

# Allowing anxiety to Work for You, instead of Against you

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These are, without a doubt anxiety-filled times, as well as times when we are uniquely afforded with opportunities to reflect upon our lives. It is a time in which we can cultivate a new relationship with ourselves, particularly when it comes to how we manage and experience difficult emotions like stress and anxiety.

## Ineffective Approaches

Short Term and Intermittent Gains → Long Term Pain

Some approaches become part of repertoire because they work on either a limited or intermittent basis. They may provide us with some limited relief from stress or anxiety and are therefore stamped in through the principle of negative reinforcement. However, they do not represent a long-term solution and so triggers as well as stress re-emerge and frequently stronger than before. In addition, some strategies have snuck into and persistently remained in our repertoire, despite the knowledge that they are less than effective. Like a gambler who occasionally gets a big payout, we unwittingly return to these strategies without full awareness of the long-term consequences.

- 1) Masking (i.e. drugs, alcohol, diet, sex, etc...)



Drugs and alcohol may provide us with temporary relief, but in the long run our body attempts to find balance, cutting off receptor sites for these chemicals and reducing production of nearly identical

endogenous chemicals and neurotransmitters.

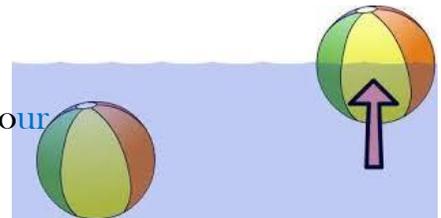
- 2) Distraction (i.e. Daniel Wegner, PhD and the Pink Elephant)



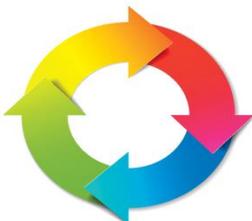
While effective, at times, in the short run, distraction ultimately leads to other things becoming tangled-up and tainted by the very thing from which are trying to distance ourselves. Subsequent shades of pink might be all we see...

- 3) Suppression (Newton's Second Law)

When we engage in suppression and attempt to push negative thoughts and feelings out of our minds and down into our unconscious mind, it is similar to pushing a beach ball under water. It takes a lot of effort and concentration, often resulting in a strong rebound of symptoms, when we can no longer devote the same level of energy and focus.



- 4) Reassurance Seeking



We might be experiencing anxiety and negative thoughts, for which we can seek reassurance in addition to social support. Reassurance about the future and our abilities can give us relief, but often gets us stuck needing more and more.

# Effective Approaches



## 1) Learn your triggers for anxiety, worry and panic.

Unexpected, negative events have been shown to be more adverse than the ones that we expect. Familiarizing yourself with your triggers will help you better anticipate their occurrence and prepare. Being ready and prepared to face triggers will help make them feel less of a surprise and less daunting leading to less overall anxiety, worry and stress.



## 2) Break down tasks and success into small steps.

The important thing is building forward movement (i.e. momentum). The wind won't always be blowing with you (i.e. sailboat). Helps to make something feel less overwhelming and helps us to balance expectations with reality for reducing prospective worry.

## 3) Differentiate between what you can control and what you can't control.

Worry is most often fueled by focus on all the things we can't control or confusion between factors that are controllable and those that are not. It can be extremely helpful to grade a worry and write it down. Once this worry has been clearly defined spend some time filling in columns of things that can be controlled and those that can't related to this worry. Once you have a relatively comprehensive list circle the controllable column, this is where you focus and energy can have the most impact, while recognizing that those factors in the "uncontrollable" column will need to be accepted as out of our direct control, for now. Spend some time planning, prioritizing and problem-solving factors that are in your control.

Control vs No Control worksheet

Controllable	Uncontrollable
1. Time that I study	1. My Final Grade
2. Material the I study	2. How hard the test is
3. How much sleep I get	3. How well anyone else does
4. Getting extra help	4. How well other students do



## 4) Practice De-Catastrophizing

Worry is often characterized by jumping around from one worry/topic to another (i.e. non-linear) and is also characterized by thoughts about "What if?" Through a series of "what if(s)" we usually arrive at some catastrophic negative consequence. However, we tend to lack awareness of this process and think only about the first one or two "what if(s)" in the chain.

Through the process of de-catastrophizing we can actually continue the chain of “what if(s)” and face what may be the *worst-case scenario*. This can help us to prepare (i.e. inoculate, much like a vaccine) against the possibility of this outcome and a lot of the unnecessary anxiety that is associated with it. In addition, it can help connect us with the hidden, inner Value or Purpose that is associated with this specific worry.

What if”.....? → (then) What if? → (then) What if? → (then) What if.....? Value ↓  
 I fail the exam? → I fail the class? → I lose my major? → I can’t become a doctor? → I can’t [help people](#)

Going from catastrophizing about outcomes (i.e. worrying) to focusing more on your values and inner meaning associated with a task will give you a firm direction in the face of disorientation and distress. Values can help you to tolerate distress, because it is worth going through discomfort and distress to achieve **something** valued and meaningful.



### 5) Learn Breathing Strategies

It is important to start by first, simply starting to check in with your breathing and to start noticing it on a more frequent basis. All it takes, is an acknowledgement that breathing has an intimate relationship with what we feel and think along with a curiosity to better understand this relationship.

*Learning* and *practicing* breathing is different than trying.

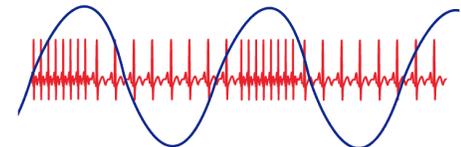
Learning at the right time and in the right place (Using SUDs to guide you). (SUDs “subjective units of distress from least (0) to most stressed (10)) Start learning breathing strategies when you are less stressed (i.e SUDs = 0-5)

You have done this before (playing or during sports, playing instrument, singing, doing hobbies, etc...) Reflect on times when you have used breathing to let go of tension, clear your head and recharge (calm the heart)

Relation between ECG and Respiration Series

Breathing can be used to slow down HR (heart rate) and create better HRV (heart rate variability)

Learn how to use the [outbreath](#), once breathing has become sufficiently relaxed.



### 6) Acceptance of anxiety rather than Suppression.



Attempts to suppress can feel like a struggle that drains you of energy, focus and motivation. Sometimes we tense up when we notice the first signs of anxiety emerging as if we are engaged in some type of tug of war designed to rid ourselves of the anxiety.

— = ECG  
 — = Resp

Let go of the Struggle!

Letting go of the struggle (i.e. suppression) and taking on an attitude of acceptance can result in added resources (i.e. focus and energy) for achieving your goals. Engaging in self compassion we can accept our anxiety, embrace it and effectively move on with our lives.



### 7) Reappraisal of anxiety as an alternative to simply accepting.

We can think of...

Anxiety as Adaptive - using statements like “This gives me the energy and focus I need to perform!”

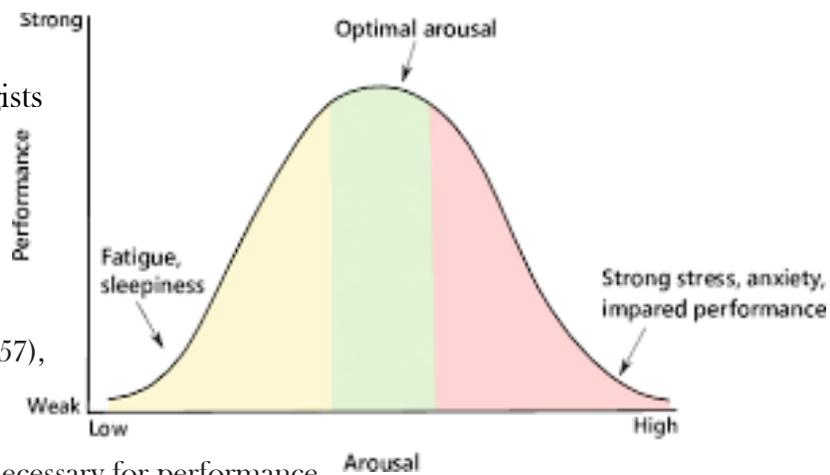
Research has shown this to be a potentially valid approach;

*Mind over Matter: Reappraising Arousal Improves Cardiovascular and Cognitive Responses to Stress* (Jamieson, Nock & Mendes; 2012).

\*Relative to controls, participants instructed to reappraise their arousal exhibited more adaptive cardiovascular stress responses - increased cardiac efficiency and lower vascular resistance - and decreased attentional bias.

#### Yerkes-Dodson (1908)

Relationship that was uncovered by two psychologists between arousal/stress and performance of rats in learning how to navigate a maze. Subsequent research has helped to further validate this proposed relationship Broadhurst (1959), Duffy (1957), and Anderson (1988). \*You can see by the figure on the right that some adequate level of arousal/stress is necessary for performance.



We can also think of...

Anxiety as really Excitement - Statements such as “I am excited to...\_\_\_\_\_!”

*Get Excited: Reappraising Pre-Performance Anxiety as Excitement*

8) (Alison Wood Brooks, 2013) \*Using statements of “excitement” prior to engaging in activities helped improve singing, public speaking and math performance in three separate sub-studies.

\*\*\* If there is anything you take away from this handout, it's that it may be an ultimately wise decision to embrace anxiety, sign a truce with panic and cultivate a long-lasting friendship with worry!  
After all, they won't be going anywhere, anytime soon.

When you think about it, where would we be without them???