

Tips for Coping with Coronavirus-Induced Anxiety¹

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As I've spoken with my clients this week, the most frequent request has been for concrete actions that their lawyers and staff can take to cope with coronavirus-fueled anxiety.

Here is a baker's dozen of self-help tips that I hope will help. All of these are evidence-based, backed by at least several studies, and, in some cases, years of solid research. Some of them work by quieting down the brain's threat circuitry. Some activate the brain's parasympathetic nervous system (the calming circuitry of the brain.) Some purposely distract. Others build resources to make you more stress-resistant in the future. And some tips do all of the above.

How will you know which one to choose? If you want immediate relief, try *Deep Breathing* (#2) or *Progressive Muscle Relaxation* (#5). Both take only a few minutes and can have an immediate effect in helping you to relax and reduce anxiety. Some of the other techniques also have a cumulative effect over the long term, building a reservoir of protection and inoculating you from future stressors. These include *Meditation* (#3) and *Social Connection* (#4). There's no reason you can't use more than one technique. Read them over and just pick those that appeal to you. You can't go wrong.

¹ I'm an organizational psychologist, not a clinical psychologist. Nothing in this article is intended to diagnose or treat any psychological disorders. If you think you might have an anxiety disorder (i.e., if your anxiety is disrupting your ability to lead an ordinary life), seek help from a qualified professional such as a licensed clinical psychologist, a board-certified psychiatrist, or other qualified professional. If you're experiencing a mental health crisis and are in the United States, one resource you can call is the 24-hour helpline of the National Alliance on Mental Illness at 1-800-950-6264 or <https://www.nami.org/find-support/nami-helpline>.



Here is a list of the techniques:

1. Accept Your Emotions Without Judgment
2. Do Some Deep Breathing
3. Practice Mindfulness Meditation
4. Increase Social Connection
5. Do Progressive Muscle Relaxation
6. Express Gratitude
7. Help Others (Giving)
8. Spend Time Appreciating Nature
9. Keep a Journal
10. Change Your Thoughts
11. Go on a News Diet
12. Listen to Your Favorite Music
13. Focus on Self-Care

Here are the details about each technique

1. Accept Your Emotions Without Judgment

Don't resist or avoid anxiety. Rather, notice it, and gently accept it. "Hmm. I'm feeling anxious right now." Be a detached, neutral, non-judgmental observer of yourself. There's an old expression that goes, "What we resist, persists." By contrast, when we simply notice that we're anxious and stop trying to will it away, that's



often when we find some relief. In other words, don't get anxious about your anxiety—it just compounds it.

2. Do Some Deep Breathing

This technique can provide almost immediate relief from feelings of anxiety. It's simple: By taking long, slow, deep breaths, and by taking a bit longer to exhale than inhale, you can trigger the body's parasympathetic nervous system (PNS), often called the “rest and digest” system. When activated, the PNS leads us to feel calm, centered, relaxed and soothed.

Here are the instructions: Sit comfortably. Slowly inhale to the count of 4. Then, hold your breath to the count of 4. Then slowly exhale to a longer count. If you can do so to the count of 8, great. If not, even a count of 6 will do. Now pause to the count of 4. Then start over again with your inhale. Do this for a few minutes and you should begin to feel calmer.

3. Practice Mindfulness Meditation

While mindfulness meditation is an ancient practice, modern neuroscience research has shown that it's a very effective technique with proven physiological, mental and immune system benefits. A single meditation session is often relaxing in its own right. But the real benefit of meditation emerges when you build an ongoing daily habit of meditation. You can start small—even a one-minute meditation is fine—and then each day try doing it for a little longer until you build up to 10, 15 or even 20 minutes a day. If you like, you can do it twice—once in the morning and once in the evening.



Mindfulness meditation involves focusing your attention on the here-and-now without judgment.

When you develop a regular habit of daily meditation, you are, in effect, training your brain's attention circuitry. You're training your brain to stay focused on your present experience. Research shows that the more your attention is focused on your here-and-now experience, the more positive your experience will be. There are even studies showing that when your mind wanders to something pleasant (a reverie about a pleasant event in the past, or a thought about a pleasant future event that you're anticipating), you are likely to be less satisfied, less happy, than when your attention is focused on the present.

In one study, commuters with long commutes were happier when they focused on the *experience* of being stuck in traffic than escaping to the past or future.

There are 4 simple steps to mindfulness meditation:

1. Sit comfortably.
2. Breathe in a relaxed way.
3. Bring your attention to your breath. Notice the sensations as you inhale and exhale. Allow your awareness to rest on the breath.
4. Whenever your mind wanders, just notice that you've gotten lost in your thoughts, gently return your focus to your breathing. Try not to judge, or get frustrated—just notice that your mind has wandered to a thought and gently guide your attention back. You're training your attention to go where you guide it.

Cultivate patience and self-compassion.

4. Increase Social Connection

Connecting with others in an authentic way is one of the most beneficial things you can do. Studies show that ongoing



connections not only reduce anxiety, but also build resilience, improve your immune system, increase workplace engagement and job satisfaction, improve sleep, and even extend life.

In times of stress, it helps to reach out to friends and family. Set up weekly or more frequent Skype/Zoom sessions. Discuss how their day is going, or talk about mutual interests. Find out how they're coping.

Reach out to others who may be vulnerable or alone. Check in with them and see how they're doing. (See "Giving" below.)

Look for opportunities every day to express gratitude to those who make a difference in your life in even small ways. Expressing gratitude brings us closer. (See technique #7, Express Gratitude, below for more details.)

5. Do Progressive Muscle Relaxation

This is a versatile technique that you can use anywhere, anytime, to relax. I've used it to take a break, as well as when I'm on a phone call, or when I'm sitting at my computer. Many people find that it helps them fall asleep at night.

The technique involves progressively tightening and then loosening one muscle group at a time while giving it your full attention. Start with your toes: Slowly, to the count of 3, tighten your toe muscles ("One . . . two . . . three . . .") – then hold the tension for a moment – then slowly relax the muscles ("Three . . . two . . . one . . . ahhh.") Then move to the rest of your foot, then your calves, your upper legs, etc., moving up your whole body until you tighten and loosen the muscles of your scalp. As you relax each



muscle group, allow yourself to let go of any tension or tightness you may be holding.

6. Express Gratitude

a) Make a list of the things you're grateful for. Then spend a minute or two on each one and savor it. Give it your full attention to experience the gratitude. Since most of us come up with the same few things each time we think about what we're grateful for, it's a good idea to do this infrequently enough so that you don't get jaded. Daily is too frequently for most people. Once a week works well for me. Use your own experience as a guide.

b) In addition to just noticing and experiencing gratitude, *expressing* gratitude can be a powerful experience. You can express gratitude with a simple "Thank you" when someone does you a small favor, is courteous, thoughtful, or helpful; or you can express your gratitude more expansively when someone has put him- or herself out on your behalf. ("Terry, thanks for helping me out with solving that problem. I know how busy you are, and I really appreciate your taking time to give me support . . .")

c) Write a gratitude letter and send it. Or call/Skype/Zoom someone. Unlike "b", this doesn't have to be in the moment of the act for which you're grateful. It can be for something this person did for you at an earlier moment, even something many years ago that you never thanked them for. Think about what you're grateful for and why, and compose your thoughts, and then reach out to that person and express your gratitude. Explain why their support/efforts/actions/etc. were particularly meaningful to you.



7. Help Others (Giving)

Reach out to help others. It not only takes your mind off yourself, but it generates on its own some positive feelings, both for you and for the person you give to. It can take various forms, and need not involve in-person activity. [Selfless actions tend to bring out our best](#), and have a calming effect.

8. Spend Time Appreciating Nature

Research shows that nature has a calming, uplifting, positive effect. It can reduce anxiety and build positivity. There are many ways to appreciate nature—take a walk in a park or the woods, look at a vista or a body of water, enjoy a garden, or tend a houseplant. Even looking at pictures or movies involving nature works. Netflix has some great nature documentaries, e.g., by David Attenborough.

9. Keep a Journal

Research shows that when we write down our feelings and we put them into context and consider their meaning, it helps us to feel better and improve our mood. For detailed guidance about this technique, see these 2 articles: (1) [“What's all this about journaling”](#), and (2) [“83 Benefits of Journaling for Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Management”](#). Both of these are available for download on my website at <http://lawyerbrain.com/resources>.

10. Change Your Thoughts

While we can't change the external circumstances we face, we can definitely change the way we react to and think about those circumstances. Think of anxiety as a normal emotion that is designed to focus our attention on a potential threat that may



materialize in the near future. Our thoughts about that threat have a powerful effect on our emotional response. And if we consciously modify those thoughts, we can regulate the way that we react and feel. This technique is very effective, but requires patience and lots of mental rehearsal. Look to these recommended resources for the specifics: [*The Resilience Factor*](#) by Karen Reivich; [*Feeling Good*](#) by David Burns; and [*Learned Optimism*](#) by Martin Seligman.

11. Go on a News Diet

The current crisis has resulted in near-24-hour coverage by the news media, with almost nonstop “Breaking News” warnings on the TV chyrons. Try to maintain a balance between learning what you need to know about current developments, while at the same time taking care not to overexpose yourself to negativity. This is especially important during the hours leading up to bedtime. Sleep is vital in order to maintain a healthy immune system. It’s a good idea to go on a News Diet for the final 2 to 4 hours before bedtime. Use that time for more soothing activities—meditate, take a bath, talk with your loved ones, or watch uplifting or even mindless TV. Avoid anything that provokes fear, anxiety or other negative emotions during this time.

12. Listen to Your Favorite Music

Music can be a powerful force in changing our moods and emotions. Try to pick something that’s uplifting, that puts you in a good mood.

13. Focus on Self-Care

Last, but definitely not least: Take care of yourself. Pay attention to the five cornerstones of self-care: Nutrition. Exercise. Sleep. Renewal. Water. Each of these components of self-care contributes



to a healthy immune system and a body and mind that is better equipped to cope with life's stresses:

Nutrition: Increasing evidence points to the benefits of a plant-based diet, especially one low on simple carbohydrates and high on nutrient density. Helpful resources: [*Food Rules*](#) by Michael Pollan; [*Eat for Life*](#) by Dr. Joel Fuhrman.

Exercise: Scientific evidence about the importance of exercise keeps mounting. Helpful resources: [*The Joy of Movement: How exercise helps us find happiness, hope, connection and courage*](#) by Kelly McGonigal; [*Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain*](#) by John Ratey.

Sleep: The research on sleep has increased in both quantity and quality. Sleep has been underrated in terms of its importance for our overall health, particularly our mental health. Experts recommend we get 7 to 8 hours a night for optimum functioning. Research has identified several simple steps we can take to insure a good night's sleep: Do relaxing things in the hours before bedtime. (See #12, Go on a News Diet, above.) Don't look at screens (TV, computers, tablets, phones, etc.) in the hours before bedtime. Reserve your bedroom for sleep and nothing else so that your brain associates this space as a sanctuary and as a place where you can sleep peacefully. Don't exercise in the hours before bedtime. And don't eat or drink stimulants or alcohol during the hours before bedtime (coffee, cola, chocolate, etc.) Helpful resources: [*Why We Sleep: Unlocking the Power of Sleep and Dreams*](#) by Matthew Walker; [*The Sleep Revolution: Transforming Your Life, One Night at a Time*](#) by Arianna Huffington.



Renewal: There's ample evidence that we are healthy, happier and more productive when we give ourselves regular opportunities for renewal. Some lawyers have adopted a work ethic that borders on workaholism—the science shows that this can be counterproductive. We function better when we take breaks, allow our mind and body to recharge, consolidate, restore our resources. Helpful resource: [*The Power of Full Engagement: Managing Energy, Not Time, Is the Key to Performance and Personal Renewal*](#) by Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz.

Water: It's essential. Stay hydrated.

In Summary:

Anxiety is our brain's normal mechanism for directing our attention to a potential threat that we can't immediately control. What we *can* control, however, is how we respond to that threat. If you use one or more of the techniques I've outlined here, you can lower your anxiety and build your emotional well-being.

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