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How to Get Anxiety Under Control

How you can keep anxiety in check before it ruins your relationship.

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The feeling of anxiety can be really scary, but you can get the feelings under control.

Your heart suddenly starts pounding and you can't seem to breathe or catch your breath. You have no idea what's going on and you think you're losing your mind. You're scared to death—welcome to the overwhelming world of panic attacks.

One of the most difficult things about panic attacks is that they seem to come "out of the blue," for no apparent reason. There you are tooling along, things seem to be going just fine when, wham, it hits. That is what makes panic attacks so crazy. Your spouse hasn't left you; the house hasn't burned down; you're not in the middle of an earthquake or tornado; and your child hasn't vanished. So why are you feeling this way?

Anxiety might be thought of as the "what if" disorder: "*What if* my spouse leaves me; *what if* the house burns down; *what if* an earthquake or tornado hits; *what if* my child gets kidnapped by some crazy person" and on and on. When the "what ifs" start and left to grow unchecked, they can easily escalate into a full-blown panic attack. Not only that, but the impact on your relationship can be devastating!

When you're riddled with "what ifs," you can't relax. You're in a constant state of hyper-stress, which makes it impossible to enjoy the moments of your day-to-day, much less your spouse and puts a severe crimp in your ability to fully engage in love-making.

What is Anxiety?

Your body and your mind are connected. I know this sounds simplistic, but we often forget that what we think and how we feel directly impacts our bodies. When the "what ifs" start and are allowed to keep coming unanswered, your body gets ready for disaster. As you raise your emotional fear level, your body responds by getting ready either to fight or flee (the two basic survival reactions) by pumping adrenaline like crazy into your body systems. Since you don't fight or flee, there you are with all that essentially unused adrenaline flowing through your blood stream, revving

up your body systems, making your heart thud, ruining your digestive system and generally making you feel that you are having a heart attack.

What to do? Well, first of all, see a medical doctor and make sure that your heart really is okay. When the doctor reassures you that yes you are fine, you're "just anxious," resist the impulse to tell the doctor he is out of his mind, that obviously you are having a heart attack, and believe him. If your doctor prescribes anti-anxiety medication, take it. When the medication makes you feel fine, don't assume that, "Oh, I just needed some medicine." No! The anti-anxiety medication causes your symptoms to subside, but it doesn't deal with what's really going on, what is causing the anxiety in the first place. Have the courage to deal with your anxiety directly, which may require professional therapy.

Dealing With the Source of Anxiety

To begin, put down on paper all the fears you are having and the "what ifs" that are running non-stop through your mind. Look at each one, one at a time, perhaps only one or two per day and take the fear apart. For example, you fear your spouse could leave you. You're getting older, balancing work and family are an ongoing challenge, you don't have the time you used to devote to him, etc.

Now ask yourself, how realistic a fear is your spouse leaving you? After all, he's getting older too, the family belongs to the two of you, he also is squeezed by life's demands. Has the love between you waned? Do you feel the friendship between you has suffered? Sort out what you can do—perhaps you could take mini-vacations, a day or two apart from the kids to have just-the-two-of-you-fun. Or you could take up a sport or hobby together and have the pleasure of discovering each other anew. Then, take action! There is nothing quite as empowering as taking action. One step at a time is quite sufficient, just keep moving in the desired direction. Anxiety melts as you deal realistically with your fear.

Anxiety can be a real joy-killer. Be willing to answer the "what ifs" with creative problem solving and take your life back. The more quickly and thoroughly you deal with your underlying fears, the more anxiety can serve the purpose it was originally intended for—a warning—not a monster that ties you in knots and tramples your relationship.

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