

Coping with Anxiety

Although almost everyone feels somewhat anxious in unfamiliar situations, some people feel such high levels of anxiety, making them extremely uncomfortable, that they find it easier to avoid certain situations. Others may rely on alcohol or other drugs to reduce their anxiety to a tolerable level. Neither solution works well in the long run. Using alcohol or other drugs to cope with anxiety can become a vicious cycle, in which people come to believe that they can't function in a given situation without using substances.

What you think and what you tell yourself have a big influence on how you feel. Many people have responded to situations in the same way for so long that their thinking becomes almost automatic. These “automatic thoughts” are the negative messages people give themselves that contribute to feelings of anxiety. Becoming aware of your own automatic thoughts, then challenging them, can help you break a common cycle of substance use. This cycle is illustrated below.

anxiety-provoking → automatic → high level → substance use to
situation thoughts of anxiety decrease anxiety

The first step is to identify ways that you might engage in automatic, or faulty, thinking. Here are some examples of automatic thoughts:

- Perfectionism (“I still sometimes think about drinking—so I’ve really failed in treatment.”)
- Mind reading (“My boss thinks I’m incompetent.” “This person must think I’m boring.”)
- Emotional reasoning—the idea that, if you feel it, therefore it must be true (“I feel so stupid, I must really look stupid.”)
- All or nothing thinking (“I had one drink, so I’m headed back to living on the street!”)
- “Should” statements (“I should always be in control.” “I shouldn’t show others how nervous I am.”)
- Jumping to conclusions (“My parole officer/boss called me today; I must be in trouble.”)
- Labelling (“I’m just an alcoholic/ex-convict/junkie.”)
- Dwelling on the negatives (“I always screw things up. Why should this time be any different?”)

PRACTICE EXERCISE

1. Can you think of any other examples of automatic thoughts? _____

2. Describe a situation in which you have felt stressed or anxious, and have used alcohol or other drugs to cope: _____

3. List the consequences of drinking or other drug use in that situation (positive **and** negative, short-term **and** long-term): _____

4. List the automatic thoughts that go along with this situation: _____

5. How do you feel as a result of these thoughts? _____

What are some things you could say to yourself in the future in order to replace the negative thoughts outlined above? For example, you could say something neutral or positive to yourself (“I’m trying and that is a start”).

If you are in a group treatment setting, you may wish to role-play the above scenario, or ask your counsellor for help in coming up with some alternatives. In any case, it is important to practice your coping plan in anxiety-provoking situations.

Here are some strategies that have worked for others in coping with automatic thoughts:

- Relabel your negative feelings (e.g., stress, anxiety)—and the cravings that go along with them—as an important signal to take action.
- Practise “thought stopping.” When you recognize negative automatic thoughts appearing, shout “STOP!” and picture a large stop sign in your imagination.
- Pay attention to the positive things that happen, and keep track of them. You may even want to write them down.
- Challenge the automatic thought. Ask: Does it make sense? What is the evidence for it? Is there a more realistic way to interpret the situation?
- Pat yourself on the back! Say something positive to yourself or reward yourself when you successfully cope with an anxiety-producing situation without drinking or using other drugs.
- Remember that some anxiety and stress is normal for everyone. Concentrate on reducing your anxiety to a manageable level, not on eliminating it entirely.
- It is important for you to become an observer of your thoughts. That way you can be aware of messages you tell yourself. Observe your positive and negative judgments about yourself.