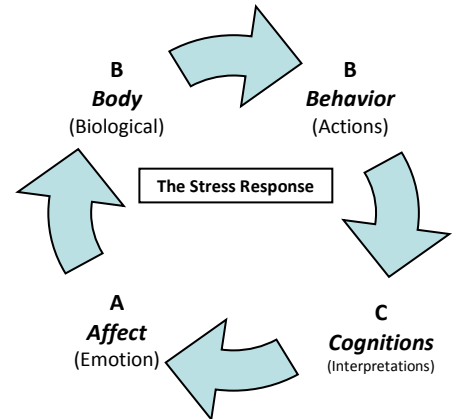


## HOW TO REDUCE STRESS AND ANXIETY

Stress and anxiety happen through an interactive process between our *body* and perceived internal states, our *thoughts* and interpretation of events and perceptions, our *emotions*, and our *behaviors* – especially how we choose to respond to our thoughts, feelings and body sensations.

Here are the general “ABCs” of Stress and Anxiety and how these interact:

Below are some specifics about strategies that can help you intervene at any part of the cycle to reduce your distress.



### **A** Intervening At the Level of Affect (Feelings)

- **ADD PLEASANT EVENTS AND FEELINGS TO COUNTERACT THE NEGATIVE FEELINGS (ANXIETY).** Use the “fight,” “flight,” and “affiliate” strategies to push back against the anxiety, escape, or get support when you’re feeling stressed or anxious.
  - **RELAX WITH PLEASURABLE ACTIVITIES.** Spending time with people you enjoy or doing things you like to do will raise your spirits. Try at least one favorite activity a day, or talk with the person who makes you feel special.
  - **COMFORT YOURSELF WITH COMPANIONSHIP.** Family and friends are “good medicine.” They can remind you of your strengths and better times. Seek out positive people who will listen without judging or giving advice.
  - **LAUGH.** Humor is a wonderful stress reliever and mood enhancer. Watch funny movies or TV shows. Talk to people who make you laugh. Look for the lighter side of life.
  - **DISTRACTION.** Find something fun to do that will keep your mind off of the things you’ve been worrying about or stressing over. Distraction is easier when it involves other people.
  - **“RADICAL ACCEPTANCE.”** Accept that you’re feeling anxious or stressed rather than trying to make it go away. Emotions are like the weather; they’re impermanent, ever-changing reactions to the environment. Most feelings will pass fairly quickly if you don’t fight them. Acceptance is critical because trying to wrangle or eliminate anxiety often worsens it. It just perpetuates the idea that your anxiety is intolerable. If you need help with this come talk to a counselor, start practicing mindfulness strategies, or practice some accepted self talk: “it is what it is right now; this too shall pass...” If you don’t believe this right away, try to remember the things you are most worried about in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, for instance – only the really big things stand out, most likely.

### **B** Intervening At the Level of the Body and Behavior

- **EXERCISE! SLEEP ENOUGH! EAT WELL!** Your brain will work best if you’re not skipping meals, having too much caffeine, too much alcohol, or pulling all-nighters. All of those things can cause an *increase* in anxiety the following day and decrease your natural resilience.
  - **EXERCISE** can help you burn off the stress hormones and adrenaline that comes with anxiety. Exercise can help you to relax, increasing your stamina, and release natural “tranquilizers” (endorphins). If you exercise early enough in the day, it can also improve your sleep. Start with five to ten minutes of exercise daily and work up to twenty to thirty minutes of aerobic walking, biking, running or swimming at least three times a week— something to get your heart-beating & your body sweating. Avoid exercising in the evening a few hours before you’re trying to fall asleep.
  - **AVOID DRUGS, EVEN THE LEGAL ONES.** This includes alcohol, nicotine, caffeine (found in coffee and soda), and other drugs. While they can sometimes appear to cause a very brief break from your symptoms, they will then immediately make them worse. Many are also addictive. These substances only create problems you cannot afford.

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- **SLEEP.** Your body needs at least seven hours (and for some up to eight hours of sleep). Sleep is essential to emotion regulation. You can't be sleep-deprived during the week and make it up on the weekends. The brain doesn't work this way. There are good apps and recordings that you can download to your phone to help you with sleep, too.
- **USE RELAXATION EXERCISES.** Try ten minutes of slow, deep breathing using this formula: ***Inhale to the count of 4, hold the breath to the count of 2, and exhale to the count of 5 or 6.*** The slow exhale activates the relaxation response and calms/slows the nervous system. You can also use guided imagery, "progressive muscle relaxation," or some other relaxing activity of your choice. You can find lots of free apps and podcasts that you can use on your phone to help guide you.

## **C** **Intervening At the Level of Cognitions (Thoughts)**

- **CHANGE YOUR THOUGHTS/INTERPRETATIONS AND YOUR FEELINGS WILL FOLLOW.** Anxiety and panic are just your brain playing tricks on you and your body. Anxiety is always future focused so try to stay in your "time zone" – the here and the now. Practice redirecting your mind to helpful, coping thoughts rather than the "what ifs" and catastrophize that the mind does when we are feeding our anxiety.
  - **ANXIETY ATTACKS HAPPEN WHEN THE BRAIN SENDS OUT A "FALSE ALARM" TO THE BODY** and dumps adrenaline into the bloodstream. You may feel that you're going crazy, that you're suffocating, or that you're having a heart attack. ***None of these are true.*** Panic attacks are dangerous and can't kill you, even when they feel like you're having heart attack symptoms. Anxiety attacks will pass on their own in about 10-20 minutes if you don't make them worse by worrying about them. In your head, label the distressing feeling as anxiety or panic, and accept that even though it's **really** unpleasant, you just have to tolerate it until it passes.
  - **SINCE ANXIETY IS ABOUT GETTING STUCK IN THE FUTURE, PRACTICE BRINGING YOUR THOUGHTS BACK TO THE HERE AND NOW.** Challenge your negative thoughts and predictions, don't take "monkey-mind" (the anxious mind jumps from thought to thought like a pet monkey) too seriously, and practice the rule of 3 to get back in the present: focus on your five senses and look for 3 things that you can see with your eyes, 3 things you can hear with your ears, 3 sensations you can feel through touch, and notice any smells or tastes that you are aware of as well. Remember that while your mind is a part of you, you are *more* than your mind. Observe but don't automatically accept the conclusions that your mind jumps to. Instead, Practice "catch and release" with your thoughts rather than just accepting the judgments our minds constantly make. Or let the negative thoughts drift away from you like leaves floating on a stream.
  - **CONSULT YOUR WISE, REASONABLE SELF.** Ask yourself, "is this something I have control over or could change?" If the answer is yes, then do something to make the situation better. If it's something that someone else controls or that you don't have any ability to change, then get to work on surviving it. If you're not sure which category it falls in, consult with someone else, journal your thoughts and feelings, or ask for help. If you have a chronic issue that keeps cropping up, it might be time to talk to a counselor who can be more objective and help you sort things out.

### **Finally, some other things that can help include:**

- having a spiritual practice (staying in touch with the things that help you remember that you're part of a bigger purpose or make life meaningful for you, which might or might not include religion)
- keep a gratitude list/journal and add 3 things each evening before you go to bed
- Organize, organize, organize and practice good time management.
- Don't avoid the things you're anxious about. Procrastination is usually a way of avoiding anxiety, which only makes anxiety stronger.
- Find a way to get out of buildings and into nature as often as you can. The research shows that this helps with over-arousal and is good for human beings.
- Ask for help and then use it! Find a good mentor or confidant so that you can talk about the things that really matter and might be troubling you.
- Make time to play with any of the pets on campus since this is a way to lower blood pressure and anxiety as well.