# **Managing Anxiety**

It's common for people during recovery to experience uncomfortable feelings like anxiety or depression, or sometimes both.

Sometimes they're related to the effects of changing or stopping alcohol and other drug use. They can also be the result of social, financial and other problems (e.g. relationship difficulties) that sometimes come with using and drinking. Often, they are underlying feeling that have been masked by the alcohol and other drug use. These feelings are known to be major triggers for relapse.

The important thing to remember is that you can learn to manage these feelings without drinking or using.

## Anxiety

Anxiety is that feeling of fear or dread that normally comes up when we believe something bad might happen. While everyone feels anxious from time to time, some people feel anxiety at times when there is no need for them to be anxious, and some people feel anxiety all the time. Like other emotions, anxiety affects the way we think, how our body responds and what we do (our behaviour).

Intense or chronic anxiety can really be a problem, and can even make everyday tasks grocery shopping or walking the dog hard. It can also stop you from enjoying life and feeling safe.

# How does it affect our thoughts?

Certain patterns of thinking cause us to feel anxious. The reverse is also true – feeling anxious changes the way we think. It narrows our attention to the things we fear, which then stops us from thinking clearly.

# How does it affect our body?

When we perceive a significant threat, our bodies get ready for one of two reactions – **fight** or **flight**. Adrenalin (a hormone) is released, triggering a number of physical changes, all geared at giving the body a burst of energy and strength. Most notably:

- Breathing becomes more rapid and the heart beats faster and harder
- Blood is diverted to the muscles, which tense up in preparation for action
- The liver releases glucose, providing an extra guick source of fuel
- Dizziness
- Heart palpitations (when your heart beat feels unusually strong)
- Diarrhoea
- Loss of appetite
- Problems sleeping

#### How does it affect our behaviour?

When we're really anxious our manner becomes strained, and we tend to get agitated more easily. We're 'on edge'. Small noises or sudden movements can make us jump. Anxiety can also increase our desire for short-term comfort, like eating, smoking or drinking.

#### Patterns of thinking that make us feel anxious

While we experience anxiety as physical and emotional discomfort, the feeling mainly comes from our thoughts – the belief that our world is unsafe.

This view is supported by four main thinking patterns:

- 1. Worrying
- 2. Predicting catastrophe
- 3. Excessive need for approval
- 4. Perfectionism

Remember, while it may seem really hard, there are things you can do to manage your anxiety.

# 1. Worrying

Worrying is what we do when we get anxious. We focus on the bad things that might happen, like rejection, failure or having an accident.

For some people this can be relentless and seemingly uncontrollable. In spite of attempts to stop, troubling thoughts keep resurfacing, making it hard to concentrate, relax or enjoy the good things in life.

We sometimes refer to this as the 'what ifs?'

"What if I lose my job?"

"What if no one likes me?"

"What if we lose all our money?"

# 2. Predicting Catastrophe

Often people who are anxious engage in catastrophic thinking. This is when we overrate the likelihood that bad things will happen and exaggerate the consequences if they do occur.

Someone who is engaging in catastrophic thinking might say to themselves:

"They'll find out I made a mistake, and then they'll think I'm hopeless and want to get rid of me"

"If they see how nervous I am, I'll be a laughing stock and I'll never be able to face them again"

#### Excessive need for approval

Everyone wants to be liked. That's natural. However, for some people, the need for approval is excessive

Being overly concerned about what others think of us often stems from a deep-seated belief that we are not good enough. Therefore, we look for validation from others.

This can create a significant amount of anxiety, as the person gets caught up in their fear of rejection.

This fear makes the person reluctant to take social risks. It also leads them to avoid conflict, for fear of disapproval.

#### 4. Pertectionism

The belief that we must do things perfectly has something to do with the messages we received when we were children.

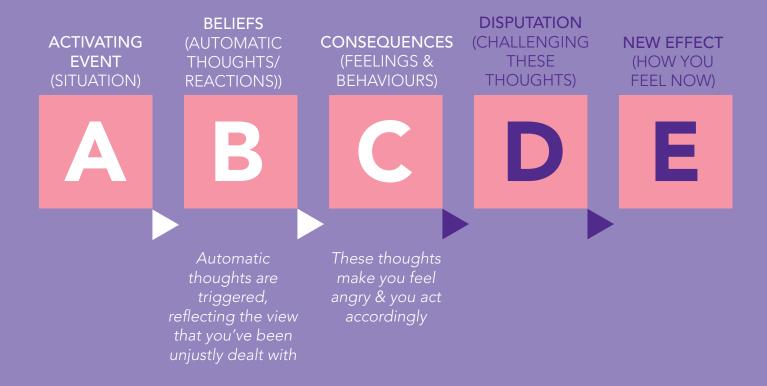
Parents who are critical and whose approval is conditional, reinforce in their children the belief that the only way to receive love and approval is to do the right thing.

People who are anxious by nature can be drawn to perfectionism as it creates the illusion of being in control. We strive to do things perfectly because it makes the world seem manageable and less scary. We believe that if we maintain that perfect standard, we will gain the respect and appreciation we crave so strongly.

# **ABC-DE** model of anxiety

Can you think of a time when you felt anxious?

Try applying the ABC-DE model to it:



# Strategies for managing anxiety: Using helpful statements to interrupt negative self-talk

Sometimes even simple statements can put a stop to thoughts which make us feel anxious.

They can interrupt ('short-circuit') our negative self-talk

Give these a try:

- Relax!
- One day at a time
- This too will pass
- Not my problem
- Whatever happens, I'll cope
- Will it matter in 5 years' time?

# Dealing with panic attacks

There are a number of useful strategies for dealing with panic attacks. These can be used in conjunction with each other to help de-escalate panic attacks. Two useful ones are decatastrophising and breathing exercises.

# Decatastrophising

During a panic attack, observe what happens in your body and mind (like a scientist observing an experiment). Remind yourself that although you're feeling anxious, the physical symptoms are harmless.

Rather than trying to fight the anxiety, sit with it and try to observe it. Remember that we are separate from our emotions, and that they do not last. Use helpful statements like "this too will pass" to ride out the sensations without trying to run away from them.

# Breathing exercises

The way we breathe generally reflects the way we feel. When we're calm our breathing is slow and rhythmic. When we're anxious or panicky breathing becomes rapid and shallow. This is called 'hyperventilating'.

By consciously slowing down and regulating your breathing you can lower your level of anxiety and the physical symptoms that come with it (e.g. tremors, dizziness and heart palpitations).

Focusing on your breathing will also distract you from thoughts which are making you feel anxious.

Try breathing in slowly through your mouth while counting to 3, pause for a moment, and then exhale through your nose while counting to 3. Repeat this process for at least a few minutes.

# Importance of deep relaxation

When we get anxious our muscles tense up, and this can last for a long period of time. For some people it just goes on and on.

Practising deep relaxation on a regular basis helps us to lower stress levels and feel more in control. It also grounds us – helping us to recognise when we feel anxious while teaching us to release the tension in a positive way. Deep relaxation is not the same as putting your feet up – it is a more active form of relaxation:

## Progressive muscle relaxation

Get comfortable in your chair. If you wish, close your eyes or just gaze at a particular spot on the floor.

Take a few moments to get settled. Once you're ready, focus on your breathing. Take a deep breath and hold it for a second. Now gently exhale. Take another deep breath, hold it and breathe out. Again, one more time, inhale slowly, hold and release.

Now, while continuing to breathe deeply, bring your awareness to your hands. Clench your fists very tightly and hold that tension for a few seconds. Now relax your fists, letting your fingers unfold. Allow your hands to completely relax. Do it again – clench your fists, hold the tension for a few seconds and relax.

As you relax, imagine all the tension leaving your hands through your fingertips.

Now bring your awareness to your arms. Curl them as if you are doing a bicep curl. As you move your hands towards your chest tense your fists, forearms and biceps. Hold the tension for a few seconds, and relax. As you let the tension go, unfurl your arms and allow them to rest next to your thighs. Feel the tension drain out of your arms. Do it again – curl your arms and tighten your fists, forearms and biceps. Notice the tension, hold, and release.

As you relax, imagine the tension flowing out of your arms.

Now raise your shoulders toward your ears. Tense your shoulder muscles and hold them for a few seconds. As you gently drop your shoulders, let go of all the tension. Again, lift your shoulders, hold the tension, and release.

As you relax, imagine the tension flowing from your shoulders all the way down your arms and out through your fingers.

Now focus on your neck and face. Tense the muscles in your neck, jaw and forehead. Hold the tension for a few seconds, and release. Let the muscles in your neck, jaw and forehead relax. One final time, tense all the muscles in your neck and face, hold the tension, and release.

Be aware of your muscles relaxing at the top of your head and around your eyes. Let your eyes relax in their sockets, almost as if they were sinking into the back of your head. Relax your jaw and your throat. Relax all the muscles around your ears. Finally, release the tension from your neck.

Now just sit for a few moments. Scan your body for any tension and let it go. Notice how your body feels as you relax.

When you are ready, open your eyes.

How was that? Did you notice anything that surpised you? How do you feel now?