

5 Tips for Managing Anxiety During Transition

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Every Day Health
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One of the primary characteristics of a Highly Sensitive Person (HSP) is difficulty processing change. The uncertainty of a new path generates [anxiety](#), sometimes so crippling that the person is unable to move forward on the new path in front of her.

I am reminded of that this month as I make the significant transition from a job as a defense contractor — a communications advisor to a cloud computing company, with comfortable benefits — to an unstable gig as a freelance writer crafting pieces on mental health. I am following my heart all right, as it's racing to catch up with me.

Every time I sit down to write a piece, I second-guess myself and list all the reasons why I'm unqualified to write articles that will technically be read by a few people.

I have felt this way every time I move through a transition. And so I may know a thing or two about how to manage this kind of anxiety...

I would [panic](#) at the beginning of every semester in college and call my mom in tears, lamenting that there was no way in hell I would be able to complete all the items on the syllabus, that I may as well drop out. She would remind me that I felt the same way last semester and I ended up with okay grades. Transition does that to us sensitive types.

Yesterday, in the midst of my heart palpitations, I reviewed my list of tools to tackle this animal, anxiety, in light of my transition. Here are a few exercises that have helped me cope with transition anxiety in the past and that I'm actively employing lately to keep me productive in a time of uncertainty.

1. Exercise.

Duh. Every advice piece on [depression](#) and anxiety lists this one, but for me it is number one. Crucial. Because, short of popping some Ativan — which I can't do as a recovering alcoholic — swimming laps is the only activity that is effective at giving me immediate relief. But not any exercise. You need to find the right exercise for where you are in your life and in your head to give you the relief.

Running used to do it for me. During the two suicidal years following the birth of my second kid, I ran six miles a day, and it literally kept me from taking my life. But now I ruminate when I run and it ruins the spiritual experience, if you can actually say that about making yourself hoof it around town. Swimming, on the other hand, won't let me think too much because I'm counting laps, and nothing is more infuriating as an [OCD](#) whackjob than messing up on my count. If I don't get in the round number of yardage, it bugs me. I can't let it go.

Exercise relieves anxiety and stress in several ways. First, cardiovascular workouts stimulate brain chemicals that foster growth of nerve cells. Second, exercise increases the activity of serotonin and norepinephrine. Third, a raised heart rate releases

endorphins and a hormone known as ANP, which reduces pain, induces euphoria, and helps control the brain's response to stress and anxiety.

2. Breathe.

You do this one on your own, so you're halfway there. But do you do it the right way? Because you are missing out on some major toxin release if you aren't. This number seems high, but your body actually releases 70 percent of its toxins through breathing. If you are not breathing through your diaphragm, you're not getting the full effect. Over time, the toxins build up, which can cause anxiety, stress, even illness. By releasing carbon dioxide that has been passed through your bloodstream into your lungs, you do your body and its metabolism a favor. When I remember to breathe deeply, I feel immediate relief. It's the difference between full-blown panic and regular panic.

There are all sorts of deep breathing exercises. I'm simple and not all that great at math or patterns, so I merely breathe in, hold it, and breathe out. If I want to get into my OCD mode, I will start counting. However, all it takes sometimes are a few intentional long breaths before I naturally move my breath from the chest to the diaphragm. Swimming is a deep breathing exercise for me, as it forces a cadence of breath for an hour, or as long as I'm in the pool.

3. Understand the language of the amygdala.

The amygdala, the almond cluster in your brain that is responsible for the message, "OH MY GOD, THE WORLD IS ENDING," gets a bad rap. But it should because it is constantly sending us panicked notes, which aren't at all helpful to persons like myself already prone to anxiety. In order to tell this nut to shut the hell up, it's helpful to learn its language.

In her book, "Extinguishing Anxiety," Catherine Pittman (a professor at my alma mater, Saint Mary's College), explains how the amygdala processes events so that we know better how to communicate with the alarmist.

The amygdala pairs a trigger with a negative event. So, let's say a car accident involved someone honking a horn prior to the person getting hit. The horn becomes the trigger. Before the negative event, a horn was a horn; now it evokes fear and panic. Fear learning can occur to a variety of objects, sounds, or situations. In my case, I'm sure some of my panic goes back to certain events of my childhood. Get real. Doesn't everyone's? Those memories have deep roots, so every time I experience substantial change, my amygdala yells, "Here it comes. Hell is around the corner!" I have to remind myself that transitioning to freelance work isn't related to the separation of my parents in the fifth grade. My amygdala must get over it.

4. Take the local lane.

Another insight Pittman offers in [her book](#) is to classify our reaction to a stimulus (for me, right now, switching careers) in one of two ways. Our brains can take the express lane, which means that the thalamus part of our brain — a symmetrical structure of our brain perched on top of the brain cell which is responsible for relaying sensory and motor signals to the cerebral cortex — delivers a message straight to the amygdala... which, of

course, tells us to panic. Or, the brain can take the local lane, the high road, in which the thalamus sends its information to the sensory cortex, where additional processing and refining of the information take place, before it goes to the amygdala. In the latter case, the amygdala doesn't have as much material to wig out over.

5. Go from no to know.

Brilliant language, I think, from psychologist Tamar E. Chansky, Ph.D. This means taking the message, "No, I can't. No, I can't. No. No. No." to the prefrontal cortex, or more sophisticated part of the brain, where we can break it down. We identify the distorted thoughts — like, um, all or nothing? Then we get a little more information. For me, I must remind myself that I never do well in times of transition; to not be so hard on myself; that I have written over a thousand mental health articles in the past, so I can probably do it again; and to go through the motions, breathe, and swim until I feel a tad more stable.