Coping Strategies for Anxiety

Use these coping strategies as soon as you start to feel anxiety. Follow these steps to keep it from getting worse:

1. **Talk to another person.** Talking with someone will help get your mind off any anxious thoughts or worries. You can share your nervousness or talk about something else to distract yourself.

2. **Move around or do some physical activity.** This helps you get rid of the extra energy or adrenaline created by the fight-or-flight response. If possible, you could walk to the bathroom or outside for a few minutes. At home, you could take a walk, ride a bike, run around the house a few times, work in the garden or do a chore.

3. **Stay in the present.** Focus on people or objects immediately around you. Look at people standing around, the lights or any objects nearby. In a car, you can look at other cars, count all the cars or houses of a particular color or notice the scenery. Staying in the present and putting your focus on external things will decrease the attention you can give to troublesome physical symptoms or negative thoughts.

   Tip: If possible, try actually touching objects around you to reinforce staying in the present.

4. **Do something simple and repetitive.** Simple acts that can distract from anxiety-provoking thoughts:
   - Count backwards from 100 by 3’s
   - Snap a rubber band against your wrist
   - Feel the edge of a key or a comb
   - Count the number of people around you
   - Add up the numbers on license plates when in the car
   - Splash your face with cold water
   - Sing
   - Chew a piece of gum

5. **Do something that takes focused concentration.** Tasks that require a lot of concentration are harder to do when you are feeling anxious, but are good distracters. Once you are involved in them, they work even better to distract your attention from anxiety. Tasks that require focused concentration:
   - Read a book or magazine
   - Solve a puzzle
   - Play a card or board game
Coping Strategies for Anxiety

To Learn More
- Adolescent Medicine 206-987-2028
- Ask your child’s healthcare provider
- www.seattlechildrens.org

Free Interpreter Services
- In the hospital, ask your child’s nurse.
- From outside the hospital, call the toll-free Family Interpreting Line 1-866-583-1527. Tell the interpreter the name or extension you need.

- Paint or play with clay
- Play a musical instrument

6. **Do something comforting or more fun.** It is hard to be anxious when you are feeling pleasure about something: Try:
- Drawing or playing a game
- Taking a warm bath or shower
- Asking your mom or dad for a hug

7. **Picture a comforting person or place.** If you are not too anxious, try imagining a safe person or relaxing place that feels peaceful. If thinking about a person, see them standing right beside you, giving you support and reassurance.

8. **Practice stopping negative thoughts.** When you begin to think negative thoughts, take a deep breath and say to yourself: “Stop it!” or “Get out!” If other people are around, just think it. Repeat several times, if necessary. Then, replace the anxious thoughts with calm, supportive statements to yourself, like “I am calm and strong” or “This will pass.” You can also try snapping a rubber band against your wrist to disrupt the negative thought.

9. **Abdominal breathing.** By slowing down your breath and breathing from your abdomen, you can decrease symptoms of dizziness. Practice abdominal breathing everyday until it feels easy and natural. Try taking a deep breath and hold it as long as you can whenever you feel anxiety coming on. If you still feel anxious, repeat it 2 or 3 times.

10. **Muscle relaxation.** A lot of the discomfort you feel during anxiety is muscle tension. If you do muscle relaxation when you first feel any anxiety, you can often turn off and reverse this part of the fight-or-flight reaction. Take a deep breath, then let go, as you exhale.

11. **Retreat.** Use this as a last resort if the anxiety is really bad. Retreat is not the same thing as escape. Retreat means you are leaving the situation only temporarily and will go back when you feel better. Of course, this is not always possible. Escape reinforces your anxiety. It is a bit like needing to get back on a horse that has thrown you off, so that you do not stay afraid of it.

12. **Express anger.** You cannot be anxious and angry at the same time. You can try:
- Pounding on your bed or pillow with your fists
- Sit on your bed and kick your feet
- Jump up and down as hard as you can
- Yell really loud outside or in a place that won’t bother anyone

Seattle Children’s offers interpreter services for Deaf, hard of hearing or non-English speaking patients, family members and legal representatives free of charge. Seattle Children’s will make this information available in alternate formats upon request. Call the Family Resource Center at 206-987-2201.

This handout has been reviewed by clinical staff at Seattle Children’s. However, your child’s needs are unique. Before you act or rely upon this information, please talk with your child’s healthcare provider.

© 2015 Seattle Children’s, Seattle, Washington. All rights reserved.