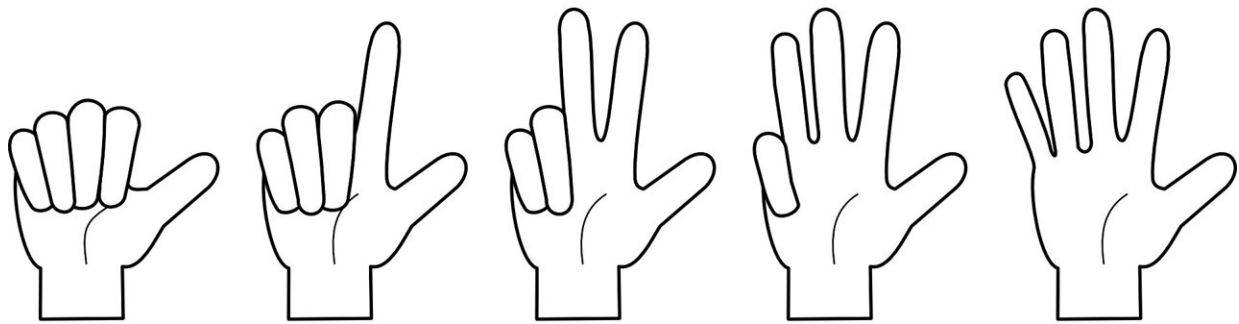


# Q&A: Countdown to control anxiety

September 11 2023, by Jill Christensen

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I recently turned 45 and have been dealing with anxiety for several years. My feelings of worry, stress and fatigue have increased, leading me to avoid social events and limit activities I used to enjoy. My friend suggested I try something she called mindfulness meditation to help manage my anxiety. What is this technique, and how can I start doing it?

**ANSWER:** Anxiety is often described as sustained and excessive worry that a person cannot control related to the anticipation of a future threat, such as a traumatic event. At times, anxiety can significantly and

adversely affect our daily lives, work, relationships and overall happiness. Anxiety also can manifest as an irritable, worried, restless and debilitating [stress response](#) lasting minutes to days. Most everyone has had anxiety surrounding a stressful situation.

Anxiety becomes an obstacle when it affects our day-to-day lives. Anxiety can negatively affect people at home, work, school and socially.

Emotionally, anxiety can appear as excessive worry, fatigue, irritability, panic attacks, paranoia, poor concentration, restlessness or sleep disturbances. Left untreated, it can increase a person's risk for depression, even suicide.

Physically, anxiety can appear as [chest pain](#), diarrhea, headache, increased [heart rate](#), muscle aches, shaking, shortness of breath or sweating.

Left unchecked, anxiety can further strain our mental health, increasing the risk for poor communication and poor decision-making.

And for many people, anxiety is isolating, as you alluded to, because people do not want to participate in normal activities. Anxiety can affect your willingness to take new steps or adventures in life due to fear.

People have many different approaches for how they cope with anxiety. Mindfulness meditation is a technique where you focus on being intensely aware of what you see and feel in the moment, without interpretation or judgment. Practicing this type of mindfulness involves breathing methods, guided imagery and other practices to relax the body and mind to help reduce stress.

Recent research shows mindfulness meditation may be as effective at reducing anxiety as medication for some people.

Try this exercise the next time your mind is stuck on the worry setting.

Sit quietly. Look around you and notice:

- 5 things you can see: Your hands, the sky, a plant on your colleague's desk
- 4 things you can physically feel: Your feet on the ground, a ball, your [friend](#)'s hand.
- 3 things you can hear: The wind blowing, children's laughter, your breath.
- 2 things you can smell: Fresh-cut grass, coffee, soap.
- 1 thing you can taste: A mint, gum, the fresh air.

This exercise helps you shift your focus to your surroundings in the present moment and away from what is causing you to feel anxious. It can help interrupt unhealthy thought patterns.

In addition to [mindfulness meditation](#), there are many tactics you can try to help combat anxiety, including:

- Behavioral therapy.
- Deep breathing.
- Exercise.
- Journaling.
- Meditation.
- Reading.
- Socializing.
- Speaking with your health care professional.
- Spirituality.
- Thought reframing.

Try different things to see what works best for you.

A person with anxiety can seek support from a therapist, medical professional, family member, friend, community support person, crisis line resource or a crisis center. Depending on the severity of your anxiety, a [behavioral therapy](#) plan, anti-anxiety medication and coping mechanisms may be recommended for your situation.

Regardless, it's recommended that you speak to a health care specialist if any of these situations occur:

- Your anxiety becomes an obstacle—in any aspect of everyday living, often causing difficulties for six or more months.
- Your anxiety negatively influences relationships, creating barriers in life.
- Your anxiety leads to isolation—producing thoughts of hopelessness or helplessness.
- Your anxiety controls your life—when your emotional or physical response to excessive worry controls your life in some aspect or another.

Recognition of anxiety is a key factor in dealing with excessive worry and moving forward in life. If you have any of the above symptoms or have difficulty controlling worry, ask yourself if it could be the anxiety you're experiencing. It's important to share any concerns about excessive worry with your health care team so we can help you identify ways to address your [anxiety](#) and move past the adverse effects of excessive worry.

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