



# men &

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## Anxiety Toolkit

A guide to understanding what anxiety means and how to overcome it

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**What Is Anxiety?**



## What Is Anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal reaction to stress. In many situations it is beneficial and helps to alert us to dangerous situations and allows us to pay greater attention to our surroundings. Sometimes, though, anxiety escalates from a protective strategy into something more harmful.

It is normal and very common to be anxious about starting a new job, speaking in public or getting married. Those feelings of worry and fear are temporary and soon go away. They do not interfere with your everyday life. But when those feelings of worry and fear are with you all the time, it can become debilitating and prevent you from doing the things you enjoy.

You cannot, nor should you, try to avoid anxiety. If you start to avoid situations that make you feel anxious, you can actually make things worse. Learning to cope with anxiety is a life skill and a necessary part of being human.

## What Is Anxiety?

Anxiety is rooted in our automatic, built-in Fight-Flight-Freeze response system, designed to protect us from danger. When presented with a dangerous situation – like suddenly being approached by a tiger – your body prepares you to fight the tiger, run away from the tiger or freezes you in place.

If you were to actually encounter a tiger, these responses could be life-saving. But anxiety can cause these responses to trigger even when there is no actual, immediate danger. This can lead you to yell at a partner for asking a question you feel unqualified to answer (fight). Leave a party early because you don't feel like you fit in - or refuse to attend in the first place (flight). Or you may feel your mind go blank when unexpectedly asked a question in a work meeting (freeze).

Anxiety disorders are the most common form of emotional disorder and can affect anyone at any age. One in six Canadian men will experience anxiety in their lifetime and, although women are more likely to seek a diagnosis, anxiety can increase men's risk of other physical and mental illnesses, including suicide.



**While there are several types of anxiety disorders, many of them have commonalities with a broad range of overlapping symptoms.**





**Symptoms Of Anxiety**

## Symptoms Of Anxiety

### **Physical signs:**

- Feeling constantly restless, wound-up or on edge
- Frequent and ongoing headaches, muscle aches, stomachaches or other unexplained pains
- Increased anger and irritability, being short-tempered
- Feeling nauseous, dizzy, or sick to one's stomach
- Sleep problems (difficulty falling or staying asleep)
- Difficulty concentrating or feeling one's thoughts are unclear or foggy
- Men may avoid emotional expression and deny their vulnerability. Consequently, they may not express nervousness or worry but instead display more socially acceptable aggression or anger.

### **Anxious thoughts:**

- Excessive worrying to the point it interferes with one's quality of life
- Asking yourself repetitive 'what if' questions: What if the bus crashes on the way to work? What if I make a fool of myself? What if I make a mistake?
- Avoidant behaviours
- Strained relationships and a tendency to avoid issues within those relationships
- Reluctance to undertake everyday tasks
- Calling in sick to work or skipping out on a social event

### **Escapist behaviours:**

Abusing drugs or alcohol to try to numb feelings of worry or anxiety  
Leaving an event early or asking someone to finish a task for you

## Symptoms Of Anxiety

### **Safety Behaviours:**

You may engage in certain behaviours to help you feel safer. This can include asking a friend to come with you to an event; undertaking excessive research when planning a trip; or rechecking things to make sure they were done correctly.

Beyond these commonalities, however, there are some specific disorders that are considered anxiety-related:

### **Generalized Anxiety Disorder:**

GAD involves an ongoing feeling of anxiety or dread, which can interfere with daily life. This is not an occasional bout of worry about a specific event but feelings which persist for months or years and have a negative effect on one's day-to-day life.

### **Panic Disorder:**

Can lead to unexpected panic attacks where you may experience a pounding heart, sweating, chest pain, feelings of impending doom or being out of control. You can experience a panic attack just once or it can be an ongoing issue with attacks occurring occasionally or even daily. Many people with panic disorder will avoid the issues/situations that have caused an attack in the past.



## Symptoms Of Anxiety

### **Social-Anxiety Disorder:**

An ongoing fear of being watched or judged by others while in public. You may experience blushing, sweating or trembling, a pounding or racing heart, stomachaches, difficulty making eye contact, or feelings of extreme self-consciousness.

### **Phobia-related Disorders:**

Can involve any number of situations or objects and the fear one feels related to a phobia is out of proportion to the actual threat of the situation or object. People with a phobia-related disorder may worry excessively about encountering that object or situation and may go out of their way to avoid it. You may have a phobia about flying or spiders or receiving an injection or being in a crowd. Agoraphobia is a fear of being in a situation where escape might be difficult – at its most severe, people with agoraphobia may have trouble leaving their house at all. Separation anxiety also falls into this category. While this anxiety is typically thought to be a children’s issue, adults can have fears about being parted from loved ones or worry that something terrible will happen to their loved ones when they aren’t together.

Many other disorders – including Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Hoarding Disorder - also fall under the anxiety umbrella.



# What Causes Anxiety

## Take Back Control

There is no single specific cause for developing an anxiety disorder and it is likely that it involves a number of factors. Such disorders can run in families which suggests some combination of genetics and environment can help produce anxiety disorders. There are also psychological and developmental factors at play. Certain medical conditions, including heart disease, diabetes, and low testosterone levels, can contribute to anxiety.

Research suggests that anxiety, if left untreated, can also lead to further psychiatric disorders, including depression, bipolar disorder and psychosis.

### How do you know when anxiety has become an issue for you?

If you have reached a point where your anxiety is impacting multiple areas of your life - work, friendships/dating, interacting with others, sleep patterns, nutrition, personal hygiene, home life, etc. - and is occurring much of the time, you may have reached a point where you need to do more to manage it.

## Take Back Control

### What can you do to manage your anxiety?

Once you have acknowledged that anxiety is an issue for you, you can start to take back some control. Even something as simple as externalizing your thoughts when you notice that your anxiety is interfering with your life can help. Instead of thinking ‘I can’t go out to dinner with my friends because they aren’t really interested in me’ you can think ‘My anxiety is trying to convince me that my friends don’t care about me.’

Talking to a trusted friend or family member can be a good place to start. Acknowledging that you are struggling is a scary but necessary step on the road to feeling better. Making an appointment to see your doctor can also be a useful early step. They can help rule out a physical cause for your anxiety and direct you to other resources – from seeking a counsellor or therapist to prescribing medication.

Anti-anxiety or antidepressant medications can help moderate symptoms but are not in and of themselves a cure. Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT, also known as talk therapy) can be a highly effective way to help you learn different ways of thinking, reacting and behaving to help you become less anxious.



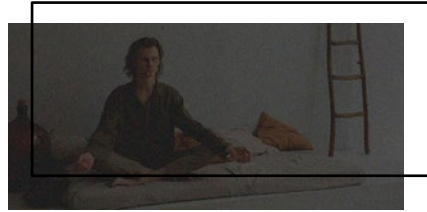
**Manage Your Anxiety**





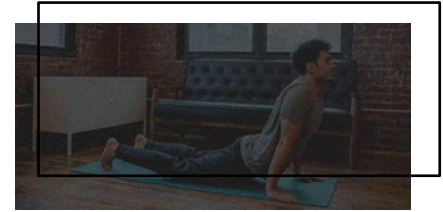
### **Eat well**

Plan consistent and healthy meals and snacks. This will help your mood by reducing irritability and increasing your energy and focus levels. Consume less salt, sugars and saturated trans-fat for a healthy diet.



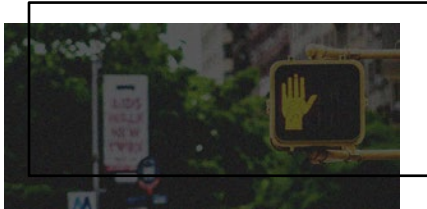
### **Physical activity**

Movement can help release feelings of anxiousness and help you to feel more relaxed. You don't need to jump in to training for a marathon right away, just a 10 minute walk can help improve your mood.



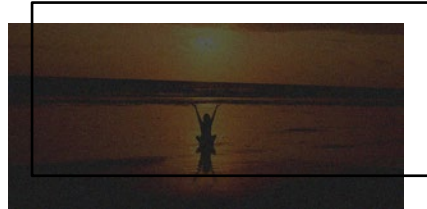
### **Find things you enjoy and do them**

Whether you go for a walk or a run, prepare a fancy meal, watch a comedy, or take up a new hobby, engaging in activities you enjoy doing can help take your mind off your worries for a while.



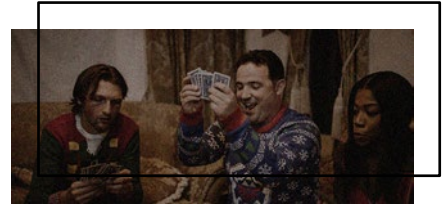
### **Reduce caffeine, avoid drugs & alcohol**

You may think these things help you relax – and they might in the short-term – but longer term they can make you feel worse. Becoming dependent on these substances can lead to many, much worse, outcomes. Masking your anxiety will not help you overcome it.



### **Get enough sleep**

A good night's sleep improves your overall mood and makes it easier to manage your stress and anxiety. Make sure to get some natural light and exercise during the day. Having a comfortable sleep environment and regular bedtime routine can also help.



### **Focus on what you \*can\* change**

You may not be able to eliminate your worries about losing your job, for example, but you can take a course or work on improving an area in which you feel deficient. Instead of focusing on the distance, plan a date night to start reconnecting.

## Consider Your Own Self Talk

We are often not aware of our own self-talk. Tuning in to this constant conversation your brain is having with itself can help you manage your anxiety. Noticing what you say to yourself on a regular basis can help you reframe your thoughts. It could be the difference between thinking 'I can't do this, it's all going to go wrong' or thinking 'I've got this.'

As you become more aware of your self-talk, you can challenge those thoughts and worries with questions about whether or not they are truthful or if there is another way to approach things that might be more helpful. Training your brain into more balanced thinking takes effort but, over time, you can reduce your anxious thinking by consistently challenging those thoughts and reframing them.

### **Talk to someone**

Talking to people about how you're feeling can be very helpful. While sharing your emotions is not something men have traditionally been encouraged to do, bottling them up is not healthy. Reach out to a trusted friend or family member just to talk. Talking through an issue can help you feel better and much less anxious about it.

## Make Use Of Calming Techniques

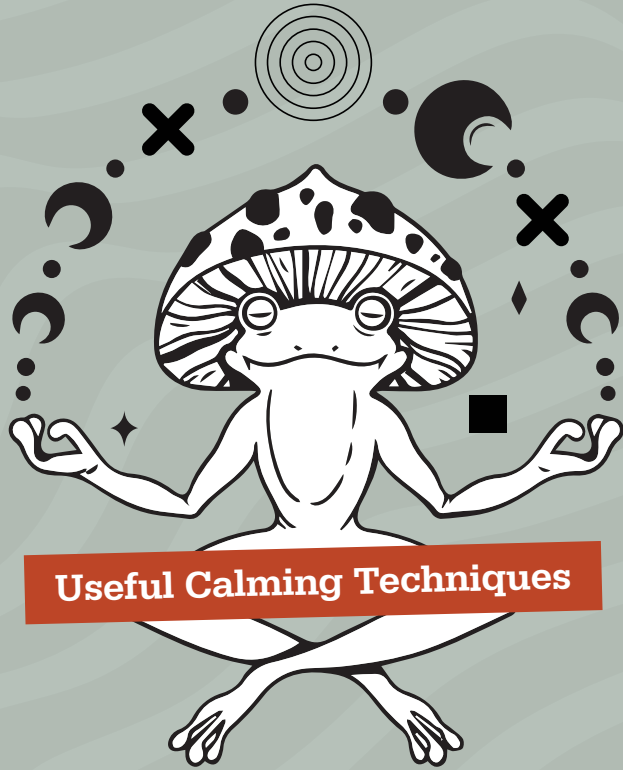
If you feel you need more in depth discussion than just a conversation with a friend, talking to a therapist can also be very beneficial in helping you to get to the root causes of your anxiety. Men & has resources that can help you when you're ready to talk.

Mindfulness or calming techniques can be good for everyone, but they are particularly helpful for those coping with anxiety. This can be as simple as acknowledging what you are anxious about and then consciously putting it to the side to think about later. In this way you aren't ignoring what is making you anxious, but you're also not dwelling on it.

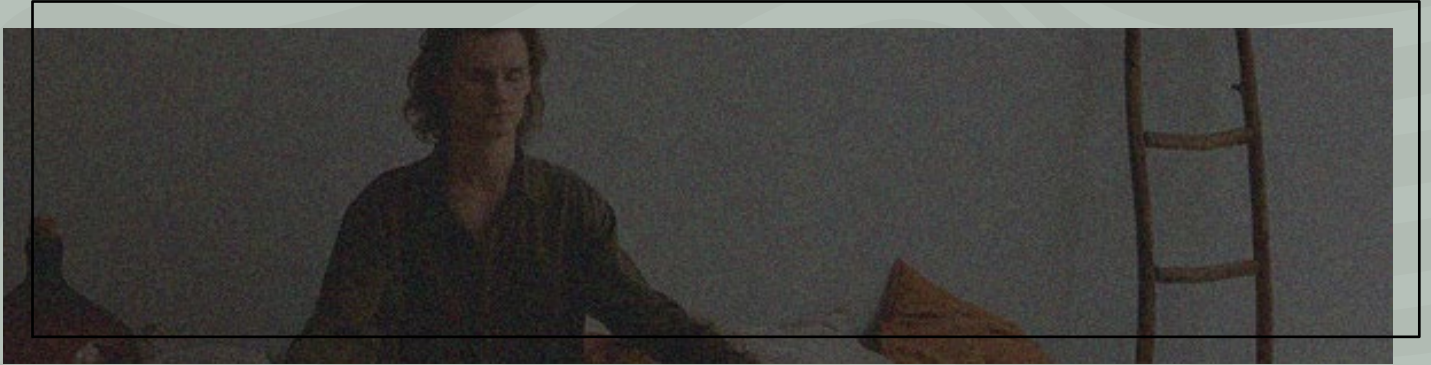
Being present in the moment can help reduce your anxiety. When you really focus on the activity you're currently doing - drinking a cup of coffee, fixing a table leg or playing catch with your kids - you don't have time to think about other things.

Some additional techniques can include deep breathing, mindfulness exercises, journalling, and other self-soothing strategies. Many of these strategies take time to have an impact. Pick one or two and practice using them. The more consistent you are with this practice - especially when you're not actually anxious in that moment, the easier it will be to access them when anxiety strikes.

**You don't need to spend 30 minutes every day practicing these techniques for them to have an impact - even just a minute or two here and there can have an effect.**



**Useful Calming Techniques**



## Deep Breathing & Visualization

Deep breathing can be very helpful in managing your anxiety. Box breathing can be done anywhere, whenever you're feeling anxious:

- **Imagine a box. Inhale going up one side of the box for 1 to 5 seconds**
- **Hold your breath for 1 to 5 seconds as you go across the top of the box**
- **Exhale going down the side of the box for 1 to 5 seconds**
- **Hold your breath for 1 to 5 seconds as you go across the top of the box**
- **Repeat 7-10 times in a row**

Close your eyes and **visualize** yourself in a relaxing, happy location. It doesn't matter where it is as long as it feels relaxing and calming. Use all your senses as you think about what you can see, feel, smell, taste and touch. Focus on this place for several minutes, until you are relaxed and calm.





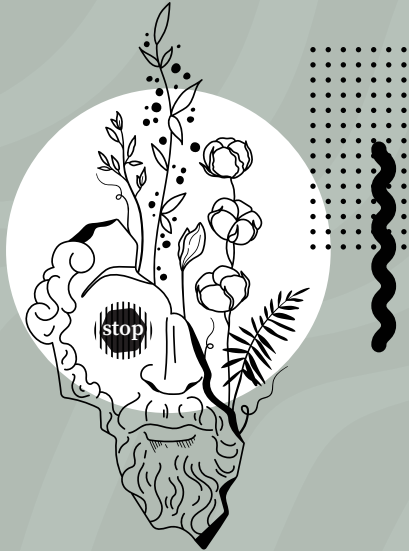
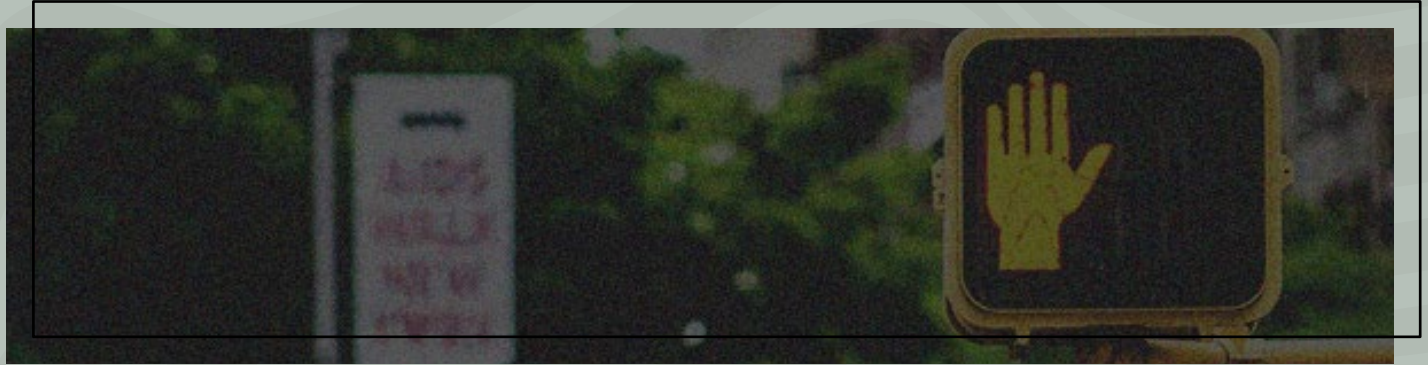


## Mindfulness

**First slow your breathing with a few deep breaths and then:**

5. Acknowledge 5 things you can see around you (a pen on the table, a spot on the ceiling, a box of tissues, your coffee cup)
4. Acknowledge 4 things you can touch around you (your hair, the table)
3. Acknowledge 3 things you can hear (birds outside your window, a car driving by, your own breath)
2. Acknowledge 2 things you can smell (your coffee, your cologne)
1. Acknowledge 1 thing you can taste (the coffee you're drinking, the gum you're chewing, toothpaste)





### The STOP Method

**S.** Stop. Take a step back and notice and acknowledge your anxiety. Ask yourself what triggered it.

**T.** Take slow, deep breath in through your nose for 4 seconds. Hold your breath for 2 seconds. Breathe out for four seconds as if you're blowing out a candle with your mouth. Repeat several times.

**O.** Observe what's going on both inside your both and around you.

**P.** Plan and proceed mindfully. Think about a plan to engage in an activity that helps you cope or gives you some focus. This could be coffee with a friend, walking your dog, or spending time with your kids playing a board game.

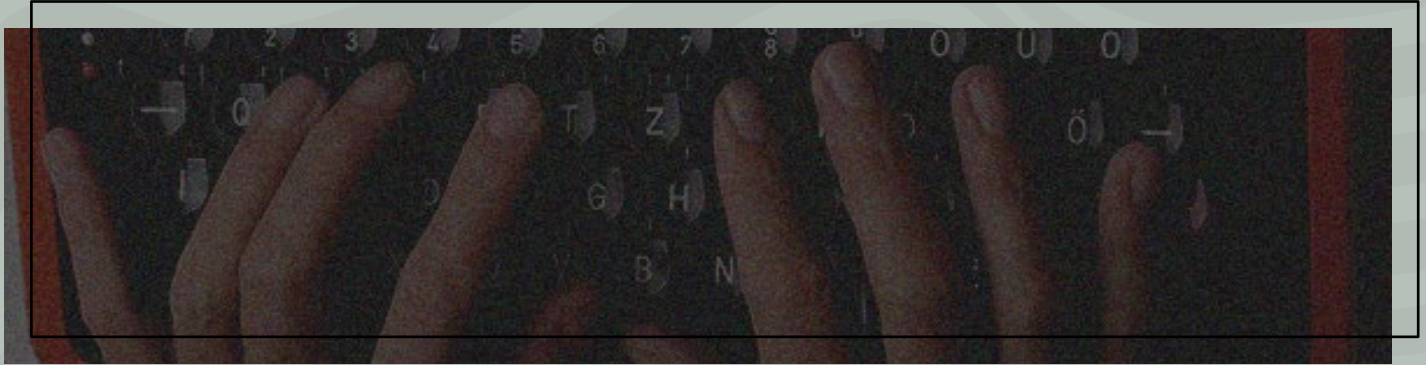


## Meditation

Meditation as a practice goes back thousands of years and refers to a variety of practices that centre on mind and body integration. These practices can help to calm the mind and enhance your overall well-being.

You can access meditation apps on your smart phone, including Headspace and Calm. YouTube is also a good place to access guided meditations when you're just getting started.

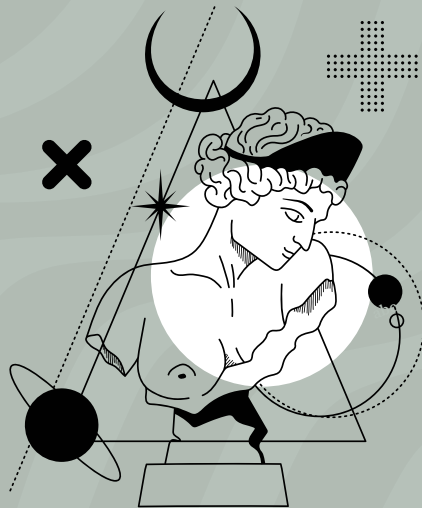




## Journalling and Gratitude

Journalling can help get worries and anxieties out of your head. By writing these thoughts down you can see where your anxious thoughts are coming from, start to challenge them and come up with ways to address them. Just a few minutes a day can help. Simply start writing – it doesn't have to 'make sense' or follow any sort of pattern. Write your thoughts down as they come to you. As you reread what you have written, you can consider if there's anything you could change or any way to rethink what is worrying you.

As part of a journalling practice, it is often helpful to adjust your focus by writing down some of the positives in your life. Gratitude for the things that are going well in life and the obstacles you have already overcome can help to reduce anxiety.



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