



# Three Aspects of Solving Anxiety

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Chronic stress is deadly. People experiencing sustained elevations of stress hormones such as adrenaline, noradrenaline, cytokines, histamines, and cortisol mentally and physically suffer from multiple symptoms and have a higher chance of developing chronic diseases. The immune system also fires up and the inflammatory reaction directly destroys tissues.

Some of the problems include the following:

- Early mortality – average life span is shortened by seven years (1)
- Increased heart disease
- Depression/ anxiety/suicide
- Autoimmune disorders (2)
- Eating disorders
  - Obesity
  - Anorexia
  - Bulimia
- Addictions
- Chronic pain – in all parts of the body (3)

When you feel threatened, your body goes into high alert to increase your chances of survival. It is intended to be short-term reaction that quickly resolves once the threat has passed. A major problem with humans is that mental threats are processed in our brains and bodies in the same way as physical ones, but we can't escape our thoughts. This means we are all exposed to inflammation and sustained elevations of stress hormones. Most of us cope with these unpleasant repetitive thoughts (URT's) by suffering, suppressing, or masking them. Although these strategies may help us think we have dealt with the issues, it's ultimately ineffective. URT's will continue to stimulate the stress response.

Humans have a name for this state – anxiety. It is word that describes this powerful non-specific reaction of which we have no control over. Rational interventions can't and won't work. The only way to decrease anxiety and alleviate the impact of these hormones and inflammatory cells on your body is to use strategies to lower the levels of them.



There are three aspects of accomplishing this and they all are important:

- Separate your identity from anxiety
- Directly lower the stress hormones and inflammatory markers
- Dampen the survival response by stimulating neuroplastic changes in your brain

### **Separate Your Identity from Your Survival Response**

It is critical to understand that anxiety is a neurochemical state that you feel, but it is not who you are. Without it, you couldn't survive more than few minutes from lack of air, your body's chemistry spiraling out balance, your heart rate not matching what a situation requires, etc. Anxiety is the essence of sustaining life and you can't (and shouldn't) want to eradicate it. It is a gift

This reaction is also so powerful that you cannot control it. Therefore, the initial step in dealing with anxiety is to separate from it. One suggestion is to remove the word, "anxiety," from your vocabulary. Instead use the term, "elevated stress response," whenever you feel nervous or afraid.

Another practice is to visualize a large thermometer. When you are nervous or upset, imagine how high the red line in your thermometer is going. This visualization will help you understand your anxiety is simply a universal stress response. It is not your identity. When your identity gets wrapped up with this reaction, you will not only suffer, you'll waste a lot of energy in your efforts to control it.

Also remember that this sensation is amoral. Its only intention is to ensure you stay alive. The associated thoughts and feelings are often unpleasant and disruptive to your sense of well-being and another reason to separate your identity from it.

### **Directly Lower the Stress Hormones**

Once you understand the problem, there are proven practices to specifically dampen this stress response. Strategies include mindfulness, exercise, meaningful engagement with others, meditation, visualization, martial arts, yoga, as well as a variety of other methods. Find which ones work for you.

The key is to understand the context of the practice and first allow yourself to feel unpleasant emotions. Then you can use the method of your choice to calm yourself down. This is a necessary approach to deal with day-to-day stresses. If you instantly jump to suppressing the thought or emotion, then your nervous system will stay engaged in a fired-up state. Suppressed thoughts are a greater threat than feeling them, and requires a lot of energy to keep them under wraps.

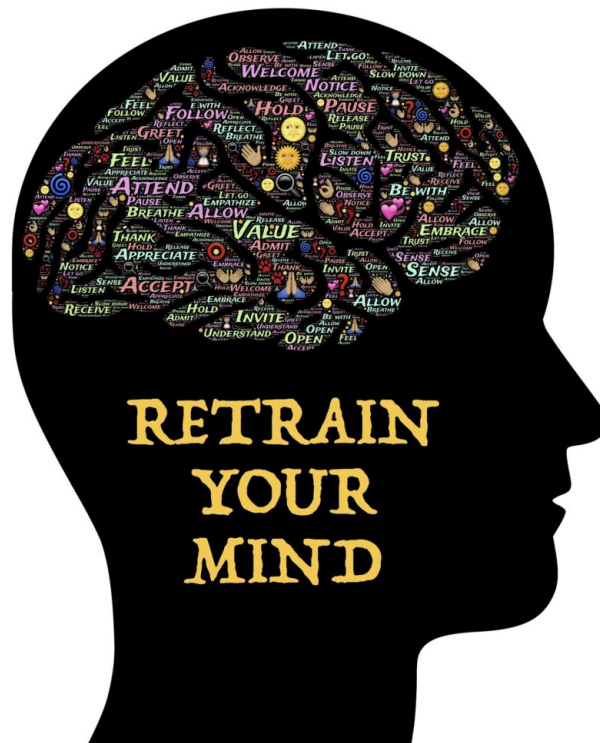
One of the most helpful forms of mindfulness is called "active meditation." When your mind begins to race or you feel upset, simply place your attention on another sensation for a few seconds. It can be any one of your senses. I tend to gravitate towards sound or taste. Instead of doing battle with your thoughts, you have simply switched to another sensory input. This is a practice you can easily incorporate into your busy life without adding another thing to do.

There are many effective breathing techniques that are effective. They directly stimulate the vagus nerve, which is main conduit of the autonomic nervous system. The is the part of the nervous system that automatically controls your vital functions such as heart rate, breathing, digestion, chemical balance and the immune response. Stimulation of the vagus nerve is strongly anti-inflammatory.

One example is simply breathing slowly and deeply for less than ten breaths per minute. There is no need to pay special attention to your breath.

## Change Your Brain – Dampen the Survival Response

Your brain changes every second with the formation and destruction of neurons, connections to other neurons, and supporting cells. The term for this phenomenon is, “neuroplasticity.”



There are three parts to stimulating it:

- Awareness
- Separation
- Redirection

This set of tools will allow you to evolve a process you can reinforce many times a day. Some of them include:

- Not ever discussing your mental or physical pain or care with anyone close to you. The only people you can discuss your issues with are your healthcare team. Your brain will develop wherever you place your attention.
- Expressive writing accomplishes awareness and separation in one step and it's easy to do. It is the **most necessary step** that allows you to move forward. Take a few minutes a day to freely write down your thoughts and immediately destroy them.
- Play – make a daily decision to create an attitude of curiosity, awareness, and openness in all of your interactions. Look at adversity as a challenge and an opportunity to practicing some of your strategies.
- Forgiveness – you can't move forward without letting go of the past. How long do you want to continue to suffer? This will be an ongoing, daily practice. Life is challenging, and we are all wronged to some degree, every day. (4)
- Create a vision of what you want your life to look like, regardless of your chronic pain. If you are waiting for your pain to resolve before you pursue your vision, that means your pain is still front and center and running the show. This is one of the more powerful tools.

The bottom line is if you want to decrease anxiety, you must understand the basic concept of decreasing the levels of your stress hormones and inflammatory markers. It begins by separating your identity from your survival reaction, and then learning short and long-term methods to improve regulate your body's chemistry. This is a remarkably simple process, especially considering how overwhelming anxiety feels. Once you choose your new life direction, there is no telling where that freedom will take you.

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