

HEALTH & WELLNESS / Well-being

◀ NEXT STORY ▶

5 Ways your chronic anxiety can work in your favor

11 hours ago



by Bethany Ramos

Follow



Image: Freedom Images/Cultura/Getty Images

Print

I thought I had to cure my anxiety, but I was wrong

If you have a problem with anxiety, you know it. And if you're looking for answers, there are only a few options available to you: Go to therapy or get on medication.

[Growing up in a severely dysfunctional home](#), I can't remember a day when I didn't feel anxious. It took becoming

an adult and seeking out therapy before I began to see any real progress.

Thanks to therapy and coping mechanisms like meditation, there are days I feel happier than I've ever felt before. Other days, when I'm triggered by something out of the blue, my old friend is back – and my anxiety is worse than ever. My first thought when this happens is that therapy was a total waste of money. My second (more profound) thought is that maybe I'm trying too hard and spinning my wheels for nothing. Maybe having some anxiety is a normal part of life and maybe, just maybe, expecting perfection and searching for a cure is causing me more anxiety in the long run.

Anxiety is the [most common mental illness in the U.S.](#), which means there are 40 million of us out there who need help. Forty million people are trying to figure out how to enjoy life without panic and how to sleep well at night. Cognitive behavioral therapy is one of the [most effective anxiety management tools](#) (and one that worked for me), but many patients walk away without the full picture: It isn't realistic to expect to be 100 percent anxiety-free.

More: [What it's really like parenting with constant anxiety](#)

It's important to do what you can to [make your anxiety manageable](#) and work through the triggers that are holding you back. But, when you've done everything you can, there's that final step so many of us anxious types conveniently overlook: *acceptance*. There are some days when anxiety may be worse than others, and there are other days when anxiety may actually be helpful.

Stacy Kaiser, [Live Happy](#) editor at large and licensed psychotherapist, says, "Anxiety can be a very positive emotion, as it is like a check engine light on your car – the warning that things may not be okay. Anxiety can alert you when there are potential concerns or dangers in your life. For example, if you are anxious about a new relationship or making a purchase when you are having some financial issues, that anxiety is serving to tell you to watch out, be careful and proceed with caution. Anxiety can serve to make you investigate the situation more thoroughly, it can make you take your time before jumping into a situation, and it can even influence you to completely put on the brakes,"

Here's how you tell the difference: If anxiety is running your life and sucking the fun out of everything, it's time to ask for help. A therapist and an anxiety management plan can bring life back into balance. If anxiety is still lingering in the corner of the room, it may be time to make friends with your worst enemy.

1. Use anxiety for success

Speaking as a diehard perfectionist who buries her head in work, I can confirm that behind our hard-working exteriors, we workaholics are just a bundle of nerves. But when you understand your anxiety and can temper its effects on your life, you can use it as a motivator — it may even help you meet your career goals. Jeff Perron, Ph.D., candidate at the University of Ottawa and developer of the [TruReach app](#) for depression and anxiety, acknowledges that anxiety isn't all bad, even for the perfectionists among us.

"Successful people are often perfectionists, but perfectionism is generally anxiety-driven," he says. "If you can learn when it's to your benefit to be a perfectionist and when you need to 'tone-down' your perfectionism, you can have its benefits without completely draining yourself."

2. Use anxiety as a creative outlet

When you spend enough time with your favorite frenemy, you'll come up with a few creative ways to keep "baby in the corner." By now, you probably have your own personal anxiety tricks you use to calm yourself down when you've reached your limit. For me, it's running and journaling, as cliché as it sounds. For PR professional [Ricky Garvey](#), it's channeling his pent-up anxiety into playing electric guitar. Performing not only helps Garvey manage daily stressors, it also allows him to challenge his anxiety on the spot. "My biggest source of panic attacks and anxiety comes from my brain asking the questions, 'What if I had a panic attack right now? On stage. In front of all these people. As a paid player,'" he explains.

"To avoid feeling alone in this situation, I typically inform the band (my friends) that I have this issue. When on stage, I've come up with signals to inform my colleagues of an oncoming attack. When this occurs, I'm greeted with a funny inside joke, gesture or smile that makes light of the situation and lets me know that I'm in control. The longer I've done this, the quicker I can overcome an attack," says Garvey.

More: [15 GIFs that show what growing up with anxiety is really like](#)

3. Use anxiety for growth

Here's some news you might not want to hear: If you never challenge yourself to get out of your comfort zone, you can count on going nowhere — fast. The beautiful side of that dark cloud of anxiety hovering above your head is that it provides you with discomfort, says [Dr. Ben Michaelis](#), clinical psychologist and author of *Your Next Big Thing*. He continues, "I know that may sound odd, but discomfort is actually a wonderful thing. Without some degree of discomfort, no one would do anything. The key is finding the optimal level of discomfort. When you

harness that energy, you can make anxiety work for you, not against you."

April Masini, relationship expert at [Ask April](#), adds, "Anxiety — and other feelings — are cues that allow you to get to know yourself. When you ignore anxiety, you're ignoring self-knowledge! So instead of suppressing these feelings, embrace them and examine them. Figure out why you're anxious, because the answer may help you alleviate the discomfort."

4. Use anxiety to accept yourself

One of the hardest parts of my struggle with anxiety has been the negative self-talk. When I can't get over that same hurdle, when I find myself obsessing over that same irrational fear for months on end, I'm my own worst critic. Beating myself up only makes my anxiety worse. Based on her years spent working with clients with anxiety, [Jessica Heimark, L.M.F.T.](#), poses another solution: acceptance and commitment therapy. Instead of seeing anxiety as a flaw, find the positives in your unique personality traits, says Heimark.

"My clients are able to see themselves not as high strung, but as productive. Not as anal and obsessive, but as particular with attention to detail. By celebrating moments as accomplishments as opposed to seeing these moments as being stuck, clients tend to defuse from the anxiety because it isn't controlling their life anymore. Seeing anxiety as a strength weakens its negative impact, thus reducing the severity and frequency of the symptoms," she explains.

5. Use anxiety as a friend

Sometimes, anxiety is just as simple as you think it is: It's a nagging warning that something in your life isn't going according to plan. As hard as it can be to set aside a moment for self-reflection, it could save you from some major heartache. "My anxiety is like a loud-mouthed, judgmental friend. Whatever crosses my path, she pipes up with her opinions. 'No! Don't do that!' or, 'Why did you say that?'" Joy Rains, author of [Meditation Illuminated: Simple Ways to Manage Your Busy Mind](#), jokes.

Rains says, "Like any beloved friend, sometimes she is right, and I'm glad I listened to her since she can keep me from making a bad decision. On the other hand, I need to take what she says with a grain of salt and realize she is not always right. She gives me an opportunity for discernment. At times, I may have to say, 'Thank you very much for expressing your opinion, I appreciate it. Now go sit over there in the corner and be quiet.'"