

## WORKING WITH ANXIETY ATTACKS<sup>1</sup>

- Most people attribute anxiety to external causes (e.g., "What if I don't make the sale?"); negative experiences tend to build up to first experience of anxiety or panic.
  - Seems to come out of the blue, then pattern begins to form and symptoms take on a life of their own (fearing sensations, becoming preoccupied with when next attack will come, focusing on internal sensations, negative images, self-doubt, uncertainty, discouragement, self-criticism).
  - Pseudo-solutions are avoidance, analyzing experience, thinking positive thoughts, planning for worst outcome, trying to contain the internal experience, vigilance = theme of needing control, which is why relaxation training alone doesn't work.
  - Instead of using avoidance, use paradoxical strategy of acceptance: *create* the symptoms and know how to respond. "I *want* these symptoms," vs. "I can't have these symptoms."
  - No. 1 predictor of success is *practice*:
    - Access and notice parasympathetic response (if fearful thoughts come up, *notice* them and go back to task at hand) = relaxation, meditation, deep muscle relaxation, abdominal breathing (calming breaths, calming counts).
    - Drive a wedge into the cycle (change parasympathetic response, allow time to pass by paying attention to breathing, especially exhale, more able to have calming thoughts vs. countering negative thoughts—because negative thoughts are so powerful, practice 8-10 times/day). Become aware of the negative observer—listen for critical, worried, hopeless thoughts, create more descriptive self-talk, begin calming counts; as you gain control, ask "How can I support myself now?" Take supportive action based on your answer (e.g., "It's O.K. to take a strong stand.")
- 1) Step back, develop neutral observer stance (dissociation). Instead of getting trapped in worried, critical, or hopeless comments, just notice them without judgment ("Ah, that's how it's showing up today").
  - 2) Paradoxical Strategy—use symptoms as cues—cooperate instead of competing with them:
    - Take calming breath and begin natural breathing.
    - Don't fight symptoms or run away.
    - Consciously decide to use paradox.
    - Observe most predominant physical symptom at this moment.
    - Say "I would like to increase\_\_\_"
    - Consciously increase the predominant symptom.
    - Now increase all other symptoms you notice.
    - Continue natural breathing while consciously increasing symptoms.

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpted from R. Reid Wilson's *Don't Panic: Taking Control of Anxiety Attacks*