

SIMPLE AND NATURAL WAYS TO TREAT ANXIETY



Whilst many people turn to medication to treat anxiety there are many natural ways to stay calm and happy.

Exercise has always been touted as the ultimate general health tonic. It is said that nothing can beat exercise in terms of reducing stress and improving overall mood.

Exercise to reduce anxiety could take the form of a hard workout in the gym, striding out for a walk in the countryside or a more relaxing yoga or Tai Chi session.

So how does exercise actually reduce anxiety? Exercise triggers a variety of physical reactions throughout the body, especially in the brain.

This is because when you put your muscles through their paces, your nervous system sends signals to stimulate the release of mood-boosting chemicals called endorphins. Endorphins reduce pain and induce feelings of euphoria - similar to the effect that morphine has on our bodies. So, working out causes us to experience some kind of 'high'; this is the reason many people find exercise addictive. [\(1\)](#) When done correctly, exercise can play a key role in decreasing stress levels by increasing serotonin, often called the 'feel-good' hormone.

Yoga acts on the muscular, nervous and glandular systems of the body to relieve tension build-up both physically and emotionally. Many people turn to yoga as a way of combating high levels of stress brought on by the demands of modern living.

Mindfulness and meditation are great to reduce anxiety.

Meditation is a practise that focuses on the conscious reprogramming of the mind. It is intended to enable you to accept your anxiety rather than feel threatened by it, and thus calm yourself down naturally. Meditation can be done in many forms such as formal sitting meditation or simply focusing on your breathing, but the important aspect is that you should try and clear your mind of all thoughts and emotions.

Meditation has been shown to reduce activity in the left side of the prefrontal cortex - an area of the brain linked with depression and other negative moods. [\(2\)](#) As well as calming what's going on in our minds, we can also influence our body chemistry through meditation.

When you are stressed and anxious your breathing can get out of control. This hyperventilation sends signals to your brain that trigger the fight or flight response - it prepares you for action by triggering a surge in your blood pressure and releasing stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol.

When practiced regularly, breathing exercises can help bring about long-term changes in breathing patterns and also teach people how to be aware of when they are becoming anxious. They can then learn how to calm themselves down before their anxiety levels escalate catastrophically.

By slowing down our breathing we give ourselves time. This helps us stay calm in high-stress situations so we don't get overcome with anxiety. Meditation for 20 minutes first thing in the morning and 20 minutes before bedtime can help bring about long-term changes in breathing patterns. Square, roll or belly breathing are the most popular techniques. [\(7\)](#)

Deep breathing when done correctly helps to slow down this process by getting oxygen into our bodies at a rate that allows us to feel calm and relaxed. By observing our breath, we become mindful of the way we are feeling. Becoming aware of your surroundings in a mindful way can also help reduce anxiety.

This is done by using all the senses.

First of all, look at what you can see around you; touch objects that are near to you; become aware of what you can smell and hear and finally taste something. This is called grounding and is a way to come back to the present moment when you feel out of control. [\(9\)](#)

There are some trigger foods that can lead to feelings of anxiety in certain people. Foods that trigger anxiety in one person might have no effect on another. So what kinds of food should I avoid if I want to reduce my anxiety?

Caffeine causes the release of adrenaline and cortisol, hormones linked to the fight or flight reaction. This stimulated state causes increased heartbeat and faster breathing, both of which lead to feelings of anxiety. Too much caffeine can also lead to a lack of sleep which makes you tired and grumpy and compounds the effects of anxiety.

Refined Sugars - if you add sugar into the mix with caffeine - either in a cup of joe or one of the popular (so called) energy drinks - the effect on anxiety is increased. [\(3\)](#) Refined sugar increases energy levels by raising blood sugar. However, it is used by the body very quickly causing a crash which leads to low mood, irritability and feelings of anxiety.

A lot of people drink alcohol as a way of coping with their anxiety. However, alcohol is a depressant. This can make your anxiety worse and make you less likely to feel like doing the things that de-stress you (such as exercise and meditation). Alcohol also tends to disrupt sleep which can worsen feelings of anxiety by making us too tired to function properly the next day.

Studies show that artificial sweeteners can increase anxious thoughts and behaviour in some people; particularly those prone already to mood

fluctuations. The study suggested a reduction on serotonin which is responsible for regulating our moods. [\(8\)](#)

Likewise, it is good to include some foods that help calm anxiety.

One of the best types of foods are those that contain probiotics (also known as good bacteria). These are fermented foods like pickled vegetables like sauerkraut, kefir and kombucha. These bacteria are part of the process of making the feel-good hormones like serotonin which is why it is important to include them in your diet if you suffer from anxiety or stress. [\(4\)](#)

The good news is that dark chocolate is also great for improving how you feel. It contains antioxidants that help reduce cortisol which is the stress hormone.

Other foods that contain antioxidants are many fruits and vegetables. Leafy vegetables also contain magnesium which is also great for reducing anxiety and helps you to relax. [\(5\)](#) Likewise, zinc is another mineral great for regulating the nervous system. Zinc is found in seafood and eggs. [\(6\)](#)

Eating healthy foods will not cure anxiety but it will keep your immune system fighting fit. This gives you the best chance to be on the best form you can be when challenged with anxiety.

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