



# FAMILY Matters

Michael D. Zito, Ph.D.



## How to manage your anxiety

While it is important to understand that biology contributes to anxious behavior, it is essential to understand and recognize that you can actively manage your anxieties. First, let's start with an understanding of how our thought processes create anxiety.

Most anxiety starts with a negative prediction about an upcoming situation. The prediction is then assumed to be a conclusion (meaning it will happen). The person then reacts as if it is true by either avoiding the situation or feeling nervous in the situation. For example, when considering flying on an airplane, you predict that the airplane will have a catastrophic emergency or crash, therefore you don't buy an airplane ticket or are extremely nervous during the flight. The main problem is that the anxious person has confused a thought with a reality. It is important to realize that a thought is just a thought that needs to be tested or reality checked with information. For the example above, there is a higher probability of a serious automobile accident than an airplane incident.

Anxious individuals have a tendency to overestimate the likelihood of danger or a negative event be-

cause they can more easily recall negative dramatic events that they heard about than positive ones.

This "danger" focused thinking is often rationalized by thinking "it could happen." This "could happen" mentality incorrectly assumes that if something is possible, it is then also probable. This fails to take into account the low probability of many events that people could become anxious about. For example, should you be anxious about the possibility that a small plane could crash into your house? It "could happen" but there is an extremely small chance it will, so most people don't become anxious about it.

There is also a tendency to interpret normal behaviors as likely negative. For example, anxious people tend to think that every cough needs to be checked by the doctor or steam produced when opening a dishwasher could be a potential fire or a physical pain could be a life threatening situation. Anxious individuals often believe they can't control their thoughts, but in my experience, they can learn to manage their thoughts through cognitive behavioral therapy.

### So what should anxious individuals do?

- Take charge of your anxiety inducing thoughts and redirect them to neutral or positive ones.
- Reality check your anxious negative predictions, i.e., consider the true likelihood of a negative prediction before becoming anxious.
- Develop a more optimistic point of view by looking for positive predictions and seeing life experiences as learning opportunities.
- Exercise regularly to flush out the hormone cortisol which is generally produced in anxiety conditions.
- Understand that a thought is not the same as a reality.
- Develop the ability to understand how you can manage your thought processes because anxious individuals often believe incorrectly that their thoughts are out-of-control.
- Only be concerned about things that have a high probability of occurring.
- Do what you are anxious about doing because that serves as a reality check to your negative predictions.
- Utilize guided imagery and meditation apps commonly found in phones and computers.

*Michael D. Zito, Ph.D. is a licensed psychologist with offices in Watchung and Morristown. He practices clinical, sport and performance psychology with children through adults and can be reached at MichaelZitoPhD@yahoo.com Dr. Zito welcomes your questions and ideas for future articles.*