



Anxiety Tips: Diet & Exercise ^[1]

Garrett Ray Harriman ^[2]14.3K reads

Anxiety is part of modern living and oftentimes cannot be avoided. Outside of medication and therapy, daily coping techniques aid anxious acceptance and recovery exponentially. This section describes several helpful ideas and habits to adopt when living with anxiety.

At this point in the course, you have a wider understanding of the causes of fear and anxiety ^[3], common anxiety disorders ^[4], and long-term ^[5] anxiety ^[6] interventions ^[7] including therapy ^[8] and medication ^[9]. Even if you do not personally suffer from an anxiety disorder, anxiety is and will remain a presence in your life. It may arise gradually or suddenly; either way, you'll need a powerful set of tools to cope with its influence, embrace its positive aspects, and avoid its negative, lifelong effects.

The next three sections of the course are dedicated to the behaviors, lifestyle changes, and positive mental habits you can begin incorporating into your life to reduce anxiety. Several of these concepts have origins in the therapeutic schools previously discussed, but none of them require extensive training or tremendous expense to implement. You can begin these techniques today!

If you are ready to turn a new leaf in how you interpret and react to anxiety and the fear response, these next sections are for you.

Exercise

The importance of exercise ^[10] for reducing symptoms of mental disorders—not just anxiety and depressive disorders—cannot be overstated ^[11]. Exercise releases **endorphins**, chemicals which help regulate energy levels and promote good sleep. More energy means less time for rumination and worry and more time putting other anxiety-reduction plans into action. More sleep means less stress overall. As little as 5 minutes of high-intensity aerobic exercise is enough to improve motivation, self-esteem, and trigger anti-anxiety and immune system chemicals.

For someone with depressive symptoms ^[12], 10 minutes of vigorous exercise has the same positive mental effect as a longer 45-minute workout—temporary but hours-long improvements in mood and concentration. Exercise also has a preventative role to play: One study showed participants who exercised regularly were 25% less likely to develop an anxiety or depressive disorder for a full 5 years. Another showed that a regimen of 30-40 minutes of exercise 3 times a week produced the same positive gains ^[13] for Panic Disorder ^[14] as did taking the drug clomipramine in just 10 weeks.

What's more, the same neurons that are excited in the hippocampus (the brain's memory center) during exercise seem to activate other inhibitive neurons. The more healthy excitement neurons experience, the better prepared they are to counteract negative, stress- or anxiety-related responses [15], and the more easily the hippocampus remembers to activate them.

Aside from study specifics, regular exercise also promotes these overarching anti-anxiety moods [16] and mental conditions:

- Gaining confidence
- Meeting goals
- Taking the mind off worries
- More chances for social interaction/support
- Reinforces more healthy coping strategies

Proper Diet

The food and nutrients you supply your body with affect your physical and mental well-being. While most experts agree that the brain's biochemistry and one's life experiences acting on predispositions [17] to anxiety and stress are responsible for the majority of anxiety disorders, there is mounting evidence that indirect links between nutrition and anxiety exist.

The unregulated market for homeopathic and supplemental cure-alls is rife with misinformation about the role certain chemicals play when it comes to anxiety. (Many combinations of natural supplements and psychopharmaceutical medications can actually be deadly! [18]) In an effort to combat these hucksters, here is a brief but scientifically-backed list [19] of foods and nutrients that affect—positively and negatively—anxiety:

- **Eat Omega-3 Fatty Acids** – Commonly found in fish, these chemicals are severely lacking in most modern diets. While the exact mechanism is still unknown, research has found omega-3s reduce anxious reactions [20] by restricting the concentration of cytokines [21], proteins which carry out inflammatory cardiovascular roles during anxiety-inducing situations. Less inflammation during bouts of anxiety means healthier stress reactions on the body and heart. Diets high in omega-3s promote this reaction.
- **Eat Tryptophan** – This amino acid (famously found in turkey) is the catalyst for the production of serotonin, the mood-altering neurotransmitter the levels of which SSRIs attempt to elevate. Controlled studies have shown increased serotonin production with more tryptophan in the body, and a reduction of cortisol, a stress hormone.
- **Eat Complex Carbohydrates** – Foods high in complex carbs [22]—notably whole grains—may contribute to serotonin production more than simple carbs—foods high in sugar and little nutrients.
- **Avoid Sugary Foods/Empty Calories** – Speaking of, blood-sugar levels affect the body's energy and mood levels. Spikes and drops in blood sugar can leave you more vulnerable to stress and anxiety triggers. Eliminating simple carbs and sugars without nutrients

[23] (have actual fruits and vegetables, not juices or concentrates) reduces anxiety's preemptive appearance.

- **Avoid Alcohol & Caffeine** – Alcohol is a depressant; its immediate effect on the body is calming but once metabolized can increase feelings of edginess and interfere with sleep. Caffeine is a stimulant; for people hypervigilant [24] about sensations of danger and anxiety, caffeine's effects on the body (shaky palms, sweating, racing heart) can be confused with anxious symptoms and set off false panic alarms.

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