

# ANXIETY



WHY WE  
DON'T USE  
COPING  
SKILLS TO  
DECREASE  
ANXIETY

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# WHY WE DON'T "COPE" WITH ANXIETY

## Reason 1:

### IT DOESN'T WORK

**The first reason: Because it might not work. If using coping skills helps you tolerate your anxiety, keep doing it! If you find they aren't working, you're still anxious or you're actually doing structured avoidance or compulsions, you might need a different response.**

Have you found yourself trying over and over to distract and not feeling calmer? Are you constantly trying to avoid the worry, reassure yourself, or ask others to reassure you? Sometimes, no matter how hard we try, and usually we are trying REALLY hard, using a regulation skill (deep breathing, distraction, or even thought challenging) can be exhausting and end up not only not helping, but actually reinforcing the anxiety.



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# WHY AVOIDANCE INCREASES ANXIETY

When we have a fear, our anxiety goes UP. When we avoid that fear, the anxiety goes DOWN, but only temporarily until the next time the situation, thought or emotion comes up. Unfortunately, then the next time the anxiety will actually come up HIGHER and SCARIER than before.

When we AVOID a feared thought, it actually TRICKS OUR BRAIN into thinking "oh yes that was really scary and something you needed to avoid or get out of, you can't handle that thought without escaping or avoiding"

So avoidance, while temporarily relieving, actually reinforces the anxiety, rewards it, and increases the anxiety over time.

**Avoidance reinforces anxiety, tricking your brain into thinking that you couldn't handle it without escaping**

**When coping skills are used to escape or avoid anxiety (or decrease it in the moment) then the coping skills are actually avoidance strategies, thus growing the anxiety**

# WHY WE DON'T REASSURE OR REASON WITH ANXIETY

When we try to reassure anxiety, it can increase the fear and reinforce distress, but it can also leave you in a mental battle with yourself, or a verbal battle with others, trying to gather certainty.

**Remember: Anxiety is the intolerance of uncertainty**

**Anxiety is a FEAR REACTION to an UNCERTAINTY, or to an intrusive thought.**

## Reason 2: It doesn't work

Reassurance and avoidance don't work because we can't guarantee the scary thing won't happen. But it isn't happening now. Anxiety is all about uncertainty, the not knowing what could happen or go wrong. Part of your job is reminding your brain that you can handle not knowing, you can handle uncertainty, we handle it all the time.

## Avoidance based reassurance example:

You: "What if someone breaks into my house"

Me: "They won't! It's safe here!"

You: WHEW! \*temporary relief\*

.....

Anxiety: "But wait, what if she's wrong and someone does break in? Remember that story you heard once about someone breaking into a house in a neighborhood like this?!"



# WHAT TO DO INSTEAD

Instead, we can use those same regulation skills with an **ACCEPTANCE** mindset. Say to yourself "This anxiety is showing up right now, and I don't like it, but I know I can handle it, I'm going to stay present with it in the moment and continue doing what I was doing."

Maybe you use deep breathing, but you're not trying to get rid of the anxiety, escape it in the moment, or avoid the thoughts. You're practicing tolerating the emotion showing up without escaping.

This part of acceptance is also an **EXPOSURE**. Within an exposure, we stay present in the anxiety, sometimes even leaning into it, turning to face the feared thought or thing, really allowing the thought to be present or purposefully bringing it up.

This instead stops the avoidance cycle and replaces it with **HABITUATION**, a process that allows your brain to relearn that you are **BRAVE** and you can handle anxiety without avoidance.

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Practicing acceptance and using exposure and response prevention reinforces habituation, tolerance and bravery, which ultimately decreases anxiety.

Coping skills, grounding, and any cognitive restructuring should only be used in the service of acceptance, not in the service of avoidance.

Remember, you are brave, you can handle uncertainty and adversity, now we just need to remind your brain of that fact.