

Overcoming Anxiety For Dummies Cheat Sheet

If you're trying to overcome anxiety, you need a broad-based approach to building a working model for understanding problem anxiety and specific treatment options that are based on sound principles of psychiatry and psychology. Gold standard, evidence-based treatment principles endorse combined therapies as the best option for the management of problem anxiety symptoms. This Cheat Sheet covers the competencies that lead to better management of anxiety symptoms, offers ways to regulate anxiety, and outlines how the anxious mind works before, during and after an anxiety-provoking experience.

Facing Anxiety Triggers

When anxiety becomes a problem, the affected person is hampered by stressful symptoms that inhibit clear thinking and proper management of feelings. This then leads to avoidance and escape; we're 'wired' to steer clear of any perceived threat. Think about the following competencies that will assist a better level of functioning when facing anxiety triggers:

1. Appraisal

This is the ability to look clearly at what's happening around you, to be able to stand back when worry, doubt, fear and uncertainty happen and understand that this is how the world works. To be able to then ask the questions, 'How does my world work?' and 'Do I have the resilience and self-acceptance to respond to such challenges?'

2. Managing conflict

Conflict with others is inevitable when the needs we have clash with the needs expressed by others, requiring negotiation, compromise and reaching acceptable agreements.

3. Decision-making

This is so often blocked, delayed, confused or rushed by the negative fear of making an error. The positive side of actually making a decision is that it's also personally enriching as it allows for other issues to be given priority. Decision-making is compromised by seeking the perfect decision, or being intolerant of any risk or ambiguity, leading to the frustration of delays, lost opportunity and regrets.

4. Learning to deal with emotional distress

If you're fearful about your feelings this can lead to suppression of feelings or reactive impulsivity to feelings; two opposites for those unable to manage their emotions. The outcome of this is to either cease to feel (*suppression*, which by definition is an incomplete solution) or to go to the other extreme and be so overwhelmed by feelings that normal functioning isn't possible. *Affect management* involves being 'in touch' with feelings without being overwhelmed by them. Dealing with an emotional crisis is an important maturational and developmental skill that's learned through guidance and practice.

5. Managing crisis and conflict

Along with decision-making and resilience, crisis and conflict management come from the secure base of an attachment to values and principles. You don't run your life on what's convenient, expedient or easier, rather you run it on the pursuit of values like truth, justice, love, trust and honesty, which common sense teaches make us better human beings. To paraphrase Wordsworth, '*... the best portion of a good life are the many, small, forgotten acts of kindness and love*'.

6. Goal-setting

Setting goals directs and focuses your energy, increases your self-esteem and helps you to achieve success, however small it might be.

7. Managing time

This is part of self-awareness. Being aware enables a person to string together blocks of time that gradually build skills and goal achievement. Never underestimate the value of a short concentrated burst of 10, 20 or 30 minutes to get something done.

8. Being mindful and aware

Contemporary psychology has been enhanced by the growth in recent decades of the skills of awareness and mindfulness. To self-skill in slowing down the mind and the body opens up so many possibilities for change strategies, processing intrapersonal blockages and growing the healing mind.

9. Being an inclusive person

This is the opposite of excluding others who have hurt or disappointed you, who are different from or unknown to you. It embodies the truly human qualities of acceptance and love.

10. Looking after yourself.

The great Irish writer Jonathon Swift, gave advice totally relevant to our 21st Century health care, '*... the best doctors I know are Dr. Diet, Dr. Quiet and Dr. Merryman*'.

Taking a Look at Problem Anxiety

Anxiety can be an uncomfortable notion. Symptoms flare suddenly and are alarming and overwhelming. When panicky, a person's fears peak at the possibility of dying. When worrying, no other focus seems possible. In the phobic state, fear is paralyzing. Yet, anxiety is a normal emotion, essential for adaptive functioning. As an alerting emotion, anxiety ensures that you're well-prepared, 'switched on' and focused. Without adaptive anxiety, you have trouble concentrating, are unable to prepare well for high-risk situations, and the appraisals you make might be threat-laden and exaggerated. This increases doubt, worry, fear and uncertainty that ultimately lead to distortions in how you see yourself, the world around you and your future.

Abnormal anxiety takes a particular role in your experiences. The mind can take you ahead to what is coming up, which might create a problem of *anticipatory anxiety*. The agitated and anxious mind will catastrophise about what could happen, or what is actually happening when your expected outcome does not occur. For example, if the visitor has not arrived, then there must have been an accident. The anxious mind will predict catastrophe, worry about unpredictable outcomes and see things as worse than they really are. Here we look at some ways to cope with being a *problem worrier*.

- **Develop skills that put fears and doubts in perspective**

It's true that everybody worries about their health, finances, children and current affairs. But a problem worrier worries more intensely for longer parts of the day, even though they sense that their worrying is bad for their health and enjoyment. This kind of worry is best managed by increasing your tolerance for feeling fear and uncertainty. Fear, doubt, uncertainty and worry are part of your experience, so you need to develop skills that put such fears and doubts in perspective.

- **Be aware of over-analysing**

Self-awareness during an interaction with another person shows that the relationship style of the problem worrier is very complex. At one level, there's an exchange between two people who are sharing their experiences; at another level, there's questioning, reviewing and 'in your head' analysis of the experience. Problem worriers may have self-talk such as, *'Am I sounding interesting?', 'Is the person getting as much out of this exchange as I am?', or 'I'm getting nervous about whether the person accepts me.'* This kind of self-talk prevents the problem worrier from fully engaging in the interaction.

- **Get your personal critical review in check**

Problem worriers have real difficulty with their own critical review after an experience with another. Such a review is likely to be judgemental and self-critical with internal questions such as, *'I should not have said that... I am no good at these social situations', or 'I should not have come'*. While it's normal to review the day's experiences, it's more productive if such a review takes a learning stance. *'Did I notice during the function if there was any shift in my level of tension?', 'Did I have an escape attitude, looking for the first opportunity to leave the function?', 'Being more aware of the "in your head" factor, was I able to listen to the other person in a mindful way?'* The learning stance enables you to review that the anxious mind will lead to symptoms that are 100 per cent the product of the worrying mind. The person might learn that the feared outcomes are less severe and less likely than predicted. Using Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) strategies, anxiety symptoms can turn out to be tolerable, harmless and reversible.

A broad base approach where your support team provides various strategies, medication, cognitive and behavioural skills will increase your ability to adapt, resolve problem anxiety and build your resilience capacity. It takes a willingness to face what is fearful, to just sit with anxious feelings, and to stop using avoidance, escape and reassurance-seeking behaviours that actually block you from learning that you're safe.

Regulating Anxiety

Excessive anxiety brings intense emotions, worrying thoughts and physical tension. Most people are able to physically locate the focal point of their stress, like tension in the jaw or across the forehead, tight muscles across the chest, upset stomach or restless sleep. Whilst self-soothing strategies play a role in dealing with excessive anxiety, the mistake made too often is trying to get rid of all anxiety and not understanding that anxiety is a normal emotion that plays an adaptive role in everyday life.

So, people try to avoid or control anxiety with the 'just in case' anti-anxiety pill kept in the purse for months on end, steering clear of situations perceived as anxiety-provoking or worrying constantly as a coping mechanism. Too often, problem anxiety triggers impulsive and compulsive symptoms like binge eating, reckless shopping or skin-picking that are reactive and unhelpful.

Normal functioning requires you to accept the anxiety that is present at a productive intensity:

See anxiety more positively, describing it as being 'switched on' or 'alertly aware' to discover if such productive anxiety enables predictable and helpful responses. If you could achieve this kind of balanced intensity, would you think differently about anxiety? Would it be okay if you could learn to make anxiety work for you? For example, giving you energy for planning or helping you to be calm in the face of threat. Would you try to take a step back, to see what you would learn if you were to see yourself as others see you? Would you ask yourself, 'How would a wise friend you know handle this challenge?'

Train yourself not to avoid all risks, rather become more skillful and adaptive in dealing with risks, and learn from this experience so that you have a growing confidence in your strategic capacity to manage anxiety.
Problem anxiety strikes quickly in specific ways, such as:

1. Exaggerating issues, making them appear worse than they really are

When you might have a challenging issue, the wise mind counters this effect. It's not helpful to turn a problem into a catastrophe.

2. Losing confidence in your capacity to handle things, bringing uncertainty, doubt and indecisiveness.

You can be 'frozen' by anxiety and the steps you take are unclear and confusing.

3. Feeling unstable

Uncertainty, threat and fear lead the over-anxious person to conclude that no-one else can help with the situation at hand and that nothing would make any difference. Therefore, anxiety and worry become chronic and resistant to treatment. Avoidance, escape and other safety-seeking methods don't resolve anxiety problems. Anxiety will shift in intensity over time if you're able to build a model for understanding how anxiety works for you.

4. Struggling to think clearly

If you get too anxious or worried, you can't think clearly and your mind becomes unregulated and over-wrought. Practice slowing down your fast-acting survival brain, and allow your calmer, slower mind to process what you're experiencing. When your mind is working in a regulated fashion you will thrive - options become clearer, the memory draws on learnings from previous experiences, curiosity and engagement are stimulated, and you make better and more responsible decisions.

Contemporary psychology provides strategic responses to problem anxiety that are effective and well-researched. Evidence shows that they work for the majority of people in most situations. Challenging confused thinking, slowing down the mind and body through mindfulness, and staying engaged with your world helps to overcome interfering anxiety symptoms. Learning to think clearly about anxiety reduces the onset of 'false alarms', over-reaction and panic.