



Mind-Body Exercises for Anxiety

Calm your mind and
body naturally

By The American Institute of
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Understanding Anxiety

Most of us have some level of anxiety from time to time, but for many people, anxiety affects everything you do in a day. While anxiety can be normal and healthy in small doses, when it becomes disproportionate to the concern or begins to interfere in your ability to live a healthy, happy life, then it is time to learn to get your worries under control.

For anyone who has anxiety that is controlling your life, affecting your mood, or changing how you think and behave, then using mind-body exercises can help you get that worry under control and allow you to live with less stress.

Below, we will explore the roots of anxiety as well as how to treat it using some simple techniques that quiet the body while also easing the mind.



Over 40 million people in the US suffer from some form of anxiety disorder while many millions more experience general or acute anxiety from time to time that interferes with their lives.

Anxiety is defined as disproportionate worry or tension, which means just being worried does not mean you have anxiety. It is only when this stress exceeds the reasonable reaction or lasts longer than the initial cause for concern.

Along with the mental and emotional responses that characterize anxiety, you will also experience physical changes that result from this increased stress. When you are anxious, your body produces cortisol and other stress hormones. These then raise your blood pressure, interfere with rational thought, and cause other physiological changes to your body as it prepares to respond to a perceived threat.

Mild, acute, or occasional anxiety is unsettling and may cause you to feel out of sorts. Severe anxiety, however, affects your ability to perform essential functions and can prevent you from being able to take care of yourself. Anxiety disorders are a mental health condition that means you have excessive nervousness or fear and you feel apprehensive or worried most of the time.

When Is Anxiety Normal?

If you are facing potential harm or a situation that could damage your happiness, then it is perfectly normal to feel anxious. In fact, our bodies sometimes produce feelings of anxiety to protect us from physical danger. Anxiety is part of an evolutionary response that we designed to keep us safe from attacking animals and other life-threatening situations.

Since few of us have to worry about being eaten by lions these days, our brains use that part of our minds to find other things to worry about. Money, relationships, work, health, and family obligations occupy most of our worries these days, the primordial response that tells our bodies to “run” or “fight” these modern-day concerns is not nearly as helpful as it used to be.

Learning how to identify and cope with these usual worries is vital for your emotional and mental health while also influencing your physical well-being. Those with diagnosed anxiety disorders should also work with a mental health professional to ensure they are getting the care, treatment, and support they need to manage their symptoms.

What Are Anxiety Disorders

Anxiety disorders occur when your stress response is chronically out of proportion to the stressor or emotional trigger. You may develop severe physical as well as psychological symptoms when you have an anxiety disorder, which is defined by the APA as "having recurring intrusive thoughts or concerns" that may interfere with your daily functioning.

Anxiety disorders include:

- General anxiety disorder
- Panic disorders
- Specific phobias
- Selective mutism
- Separation anxiety disorder:
- Social anxiety disorder

The symptoms of each of these can vary widely, with the more common being feelings of restlessness, uncontrollable worries, irritability, and difficulty concentrating. Anxiety is known to affect sleep, which can lead to other emotional and physical symptoms, as well.

The Causes Of Anxiety

If you have an anxiety disorder or are struggling with acute anxiety, identifying the cause of your worrisome feelings can help treat and reduce these thoughts and emotions. But the cause of



anxiety is complex and may not stem from a single source.

Anxiety is often made worse by other conditions or factors or influenced heavily by emotions

or conditions you may already have.

Your brain chemistry plays a significant role in the development of diagnosed anxiety disorders. When the hormones or electrical signals of your mind are misaligned or fluctuating this can trigger anxiety or make certain situations worse for you. Those with a family history of anxiety are much more likely to suffer from this disorder, as well.

Whether you are genetically predisposed to anxiety or not, environmental stressors can trigger or make these feelings worse. Problems at work or in relationships, the loss of a loved one, financial issues, or caring for someone with a lengthy or end-stage illness are common triggers for anxiety in many people.

There are also certain medications that can make anxiety worse. A common symptom of withdrawal from certain illicit substances is anxiety, too.

When considering what may be causing or making your anxiety worse, it is important to note which of these you can control, and which are outside of your influence. For every factor that you cannot control, just as a family history or brain chemistry, it becomes even more critical that you manage others and learn mind-body techniques that will help you cope with your anxiety.

Understanding The Mind-Body Connection

The earliest forms of healing and medicine focused on the minds as much as the body, and while that wisdom may seem misplaced to some, medical researchers and doctors today understand the powerful connection between the physical and psychological health of humans. Your mind plays a significant role in your body's ability to heal itself, recover from injury or illness, and to prevent diseases.

Your emotions and thoughts influence your mind as well as your autonomic system, your



hormones, and much more. And this connection also flows in the other direction, as your body's responses and sensations directly influence your emotions, thoughts, and mindset.

When you feel negative or disturbing emotions, your body responds by releasing stress hormones, namely cortisol, into your system. It also

releases various neurotransmitters in your brain. These responses are meant to help you flee or defend yourself against threats, but when there is no physical threat, you are still left with the aftermath of this hormonal fluctuation.

Cortisol raises blood pressure and increases your heart rate. It is also associated with an increase in blood flow to muscles and other parts of the body, which can result in inflammation over time. When cortisol levels are kept high, because you are always feeling stressed from anxiety, this takes a significant toll on your physical health.

The physical response to stress is also felt in the gut. Here, your body substantially slows down digestion, choosing to direct energy to other areas, and your stomach and other digestive organs can become sluggish.

You may develop constipation, or the increased inflammation could result in additional symptoms, like diarrhea or nausea. Over time, stress can raise the levels of acid in the gut, which can contribute to the development of gastric ulcers and other problems of the gut lining.

All these responses also affect your immune system. Stress, strong emotions, and the continued assault of stress hormones in the body reduce immune system function, making you more vulnerable to disease. Conversely, when you have more positive emotions or think optimistic thoughts, your immune system fights harder, and you are more likely to overcome an illness or recover faster from an injury.

Managing emotions, coping with stress, and controlling the physiological response to stress and anxiety are part of the mind-body connection. Using exercises and techniques that help to regulate the body's response to stress and identifying thought patterns and emotions that throw your system out of balance are known as mind-body exercises.



How Exercise Can Help Anxiety

In the same way that your thoughts and emotions can affect your physical health, so can your physical health affect your thoughts and feelings. And one way to improve your physical health while also have a considerable influence on your emotional and psychological well-being is through exercise.

Physical exercise has benefits that far exceed strengthening muscles or improving heart function. In addition to helping reduce stress, exercise can also improve anxiety and reduce the symptoms of this mental illness.

When you exercise, your body releases hormones and neurotransmitters that have a powerful effect on your mood, outlook, and physical health. Those who exercise regularly are much less likely to suffer from depression or anxiety because of their consistently higher levels of these natural “feel good” chemicals in their systems.



Exercise helps increase blood flow throughout the body, which enhances brain function and help you feel more alert while also thinking more clearly. When you exercise, you are contributing to a healthy body that responds well to insulin, which also influences your mood and emotions. Exercise can help you manage your weight, which contributes to a positive self-image, thus helping you maintain a more positive outlook, as well.

One of the simplest ways to reduce stress is to exercise moderately for even a brief time. Lowering stress reduces cortisol levels, which can continue the cycle of improving your mind-body connection, as well.

Setting goals and developing a habit of physical exercise are instrumental in developing this healthy habit. The best recommendations for duration and intensity today suggest that you

should strive for at least 75 minutes each week of vigorous-intensity activity, like jogging or swimming. Alternatively, you can work up to this by engaging in 180 minutes of moderate intensity exercise every week, including brisk walking. As you gain strength and stamina, you can increase the intensity while decreasing your time.

Frequency of exercise is more important than duration. If you only have time for 15 minutes one day, do it. It is better to do a little each day than to wait to cram it all in in a few days. Find activities you like to do and rotate those. If you enjoy taking classes, sign up for a few. If you enjoy solo activities, that works, too. The point is to do what you like rather than just exercise for the sake of movement.

Exercising regularly can help relieve chronic anxiety and help alleviate many of the physical and emotional symptoms that this disorder brings. When you combine regular physical activity with mind-body exercises, like those described below, you can learn to control your anxiety and reduce its impact on your overall health and well-being.

Mind-Body Exercises For Anxiety

Mind-body exercises are a form of therapy that teaches the mind how to influence the body and vice versa. Mind-body practices often focus on thinking and emotions to create change within the physical self.

Among the most common mind-body therapies are yoga, meditation, deep-breathing exercises, Tai chi, qi gong, biofeedback, relaxation tools, guided imagery, and create art therapy. There are many others, and below, we explore the most common and successful of these techniques that you can do.



For some people, mind-body exercises and physical activity may be enough to control or lessen anxiety or treat the thoughts and feelings that are influencing your life. For others, especially those with diagnosed anxiety disorders, these should be used in combination with other forms of therapy and treatment suggested by your doctor.

If you are taking medication for anxiety, you should not stop taking that without consulting your physician. While the mind-body techniques we discuss below can help, your medication is working in a different but still effective way to improve your anxiety symptoms. Always follow your doctor's recommendations.

There are many ways to practice or perform the techniques described below, and each could be discussed in a much longer form than what is allowed for here.

After reading about the basics of each therapy, choose ones that interest you the most, and do additional research to learn more about the specific techniques for practicing it at home. Choose one or two to incorporate into your life and make a regular habit of practicing them.

Meditation

One of the biggest reasons that anxiety is such a problem for many people is that it creates distracting thoughts and worries that interfere with your ability to solve everyday problems, make decisions, and live your life. It can be hard for your mind to differentiate between a helpful worry about solving a problem or making a choice and the constant anxiety you always feel.

Meditation is a practice perfect for helps with anxiety because its primary purpose is to help you ignore distracting thoughts and learn how better to focus on the things that are most important



to you. Mindfulness meditation, in particular, retrains your brain to focus on one thing and ignore all other thoughts or concerns, which is exactly what you want to be able to do when you suffer from anxiety.

There are many ways to practice meditation, and you do not need a lot of specialized equipment or training to do it. Once you learn

the basic technique, you can use it whenever you need to regain focus.

Mindfulness meditation does not teach you to shut down the thoughts or emotions you are experiencing but simply to know which you need to attend to in any given moment. Meditation helps you gain control over your mind and feelings again, which is vital for those with anxiety.

Breathwork

Learning to control and use your breathing can allow you to control the physical response to stress and give you better management over your anxiety symptoms. Deep breathing, focusing on your breath, and consciously changing how you are breathing can all help you calm the physiological response to stress and get your anxiety under control.

When you breathe deeply and slowly, concentrate on using your diaphragm to push air in and out of your lungs, you stimulate the vagus nerve, which plays a role in the flight-or-fight response that is triggered by stress. By focusing on this type of breathing for just ten cycles can calm your body, reduce your anxiety, and improve your mental and physical state.

Those with chronic anxiety tend to breathe shallowly, take breaths from the chest rather than from the abdomen, and do not exchange enough carbon dioxide for oxygen when they breathe.

This type of shallow breathing reduces air exchange and contributes to feelings of panic or worry, so breathing deeper and getting more oxygen to your brain and body can help alleviate these symptoms.

When you feel anxious, taking a few deep breaths and focusing explicitly on how the air is moving in and out of your body can help you focus your thoughts and provide you with a way to break the worrying cycle of thoughts that are common in those with anxiety.



Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a habit of mind that helps you focus on the present, which is helpful for those whose worries tend to spiral out into the unknown future or dwell on the mistakes of the past. Mindfulness exercises can be practiced just about anywhere and help you focus your attention on what is happening in your life right now, how you are feeling and what facts should guide your thinking.

Focusing on the present allows you to see that, despite your worries, you are okay right now. You have what you need, and you are in control of your body and your mind.

To practice being more mindful when you feel anxiety creeping in, start by focusing on your body.

- How do you feel? Where are your muscles tense?
- How does your skin feel?

Notice where you feel comfortable and where you have discomfort. Breathe and notice how this affects your body.

Before you react to something because you are anxious or fearful, try to ground yourself in the present and focus on what is happening right now. Learning to remind yourself that you are okay and in the present moment can help stop anxious feelings before they escalate.

Get Outside

If you want to improve the impact of any exercise you do, do it outside. Being in nature, looking at natural elements, or just being outside can reduce stress and calm your mind. The chemicals emitted by plants are helpful to our brains and being exposed to the sun also plays a role in your mental health.



Even just a 20-minute walk among trees or through a garden can reduce stress hormone levels significantly. Breathing fresh air and spending time outside grounds you and helps you feel more connected with the earth as well as other people, and the more time you spend in nature, the less anxious you will feel. If you can't get outside for some reason, looking at natural scenes is the next best thing, so find a pretty view to enjoy.

Yoga

Yoga is a tradition that combines strength and flexibility exercises with mindfulness practices, focused breathing, and elements of meditation, making it a mind-body technique that can be extremely helpful for those with anxiety.

Yoga has been shown to significantly reduce anxiety as well as depression, anger, and other strong emotions. It is widely recommended as a complementary practice for many mental health problems.

Yoga helps you by relaxing your muscles, reducing stress, teaching you to remain focused and intentional, grounding you in the present, and providing an extended period of deep breathing. Once you learn to practice regularly, you can use some of the techniques, including deep breathing and meditative poses, throughout your day.

Meditative Movement

Several traditions that are good for reducing anxiety include Tai chi and qi gong. Tai chi is a



system of movement and exercise where you practice a series of actions in a specific order. These movements are slow and gentle and are patterned after nature.

Tai chi is performed while standing and requires only small steps, and once you learn the series, you can practice it just about anywhere.

Qi gong is similar to tai chi in that you repeat specific movements a predetermined number of times, and these movements are connected to thoughts or emotions that you are focused on. Unlike tai chi, where you do the full series of actions every time you practice, with qi gong, you chose those exercises that are most pertinent to your current needs.

Both traditions are types of meditative movement, where your mind focused intentionally on how you are moving your body and for what purpose. During practice, your stress is reduced because of your mindfulness, deep and focused breathing, and constant engagement and relaxation of specific muscles in your body.

Positive Self-Talk

If you want to control anxiety better, listen to how your mind talks to you and what messages you are consistently sending to yourself. When you hear anxious thoughts being vocalized in your mind, it is essential to remember that you have the power to change these.

When you hear negative self-talk or the inner critical voice, we all have inside of us, you can stop what that voice is telling you and change the narrative.

Where the words come from is often the most in-depth source of your anxiety. Instead of listening to these negative or worrisome thoughts, though, you can choose to say positive and uplifting things to yourself.

Repeating positive affirmations is one way to change the messaging in your brain and avoid the negative messages that can create a downward spiral for your anxiety. The more you repeat these positive messages, the more you will believe them and embrace their truth.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

You can also use a technique called progressive muscle relaxation to relieve tension and help improve your anxiety symptoms. This process involves tensing specific muscles or groups of muscles as you inhale, then relaxing these as you exhale. Working your muscle groups in a particular order can enhance these effects.

By tensing and then physically relaxing your body, you release tension and feel less anxious. The more you practice this technique, the easier it becomes and the more effective your results. Several recorded audio programs can guide you through the procedure.

Lying on the floor, you relax and then focus on contracting the first muscle group for up to 10 seconds, then breathing out and wholly and suddenly releasing all the tension from that muscle. Repeat with the next group, and the next until you have processed all 16 areas of the body.

Socializing

When you have anxiety, communicating with others through electronic messages or social media can actually make your concerns and worries worse. Spending time with people in person is beneficial for your physical as well as mental health, and those with anxiety can reduce their stress and improve their mindset when they try to socialize face-to-face.

Even those with social anxiety will enjoy positive benefits when they make an effort to spend time with other people. Being with friends and loved ones improves your outlook, lifts your spirits, makes you feel more connected, and can help you see how much support you have in your life to help you when things get tough.

Final Thoughts

Anxiety is a common problem, and there is no reason anyone should feel ashamed for experiencing this type of worry or concern. However, when anxiety begins to control your life and interfere with your ability to function or take care of yourself, you need to learn ways to manage and reduce its influence.

Using some simple mind-body techniques, you can learn to control and manage the influence that your mind has over your body and vice versa. Mind-body exercises use the power of your intention to relax the body while also relaxing the body to improve the mind.



Mind-body exercises require regular practice to make most effective, so pick a few you enjoy and try doing them every day.