



Book Learn to Relax

Proven Techniques for Reducing Stress, Tension and Anxiety And Promoting Peak Performance

C. Eugene Walker, Ph.D.
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Recommendation

Stress and anxiety are natural parts of the human experience and can actually improve performance in challenging times. But for those of us with more than our fair share of tension, C. Eugene Walker has written a helpful book. Walker draws on theories from many psychologists, psychiatrists and other researchers in analyzing the origins of our stress. More importantly, he also provides techniques for overcoming and reducing tension - including more than 40 exercises that will help you calm down. While his basic principles will sound familiar to those who know self-help and personal-development literature, Walker does a good job of combining and organizing these points. *BooksInShort* com recommends this book to a general audience, but also to top managers and executives who deal with stressed-out employees or feel the pressure mounting themselves.

Take-Aways

- Anxiety is a reaction to the feeling that your well being is threatened in some way.
- Moderate anxiety and stress motivate you to plan and increase your ability to cope.
- Excess stress or anxiety will cause your performance to deteriorate.
- Straight thinking reduces stress, since faulty beliefs can cause you to respond anxiously.
- One way to overcome fear is "paradoxical intention" - doing what you fear to do.
- You'll feel less tense if you plan ahead.
- You will be more relaxed if you set realistic goals - rather than having no goals, or overly ambitious goals.
- Certain exercises can help relax your muscles.
- Systematic desensitization will help you unlearn conditioned reactions that can cause anxiety.
- If you want to relax, deal with your problems as they arise.

Summary

The Nature of Stress

We use the term "anxiety" in a number of ways. It can refer to subjective feelings, mental blocking of a disturbing situation, physical sensations such as a tightness in the muscles and behaviors such as stuttering, stammering and physical awkwardness. Different people express their anxiety differently and in response to different situations at different times. But anxiety is your reaction to something you think is threatening your well being. This could be a threat to your physical safety, job or self-esteem, or to someone important to you.

While anxiety can be unpleasant at times, it is a survival mechanism. It has roots in the beginnings of human history. The human nervous system developed to prepare individuals for fight or flight when confronting some danger. However, this response is not always appropriate today. If you become too physically aggressive, you can create more trouble for yourself. If you try to flee your responsibilities, you are only delaying the inevitable and you will have to face them eventually.

“The nervous system of the human prepares them physically for fight or flight in the face of danger. Today, unfortunately, neither of these options is very effective.”

Anxiety can take a number of forms - including a phobia (an intense, irrational fear), an unconscious anxiety (of which you aren't aware) or a free-floating anxiety or panic state (where you feel out of control or confused). We often use the term "stress" synonymously with anxiety, but stress also refers to feeling a sense of pressure from the environment.

“We can control external events to only a certain extent, but we can learn to control our internal responses to those events almost completely.”

In general, a moderate amount of anxiety and stress is good for you. It helps motivate you to plan for future events. It can increase your ability (generally due to the secretion of adrenaline) to cope with a situation more effectively. For instance, you will gain strength if you are afraid of something or be better able to work under pressure. Thus, as long as the amount of stress or anxiety you experience remains moderate, even if the amount goes up slightly, your performance will improve.

However, when stress or anxiety become too great or continue for too long, they become a problem. Beyond a certain point, your performance will deteriorate. Excessive anxiety can block your performance or interfere with your ability to perform skillfully - such as when a speaker becomes too nervous to speak or makes mistakes in front of a big audience. Recognize that stress and anxiety are simply "facts of existence." Learn to make them work for you rather than against you.

Straight Thinking

A key source of anxiety is the way you interpret your experiences. If you interpret an event too anxiously, your thoughts or beliefs can make you worry about it. For example, you may make a minor mistake at work. Then, the feeling that you won't succeed paralyzes you.

“Moderate amounts of stress or anxiety motivate us to plan for future events and increase our ability (primarily through the secretion of adrenaline) to cope with situations as they occur.”

Psychologist Dr. Albert Ellis developed a system of psychotherapy based on straight thinking. He called his approach "rational-emotive behavior therapy," and based it upon the idea that a person's belief system causes an emotional reaction or contributes to the consequences of a particular event. When this belief system is faulty and results in anxiety or stress, the remedy is to change the thinking or belief system. You don't have to be the victim of your irrational beliefs - rather, you can learn to dispute them successfully through clear, rational thinking.

“Humans are not content when they reach homeostasis, or equilibrium, at which all pressures are absent. They are most content or happy, and life is most meaningful, when they are responsibly meeting and solving problems.”

To help dispute irrational belief systems, read biographies. They can show you how famous people have had experiences that are

similar to yours, and how they overcame difficulties. For example, the brilliant Thomas Edison was thrown out of school as being uneducable.

You also should try to overcome some of the common irrational myths in Western society - such as the idea that everyone should be thoroughly competent and high achieving. Instead, substitute rational thinking. Realize you can't be superhuman in what you accomplish. Everyone makes mistakes sometimes. The most others can expect is that you will seek to make progress, learn and grow.

Likewise, don't think that life is unfair or that a catastrophe has occurred when things aren't the way you like them. Don't take things you don't like as a personal insult or as an attempt to defeat you. Rather, if you can't improve a situation, resign yourself to accepting it. You can only control external events so much. But you can almost completely control your internal responses to those events. So learn to accept what you can't change, and change what you can. Face your difficulties and responsibilities immediately. Solve them the best way you can. You will feel more anxious, and even depressed and guilty, if you put them off. Try writing down some of your irrational beliefs and consider why they are false.

Overcoming Existential Anxiety

You can overcome existential anxiety by finding meaning in your life. According to Viennese psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, the main motivation of human beings is to discover the meaning of existence, which he called the "will-to-meaning." He believed this motivation is even more powerful than the "will-to-pleasure" or the "will-to-power."

“When they are present in moderate amounts, increasing those amounts leads to a heightened performance. Eventually, however, a peak is reached after which any additional amount results in a deterioration of performance.”

Just achieving a state of homeostasis, in which you experience no pressure in life, will not make you happy. Rather, you will experience life as most meaningful when you are responsibly facing and meeting problems. Then, too, you will find meaning in life when you grow or progress towards achieving values. The three relevant types of values are: 1) creative values (when you work for society's benefit), 2) experiential values (when you seek to experience life's beauty and excitement) and 3) attitudinal values (when you face life with the right attitude). Have a positive attitude. Seek to discover your unique destiny.

“Stress and anxiety are facts of existence. It's best to learn to make them work for us rather than against us.”

Another good anxiety-fighting strategy is paradoxical intention. Confront your fears by doing what frightens you. Overcome the anxiety that occurs when a situation frightens you so much that you avoid it. Write your ideas about what would give your life more meaning.

Engineering Relaxation

Planning will help you overcome stress and anxiety. A lack of planning often results in unnecessary tensions and hassles. Think of planning as "structuring" or "engineering." In structuring, you organize situations so that arrangements will go smoothly. In engineering a situation, you design a strategy of activity that will lead to the result you want.

Structuring will get you moving. You will be able to complete a task more successfully - whether your boss assigns it or you do. Break down the task, so it is clear what you need to do and what tools or materials you must have to do it. Keep a calendar to structure your day. Time management can help you prioritize, so you do what is most important.

“All people have setbacks. These events needn't have catastrophic consequences if we think rationally about what has occurred and what it means. Such an event can be a stimulus for growth and improvement if we see it as such, rather than allowing it to provoke the anxiety that leads to deterioration.”

However, don't become overly compulsive. Plan in advance, so an event is not a problem when it occurs. At the same time, be flexible so you can change your plans as circumstances warrant. Consider, too, if there is a better way to do a task than the method you have used in the past. Schedule specific times to carry out planned tasks. Resist unnecessary interruptions.

Setting Realistic Goals

People often avoid setting goals. Or, they set goals that are too high. If you don't set goals for yourself, you may not achieve as much as you can, while if you set impossibly high goals, you will create additional anxiety if you fail. You will relax more if you set realistic goals.

“Actually, 99% of the unhappiness we experience is not caused by the unpleasant aspects of real-life events but is created internally, by the things we say to ourselves about those events.”

Also, avoid setting faulty goals. If you head for the wrong goal, you may achieve something, and then find it isn't really what you wanted. Set realistic long-range and short-range goals. Make your long-range goals general. If they are too specific, you usually will set yourself up for failure. If they are general, you can accomplish them several ways.

After you set a long-range goal, analyze it to create realistic short-range goals that lead to your long-term goal and start working toward those. Be patient. If you fail at one goal, try again - or seek an alternative route. Celebrate as you achieve your goals, too.

Relaxation Exercises

Use relaxation exercises with biofeedback. With proper training, you can work on using these exercises to control your heart rate, blood pressure, body temperature and other functions. Ask for feedback as your body processes change. Through this feedback, you can tell when you are more relaxed - for example, your heart rate may decrease.

“It is best to face problems squarely and to solve them to the best of our abilities. Putting them off only increases anxiety, depression and guilt.”

You also can do exercises without feedback, if you train yourself to relax your muscles. Sit in a comfortable chair or lie down. Instruct yourself to relax different parts of your body, starting with your forehead and going to the bottom of your feet. Repeat this procedure when you want to relax. Later, you may be able to relax by simply sitting or lying comfortably, taking a deep breath and letting all of your muscles go slack. But if you have trouble doing this yourself, a professional therapist can help you.

Using Systematic Desensitization

Anxieties often are due to conditioned reactions, in which certain experiences link with certain reactions. For example, you may become anxious with people in authority because of something (a reaction) you learned in childhood.

“If we work at it, especially through rational thinking, we can learn to control our emotions rather than being controlled by them.”

You can overcome these anxious, conditioned reactions through systematized desensitization. You can unlearn your conditioning, or replace it with a different response. List different situations that cause you anxiety. Put each one on an index card and arrange the cards in order, with the one causing the least anxiety on the top. Relax and start with the top card. Visualize the situation as vividly as you can. If you feel anxious, relax again and look at the card. Continue until you don't feel anxious. Then, go to the next card.

You can engage in these activities in real life by using "in vivo desensitization." Prepare yourself to meet a situation, and relax. As you repeat the process, you will feel less anxiety.

Using Other Relaxation Methods

Other ways to relax include:

- Use assertion to deal with the problems you face as they arise. You will have fewer unsolved problems to worry about when you do this.
- Learn to use problem-solving, decision-making and brainstorming techniques to help you find alternatives to your problems.
- Be careful about nutrition and exercise, since good physical health contributes to mental health and vice versa.

- Use recreation to help you feel refreshed. Find things you like to do.
- Turn to friends or develop new friends, and communicate meaningfully with them.
- Use self-hypnosis to give yourself suggestions to calm down or to figure out how to overcome your problems.

“Everyone has a unique destiny and contribution to make in life that nobody else can make. It is your responsibility to find that role and your duty to carry it out. Doing so gives meaning to life.”

Never hesitate to seek professional help if necessary.

About the Author

C. Eugene Walker, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist and consultant. He is professor emeritus at the University of Oklahoma Medical School and the author/editor of more than 20 books.
