

# Using Coping Skills in Situations That Make You Anxious

**Objective:** To reduce your anxiety symptoms by identifying situations you avoid and learning techniques to cope with them.

## You Should Know

You might believe that the best way to deal with your anxiety is avoid situations that make you anxious in order to feel safe and comfortable. You might not want to feel fear or discomfort, but your desire for safety and comfort represents the biggest obstacle to overcoming anxiety.

To truly overcome anxiety, the first step is to accept the fear, face it, relax into it, and expose it for what it is—baseless and harmless. From a logical point of view, you may know that there is really nothing to fear. You may understand that you are not going to faint or have a heart attack, yet you still recoil in fear when you feel a twinge in your chest or experience lightheadedness. But until you actually experience the fear, face it, and learn that there is nothing to fear, it will be difficult to make lasting progress.

The steps to overcome anxiety include the following:

- Acceptance—Accept your fear and welcome it.
- Courage—Face the fear without running or avoiding the situations that make you anxious.
- Persistence—Repeatedly place yourself in situations that make you anxious.
- Patience—Allow time to pass so that anxious symptoms dissipate.

Many people deal with their anxiety by simply avoiding the situations that cause them to be fearful. While avoidance may reduce anxiety in the short run, it will also restrict your life unnecessarily and possibly exacerbate your fears and worries in the long run. To conquer your fears and anxiety, you must learn to tolerate the situations that bother you, rather than avoiding them. This may seem difficult, but study after study tells us that this is the best way to rid yourself of anxiety.

There are many coping strategies you can use other than avoidance. Relaxation, breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, positive self-talk, and visualization/imagery can all be helpful and effective in decreasing your anxiety. It is important to remember that as long as you do not feed your fear, symptoms will subside naturally, usually within minutes. Coping techniques are designed to break the fear cycle and to limit the duration and intensity of your symptoms.

Although some people mistake avoidance for coping, there is a difference between them. Coping skills must be used when you are in situations that cause you to be anxious, allowing symptoms to naturally run their course, without adding more fear to the process. Avoidance is a problem from a behavioral and learning standpoint because it does nothing

to teach you that anxiety is not harmful, and it creates the false belief that you must try to “escape” from a situation to feel safe. Examples of avoidance behavior include running to be in the presence of a friend or “safe” person or fleeing to a “safe” place, like your car or a specific room in your home.

The only way to overcome anxiety is to experience symptoms without fleeing, avoiding, or adding more fear to the situation. This means that you will experience times of extreme fear and discomfort. The good news is that if you are willing to do that a few times, it will begin to get easier very quickly. It doesn’t take long for your courage to pay off as you suddenly find that you are no longer afraid of certain situations.

## What to Do

The first step is to rank the situations you avoid because they make you anxious. Place a 1 next to the situation/place you avoid most, a 2 by the situation/place you avoid next most often, and so on.

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|------------------------------------------|--------------|
| _____ Public speaking                    | Other: _____ |
| _____ Subways, buses, trains, airplanes  | Other: _____ |
| _____ Using a public restroom            |              |
| _____ Walking on the street              |              |
| _____ Theaters                           |              |
| _____ Shopping centers/malls             |              |
| _____ Dating                             |              |
| _____ Standing in lines                  |              |
| _____ Auditoriums or stadiums            |              |
| _____ Parties or other social gatherings |              |
| _____ Crowds                             |              |
| _____ Restaurants                        |              |
| _____ Museums                            |              |
| _____ Crowded elevators                  |              |
| _____ Large rooms                        |              |

Now that you have identified the situations that make you anxious, choose one that you will practice experiencing over the next few weeks. \_\_\_\_\_ . Use this chart to keep a record of what happens.

<b>Date</b>	<b>What happened</b>	<b>Coping skill you used</b>	<b>How did you feel/react?</b>

Which strategies effectively helped you cope with your anxious symptoms?

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Describe what else you can do to cope when you are in situations that make you anxious.

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Write down how you would like to approach that type of situation differently in the future.

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### **Reflections on This Exercise**

How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

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What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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