

## *Self-help for Anxiety*

### **Practical suggestions**

I've been asked for practical suggestions for people who are especially anxious about the financial crisis—or anxious in general. Have you been feeling “edgy”... tense... irritable? Do you tire easily but find it hard to get a good night's sleep? Do worries make it hard to concentrate or do you “go blank”? If this has been going on for awhile, it's time to give yourself a break! Here are possibilities to relieve the body, mind, and spirit.

Before making changes in diet, supplements, or exercise, it would be a good idea to consult with your physician. Likewise, if you have longstanding or debilitating symptoms, have your physician rule out organic causes.

### **Group 1: To help the body release anxious tension**

- Learn the art of deep breathing from the diaphragm. Shallow breaths cue the body to tense up. Deep breaths cue our body to relax more.
- Yawning also cues the body to relax.
- Sip often on water, tea, or other healthy beverages—hot or cold. Swallowing cues your body to relax. In a pinch, using concentration, you can increase saliva flow with the same result.
- Eat well. Lots of produce and foods with B vitamins and omega 3 fatty acids.
- Avoid caffeine, sugar, and processed foods. On the go it's tempting, but in the long run, it makes you feel worse.
- Avoid alcohol and any sedatives. They can make anxiety worse.
- Learn the art of progressive muscle relaxation. There are many good self-help books and even guided recordings to progressive muscle relaxation on the internet.
- Regular exercise and stretching can really reduce stress—start off gradually.
- Research herbs and supplements. Consult with your physician or pharmacist about calcium, magnesium, B vitamins and folic acid, omega 3 supplements, passionflower, valerian and theanine.

### **Group 2: To help relax the mind**

- Be intentional about how you follow the news. Advertisers used to plug the high points. Then they learned that anxiety sells more. The media compete for their audience and manipulate anxiety to sell their news product. If you hang on every word to alleviate the anxiety, you're caught in a vicious cycle.
- Confront your black and white thinking. Does it seem that any decrease in financial prosperity equals total ruin? Doing with less does not mean doing without. Instead, cultivate gratitude for what you do have.
- Challenge your “what if” thinking—it makes the brain release stress hormones, upping the anxiety. Bring yourself back to the present and focus on solutions.
- Face your fears. What's the worst that might realistically happen and what are your choices? What would you do about it?
- Visualize a container large enough to hold all your worries. Let them flow into the container; seal it, and imagine storing it someplace far away. When you need to deal with a particular worry, take out just that one, resolve it or put it back in the container until needed again.
- Be intentional about the music you listen to. Create a library of relaxing music and of uplifting music.

### **Group 3: To bring spiritual relief**

These are drawn from the Orthodox Christian tradition. Let them spark ideas, whatever your faith tradition:

- Anxiety is energy—spend it in prayer for the things you worry about! I know of a wise woman who used to say: “I believe in the power of worry and prayer!”
- Broaden your prayer and pray for all people in financial hardship. As much as in your power, avoid profiting from the hardships of others. Be intentional in the companies you do business with. This will help you avoid spiritual debt.
- Alternately focus your anxiety on the one thing that truly deserves it—ask yourself: “Am I leading a God-pleasing life and will I save my soul?” Let this anxiety keep you spiritually vigilant.
- In the original language of the Bible, Jesus Christ tells us to *Keep asking and it shall be given you; keep seeking and you shall find; keep knocking and it shall be opened to you* (Mt 7:7 & Lk 11:9). Do not grow fainthearted in prayer.
- St. Seraphim of Sarov taught that we must amass grace in much the same way as the businessman amasses capital. We must become sensitive to the activities that bring us grace and do more of them, just as we would put more in a high-yield investment. In addition, he taught that only those things done for Christ’s sake yield this grace (St. Seraphim, 1996).
- A time-honored tradition in the Orthodox Church is to do a 40-day prayer vigil for urgent needs. Even if the prayer is answered right away, we need to fulfill the prayer commitment, just as we would repay a loan because, in this case we have been loaned the grace. St. Xenia of St. Petersburg is the patron saint of employment and housing. She truly helps people who ask her intercession for 40 days.
- Finally, our faith helps us gain peace through finding meaning. What is the meaning of the present crisis and our place in it? Why does God allow it and what strengths and resources do we discover in ourselves and our community that we might not otherwise have uncovered?

If you make self-help changes without satisfactory improvement, or need help sorting it out, it may be time to talk with a professional counselor. Remember, anxiety comes from a variety of causes and there are many treatment options—the ones given here are very general. A counselor can work with you to create a personal treatment plan. There is no need to fight this alone.

—Nun Katherine Weston, M.A.

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#### **Bibliography**

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