, prepare for it and break it down. Start with easier tasks and work up to the more difficult ones. For example, if you're anxious about driving, start with a small trip on quiet roads and slowly build up to longer and busier journeys. You'll feel more anxious at first but will tolerate it and, in the end, will feel less so.'

HAVE A TOOLKIT

Anxiety attacks can be scary, but there are strategies to ease your way out. 'Find something to fix your eye on to, and notice your breath,' says Audrey Stephenson. 'Bringing awareness will change it, as we often hold our breath or over-breathe when we're very anxious. But don't fight the anxiety, as that will make it worse.' 'Another top tip is to fill your mouth with saliva,' says hypnotherapist Marisa Peer, author of *I Am Enough* (£10.99; iamenough.com). 'This might sound bizarre, but it works so quickly. A dry mouth is a symptom of nervousness, whereas a wet mouth means you're relaxed (think drooling), so this signals to your brain that you're relaxed. Or sing a song in your head – it can instantly change your state of mind.'

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ADDRESS THE MENOPAUSE

'Anxiety can be a common symptom of the menopause, as a result of low hormone levels,' says Dr Louise Newson, GP and menopause specialist (www.newsonhealth.co.uk). 'Many women tell me that they have a "sense of dread" and others say how anxiety has stopped them driving, using public transport, or going on holidays. Along with considering your wellbeing and lifestyle in the perimenopause and menopause, taking the right type of hormone replacement therapy (HRT) can really help. Many women find that they feel calmer, are more motivated and generally much happier when they take it.'

ASK FOR HELP

For some people, lifestyle changes may be enough. If not, therapy may be helpful. There are several types of talking therapy, but cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is available on the NHS for anxiety disorders. 'Medication is also an option. There is sound research on the superiority of medication plus psychological treatment for moderate to severe anxiety, rather than each one alone,' says Dr Bijlani. 'Medication helps recalibrate chemicals in the brain that can contribute to heightened anxiety and, once you feel calmer, you'll be able to benefit from strategies discussed in your talking therapy much more effectively.'

CHANGE YOUR VISUAL IMAGE

'When we're in a spiral of anxiety, we tend to create negative pictures (the airport is going to be so overcrowded, that party will be too loud) and we use words that simply aren't true (hellish, total nightmare, absolute chaos, disaster),' says Marisa Peer. 'By thinking and speaking in this way, it almost becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, so try to use more positive words and images, even when you don't feel like it, to help send the right signals to your mind. Instead of "it's going to be a total nightmare", think, "I have great coping skills" and visualise yourself being strong and resilient.'

LEARN TO TOLERATE UNCERTAINTY

'Intolerance of uncertainty is a large part of anxiety for many people,' says Rowan Newby. "'What if I get ill?', 'What if my kids get hurt?'" But uncertainty is a part of life that we have to deal with, because bad things do happen, but, fortunately, very rarely. If we learn to step back and ask whether these problems are real or hypothetical, we can increase our tolerance of not knowing what will happen in the future and lessen our need to worry as preparation for events that have not yet happened.'

DON'T WORRY ABOUT BEING WORRIED

Anxiety can often be a vicious circle. Because it feels unpleasant, it's easy to start feeling anxious about being anxious. 'Sometimes worrying is just what it is to be human,' says Audrey Stephenson. 'Random thoughts can often mean nothing and don't need to be dwelled upon as something abnormal. Talking therapy can help you understand the vulnerabilities of being human and learn to be more comfortable in your own skin.'