

## Anxiety or Apprehension About Medical Procedures

- **I'm nervous about having the medical procedure; what should I do?** Most people feel some kind of nervous anticipation when they are about to undergo a medical procedure. Sometimes we can even worry about being worried, thinking that our reaction is not "normal." This can interfere with our ability to cope with the situation. There are three general steps to handling these feelings:
  1. Accept how you are feeling at the time. Getting upset about having the feelings you have probably won't help the situation. Accepting your feelings for what they are can improve your ability to cope.
  2. Determine whether your reaction is helpful or unhelpful.
    - a. Helpful reactions are ones that help us feel better or function better, and are usually based on realistic appraisals of the situation. Sometimes our anxiety can be a signal that something is not right. It can serve as a good indicator that we need to do something. For example, if you have an important question about your medical procedure that has not been answered, you might become anxious. This anxiety, as long as it was not too severe, would be healthy, since it could serve as a signal to you to find out more information about the procedure. If you feel your reaction is helping you cope, then you probably don't need to do anything about it.
    - b. Unhelpful reactions are ones that tend to make us feel worse or function worse, and are usually based on unrealistic appraisals of the situation. Getting overly anxious will tend to get in the way of coping successfully with the situation. If you determine your reaction is not helpful, there are a number of things you can do about it (see below).
  3. Do something. There are many things you can do to help decrease anxiety. Some of these are listed below.

**Problem-Solving.** When we are uncertain about what action can be taken to handle a situation, using the problem-solving steps below can help point us in the right direction.

1. Get information about the problem. We often know something is wrong but don't know exactly what. Identifying the problem in clear, specific terms is essential to resolving it.
2. Generate options for resolving the problem. There are usually a number of different ways of dealing with a problem. At this step, it's important to come up with as many potential solutions as possible, even if they don't sound quite right at first. Suspend any judgment of the options until you have generated as many as possible.
3. Evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of implementing each option. Not all options will be as good as others. Think about how successful you think each option will be at resolving the problem, and what might get in the way of that option actually working.
4. Choose an option and implement it. Which option do you think will work the best overall? Make a plan for implementing the option, and put it into action.
5. Analyze whether the option worked to resolve the problem. Keep track of what changes occur as you implement the option chosen. If the option worked, the problem is resolved and you are done. If not, you need to re-think the situation, by repeating the process.
6. Repeat Steps 1 through 5 as needed.

**Communication.** One of the best things you can do to help yourself cope better is to communicate with others. Sometimes, this means asking questions of staff. Other times it means just talking with family and friends about what you're thinking or feeling. Some keys to communicating effectively can be put into the following form: Communication often works best if it is:

Honest. It's usually a good thing to share what we think and feel with others.

Appropriate. Usually it works better to speak one-to-one, at a time convenient for both parties.

Respectful. We all like to be treated well by others, like we would treat ourselves.

Direct. Sometimes "less is more." Consider getting your message across in as few words as possible.

**Relaxation.** There are many ways to relax, such as going for a walk, reading a book, taking a warm bath, and listening to music. The key to these relaxing activities is that they are enjoyable. It's important to do something you enjoy on a regular basis. Keeping busy with an activity can also be a good distraction from any worrisome thoughts you might have. You can also relax by using a brief relaxation skill, such as deep breathing. This can help decrease unnecessary anxiety and tension.

#### Deep-breathing relaxation

1. Sit in as quiet and comfortable a location as possible.
2. Get as physically comfortable as possible. Let your muscles relax and your body slow down.
3. Take a deep breath in through your nose, inhaling slowly and smoothly. Let your stomach gently rise as your lungs fill with air. Hold that breath for 2 seconds.
4. Exhale slowly and smoothly through your nose, concentrating on letting your muscles relax even further. Let all of the air leave your lungs. Let your stomach gently fall. Don't be concerned if you feel that you aren't relaxing as well as you'd like. Sometimes it takes a little practice before we are able to relax quickly and easily.
5. Inhale and exhale as needed, concentrating on slower, smoother breaths. The more relaxed you become the slower and shallower your breathing will become.
6. You may find it helpful to fill your mind with a peaceful distraction (e.g., counting, singing to yourself, visualizing a pleasant scene, remembering something relaxing).

**Personal Thought Control.** Our thinking often creates anxiety for us. Getting better control of our thinking can go a long way in helping us cope. The following steps can be useful.

1. Let yourself become aware of thoughts you have when you are anxious. What are the words that you are saying to yourself at that moment? Sometimes it takes a little practice before we become aware of our thoughts. Some examples might be: "I know something bad is going to happen," or "This is horrible" or "Why is this happening to me!?"
2. Write your thoughts down. It's much easier to work with our thoughts, analyze them, and replace them if they are "in black and white."
3. Ask yourself the following questions about your thoughts:
  - a. Is it true? (*Is it logically correct? Where is the evidence to support the truth of that thought? Are there alternative ways of thinking that would be more correct?*). If a thought is not as true as it could be, replace it with a more realistic and helpful one. The majority of thoughts we have that generate anxiety are not the most realistic appraisals of the situation.
  - b. So what? (*If this is logically correct, what does it mean to me? Is there anything I can do about the situation? Is it in my best interest to get anxious about this?*).
4. Use coping self-statements. When feeling anxious, you may be able to tell yourself automatic phrases without thinking too much about it. A couple of examples would be phrases such as "It's OK, I can handle it," or "I've been through things like this before and have done all right." Notice that these statements tend to be true for all of us.
5. Notice a change in your emotional state as you change your thinking. As your thoughts become more realistic, you will probably notice a decrease in anxiety and tension, and an increase in your ability to cope.

**Other coping skills.** There are many other things we can do to help ourselves cope. These include eating well, avoiding nicotine, caffeine, and alcohol, keeping up a good sleep schedule, and following the physician's recommendations (medication, preparatory regimens, etc.). Of course, if you have difficulty you can always seek out additional assistance and guidance from a health care professional.