

Anticipatory Anxiety: Some Tips on Coping

Events can occur at home, at work and in your community which disrupt your usual feelings of safety and security. When unexpected events occur in your workplace, home and community, you may experience a heightened sense of anxiety and concern for yourself, your co-workers, and your family members about the possible threat. You may notice yourself being on edge, fearing every small illness or negative event and feeling a sense of dread which you can't explain.

These can be symptoms of 'anticipatory anxiety'. Anxiety is defined as the 'subjective state of apprehension and uneasiness.' Anticipatory anxiety is worry and nervousness about future events which may or may not occur, and which may or may not be negative. We anticipate that we will not be able to control a situation or ourselves. These thoughts and feelings affect people differently, but in general, when we are anxious, we tend to think about the worst possible outcomes, we feel a sense of fear, and our hearts race. The following are some reactions you may have when anxious:

- **BODY** - headaches, nausea, diarrhea, body temperature changes, sweating, rapid breathing, light headed or dizzy feeling, rapid heartbeat, dry mouth, and fatigue.
- **BEHAVIORS** - fidgeting, pacing, yelling, rapid speech, increased aggression, road rage, eating more or less, change in sleep pattern, avoidance, and substance abuse
- **EMOTIONS** - fear, excessive worry, anger, rage, depression, irritability, agitation, and crying
- **THOUGHTS** - racing thoughts, difficulty concentrating, negative thoughts, catastrophizing, hopelessness, and helplessness.

Usually, the symptoms of anticipatory anxiety build in intensity gradually and decrease quickly after the anxiety-provoking situation is over. One of the many difficulties when you don't know when a situation is over is that the anxiety-provoking situation may occur in an unexpected way at an unexpected time or may never occur.

You may be experiencing a range of reactions. The following are some strategies you can use to decrease your own anticipatory anxiety.

Focus on what you do have control over – your thoughts, your feelings, your physical activity, your interpersonal interactions...*yourself*.

Be alert, but not so alert that you become paranoid.

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Act upon what you do have control over: your work, redirecting negative thoughts, your health, taking care of yourself and your family, and continuing on with your daily routines and schedule.

Challenge catastrophic and irrational thoughts: Stay focused on the present. Do not make assumptions about the future or think about "what if's." Redirect your thoughts from these fears by using positive affirmations.

Reach out and connect with friends and family. A sense of community is very healing. At work, **respect** everyone's' differences. Some people may want to talk a lot about their concerns. Others may want to be silent.

Try deep breathing. Practice diaphragmatic breathing by slowly inhaling through the nose allowing your diaphragm to expand and then exhaling even more slowly through your mouth. Try some 'soft' **stress management activities:** exercise, play or watch sports, engage in hobbies.

Use positive images to form a private sanctuary, a safe place to retreat to for quick "mini-stress breaks". Repeat a short phrase, prayer, or mantra while you are there.

Express your feelings. Discuss your concerns with Human Resources. Keep your usual routines.

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