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Quieting the Anxious, Unquiet Mind 10 Tips for Interrupting Anxious Turmoil©

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At 3:00 AM, 3 hours before he intended to awaken, Steph awoke from a bad dream. Immediately, his mind was filled with thoughts about business challenges. “Will we have enough money to meet payroll? I have a meeting with J... in the morning and I’m not sure how to approach him. He can be so defensive. Oh, and I have to remember” This went on for awhile. Steph gave up on going back to sleep and went to have a snack, read, and clear his mind.

These days our minds seem to be always on. We worry about what we should have done differently. We ruminate on some emotional hurt or injury. We worry about our list of tasks to get done tomorrow.

We live surrounded by information, an overload of information and media. We have umpteen TV and cable stations to watch. We have podcasts, social media, news feeds, email, and text. We have a library of apps, a collection of Audible and Kindle files, plus magazines and books.

That overload applies to most of us. Then, there are also the highly anxious people whose minds focus in on repeated thoughts or worries. Those who have Bipolar Disorder have racing thoughts moving so quickly, the person can barely describe them. Mental overload, especial overload with anxious or depressing thoughts, interrupts the natural process that put us to sleep and keep us sleeping.

Here are 10 ways to calm ruminating thoughts. Find the ones that work for you. In a second article, I’ll cover 10 more favorite ways to calm the unquiet mind.

1. Distraction: Engage in a healthy activity that requires focus, such reading, exercising, Yoga, or spending time with friends. Do not toss and turn in bed. Do not lay in bed unless you fall asleep in a shot while. Worrying in bed just reinforces ruminative thinking patterns. It associates bed or quiet with with “time for worrying now.” Get out of bed and find a focus that pulls you away from what was on your mind. Solve a puzzle, play a game, listen to music with words, or clean a space. Choose activities that require concentration to draw your attention away from the rumination.

2. Mindfulness: Focus on the present moment through deep breathing or paying attention to your sensory inputs. We have an article, *Mindfulness Can Help You Sleep: Overcoming Insomnia*. Check it out.

3. Paradoxical Intention: Does this seem like an odd idea? Logotherapists call this Paradoxical Intention and Family Therapists call is Symptom Prescription. What it means is that you set aside time for your “symptom” of obsessing, but when it’s more convenient for you and less of a disturbance to your life. Set a time limit, a specific amount of time for rumination, like 10 to 30 minutes. Whatever you may be obsessing about at any other time, write it in a notebook so you can review it in the time you allotted for rumination.

Another paradox is to exaggerate the problem. Instead of resisting the anxious thoughts, lean into them by exaggerating them intentionally. For example:

If you’re worried about making a mistake, mentally amplify the worry humorously: “What if I trip over every word in the meeting and everyone bursts out laughing?” This humorous exaggeration disrupts the anxiety loop and often leads to a calmer perspective.

4. Identification of Triggers: Notice the situations that trigger your ruminating thoughts, such as where you are, what time it is, and who you're with. What seems to cue these worries or ruminations? How do you suppose you learned that association? The benchmark memory is usually a painful or memorable experience that feels emotionally unresolved. For example, Philip kept coming back to why a girlfriend broke up with him and ghosted him. Unable to learn what had gone wrong between them or why she did that, he spent a lot of time going over details of their interactions. He sought clues to her choice. Without the facts, he ruminated. The cues that brought this all up for him included seeing photos of her or any thoughts of finding a new girlfriend, even thoughts of doing activities like those they had done together. To break the cycle, he archived the photos, filled his gallery file with photos of nature and of people who are important in his life, and met up with those people in all the places previously associated with the girlfriend.

5. Partializing: Break down problems: Break big problems into smaller, more manageable steps. Instead of worrying about a big problem, a process associated with anxiety, consider one small step that will make you feel more confident the problem or task can be mastered. For example, writing and giving a speech to a meeting at work can trigger disquiet in many people.

They may picture an anxiety-provoking detail, such as being in front of the group, worrying about how you may look, what you may say, how you will mess it up, or how you may be received. Instead, look around for an appropriate bit of humor to start with. Ask AI to provide an outline for your talk. Spend time mastering the background information. Think about the 3-5 take-away ideas rather than the whole speech. What may be the last two sentences of your speech? In other words, break it down to one quite manageable task. Start with that.

6. Clarification of the Outcome: Readjust your approach. Set more realistic goals that you can accomplish. As Stephen Covey wrote, “start with the end in mind.” What outcome do you want to achieve from the task or responsibility or paper? Do you know about SMART goals? Write SMART goal for the situation – even for an interpersonal situation. SMART means specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, timely. This process helps prevent worrying about those extraneous, anxiety-provoking elements that get in one’s way. Here are three examples.

For a school paper: I will write a 10 page paper on the topic of _____ by 10 days from now, with a list of takeaway points ready by tomorrow, an outline the main sections by the next day, then filling in the paragraphs by day 6, proof-reading by day 8. [Notice how all we are trying to achieve in the next 24 hours is a list of a few takeaway points.]

For a work meeting: I will present a 10-minute talk on, accepting I may be anxious, but I know the topic. I will anticipate 10 questions I may be asked. The outcome I want is to be seen as competent and to get a decision on the ____ project so my team can go forward with it. Ah, so that means I can start my speech with that goal and the 3 main reasons the project should be approved.

7. Positive Self-Focus: Much of our disquiet is about embarrassing moments, things we didn’t do that we were supposed to do, mistakes we made in school or work or relationships, why someone did something to us, how we are at fault, even negative self-thoughts.

I. Strengths: Review and appreciate your strengths. Having some difficulty with that? Thinking you faults and foibles are just too dominant in your mind? Try this. “Although I accept that I have made errors and I have a few things I could have done better, nonetheless and in spite of all that, I _____.” Fill in the blank with true statements about your survival, obstacles you overcame, accomplishments you never expected you could have done, positive traits, positive things you have done for other.

II. Gratitude: Think of whatever went well today and whatever has gone well for you. Think of any positive figures in your life. If you think of the things that went poorly or the negative figures, that is the kind of disquiet we are trying to get away from. Imagine all those words, thoughts, and emotions swept to one side of your mind or one side of a room. In the remaining space, imagine you are going to put some thoughts and memories in that space, but only of something for which you can be pleased or grateful.

III. Self-Compassionate Self-Talk: For some people, the strength of their negative self-talk is so

great that asking them for positive self-talk seems impossible. Compassionate self-talk can help calm the inner critic driving the rumination.

So, in an act of mental Judo, use the strength of the negatives against themselves! E.g., “It’s okay to feel this way. That stuff has a kernel of truth, though it’s kind of exaggerated. But I accept I think that way. Nevertheless, I am safe where I am right now. Nevertheless, I have food to sustain me. Nevertheless, I have a roof over my head and water to drink. Nevertheless, I have done some admirable or worthwhile things along the way. I will get through this.”

8. Support Seeking: Being social creatures, we usually tend to do well when we talk to someone about what is bothering us. Talk to a trusted friend or family member, or consider seeing a therapist. If what is on your mind seems ridiculous to the point you are embarrassed to discuss it, start off with saying just that. Most friends will be accepting. If you really can’t tell anyone in your personal life, make an appointment with a therapist.

Remember, we all need support. Something rumbling around in the mind can take up a lot of mental real estate. Sharing it can help.

9. Mental or Physical Relocation: Go to your happy place: Find a place that makes you feel good, like a favorite beach or hiking trail. You can go there or visualize yourself there in your mind. In either case, being mindful is the key variable. That means, really focusing on the details of that place. To do that, use your senses. What do you see there? What do you hear? Smell? Touch? What is moving in your scene? A favorite food there? How does it taste? Moving around there? Feel the sense of movement? What do you see as you move through the scene?

Experiences have time, place, sensory elements, and, usually, some thoughts associated with them. Change one of those factors.

10. Grounding: Grounding means bring your mental experience from unpleasant fantasy or obsessive, anxious thoughts back to the present moment. To do that, we need to be fully present to this moment in this place.

Anchoring means to find a cue stimulus that we associate with a scene or experience and mentally use the anchor to bring the positive situation to mind.

Unfortunately, we have used anchoring to cue the unpleasant thoughts and the anxiety. Various cues trigger the negative mental states. So, let’s consciously change that

I. The 5-4-3-2-1 Grounding Technique is an exercise to redirect focus to the present moment by engaging the senses:

Look for five things you can see around you.

Identify four things you can touch and how they may feel (or actually touch them). If you are

sitting, you have the seat of the chair, the arms, the back. Etc.
Listen for three sounds you can hear.
Notice two things you can smell (or imagine smells).
Focus on one thing you can taste.

This approach shifts attention away from rumination and towards immediate sensory experiences.

II. A Walking Exercise: Walk very slowly. Concentrate for 30-40 steps on the movement of your knees through space, their bending, how that feels. Concentrate on how your heel strikes the ground, then the outer edge of your foot, then the ball and toes. Just concentrate on those repeated sensory inputs over and over.

We have at least 10 more methods for quieting the disquiet. We will detail them in another article. Watch for part 2.

Shorehaven Behavioral Health is a major mental health clinic and training center with therapy offices in Brown Deer, Greenfield, and Mt. Pleasant, and also offering telehealth throughout Wisconsin. We specialize in challenging cases and rapid access to services. In addition to depression, anxiety, behavioral problems, and most other psychological problems, we work extensively with children & families and with substance use problems. Our DBT program has three groups – for younger adolescents, older adolescents, and adults – and has openings. We also accept referrals for substance abuse care from clinicians who are not comfortable with that population. Call 414-540-2170.

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