

# As a Therapist, Here Are 5 Habits That Could Be Making Your Anxiety Way Worse

You might actually be fueling your anxiety without realizing it

By Julia Childs Heyl, MSW | Published on February 28, 2024

It's already February, which means you've likely been inundated with self-improvement content ad nauseum. In the midst of chatter about how to become a better version of yourself, there can be a heavy emphasis on resolutions. While that is well and good, resolutions that focus on avoiding negative outcomes set us up for failure.

It turns out, according to recent research, goals that focus on achieving positive outcomes are far more successful.

Keeping this in mind, I mused on my work with clients in my psychotherapy practice, considering what patterns I see spike the most anxiety among the folks I work with. Alas, I discovered five key habits that seem to cause the most issues. Let's dig in, decrease our cortisol levels, and find some inner peace.

## Staying Sedentary

Within 12-step recovery programs, there's a much-beloved phrase: *Move a muscle, change a thought*. When I begin working with anyone who is seeking treatment for anxiety, I always ask what their exercise regimen is. Many are so hyperstimulated with work, relationship issues, and general stressors, that exercise falls by the wayside.

It is also increasingly common to have a sedentary lifestyle, with a 2020 study stating that about a third of the world's population does not engage in substantial movement on a daily basis. Another recent study found a correlation between sedentary lifestyles, anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation.

While digging into a fitness program is great, the goal is to avoid being sedentary and move your body. Start by setting a timer on your phone to remind yourself to walk

around every few hours. Add in a 30-minute walk before and after work. Park your car far away from your destination and see if there are any errands you typically drive to that you could walk or bike to. Every movement adds up to a new mind.

## Overidentifying With Your Work

It is amazing to have a career you're excited about. You may find yourself talking about it on end and centering conversations around what you do for work. Alternatively, you may feel defeated by your work situation and find it impacts your self-esteem. For parents and caregivers, it may not be your career that is encompassing your identity. It might be the labor of caring for kids and loved ones. Regardless of where you fall on this spectrum, it is important to remember that you are much more than what you do for others.

Work consumes most of our time throughout the week, so the thought of finding ways to understand yourself outside of your work can feel like yet another task. The best way to step more into your authentic identity is to begin trying new things.



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Go to a ceramics class or join a book club. Take up watercoloring with a YouTube class. Consider reconnecting with your younger self, too. What did you love as a kid? How can you return to it as an adult?

For example, if you loved animals growing up, perhaps you could set aside an hour or two one weekend to volunteer at an animal shelter. Finally, you can keep things simple and begin romanticizing your life. Pay attention to the details of making your coffee in the morning—how it smells, tastes, and sounds when it percolates. Relish in the process of sipping it from your mug on your way to work. Tap into the quiet details of your daily life and come back home to yourself.

## Clocking in Too Much Screen Time

Current research indicates high amounts of screen time can be correlated to anxiety and depression. Yet, many of us depend on screens to accomplish our jobs and

responsibilities. So, what gives? Replace a negative habit with a better habit.

If your relaxation routine includes scrolling social media on the couch after work, see if you can replace it with sitting outside for 10 minutes and simply breathing. If you tend to have movie marathons on the weekends, see if you can replace watching a film hiking, walking to a local garden, or eating lunch outside.

## Avoiding Boredom

Boredom gets a bad rap, but it is pretty important. Experiencing boredom can lend us deep insights, like realizing we're pretty unsatisfied with our daily lives and are seeking stimulation to distract ourselves from it. With such an insight, boredom can also motivate us to make significant changes. Though our current culture prioritizes constant stimulation and fears boredom, we can lean in and feel its power.

You can start by minimizing the stimulation you're exposed to online. Consider deleting social media apps off your phone and checking them once a day on your desktop. This can help mitigate the habit of compulsively checking social media whenever you have an idle moment. When you feel restless and go to turn on the television or listen to a podcast, just pause. See what happens when you stop doing and start being.

## Coping Through Substances

Alcohol, cannabis, and recreational drugs are all ways individuals may choose to cope with anxiety. Though using substances may provide momentary relief, they also can increase general feelings of anxiety. However, this doesn't mean that complete sobriety is right for everyone. Let me introduce you to the concept of sober curiosity.

While various forms of substance use are accepted and even celebrated, the sober-curious movement encourages individuals to observe and question their desire to use substances. Typically focused on exploring why one drinks alcohol, the concept of sober curiosity can be applied to all substances. Allowing yourself to be present and sober in the here and now may feel anxiety-inducing at first. But, over time, you may learn you like yourself more when you're not trying to cover up your anxiety with things that only inflame it.



### What This Means For You

When starting any new habit, I encourage all my clients to be gentle and open-minded with themselves. When you change your habits, you change yourself. May you meet

and fall in love with your most authentic self in the process.

## 5 Sources

Verywell Mind uses only high-quality sources, including peer-reviewed studies, to support the facts within our articles. Read our editorial process to learn more about how we fact-check and keep our content accurate, reliable, and trustworthy.

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