**Helping Others with Anxiety Over the Phone**

**It's Important to Understand Anxiety and Why We Feel It in Order to Help**



**by Debra Lafler, WI Department of Health Services Wellness/EAP Manager**  
   
To help others with anxiety while on the phone with them, it is first important to understand what anxiety is and why we feel it, what the body is doing, and what some signs of anxiety may be. The first page will review these things for you. The second page will provide you with some tips to help them.

# Understanding anxiety

Anxiety is a normal reaction to a perceived threat (real or imagined) to our basic human needs.

# We have the following innate human fears:

* Fear of harm, illness, disability or death
* Fear of not being able to protect and provide for oneself and/or loved ones
  + Physical shelter (fear of homelessness)
  + Food and water (fear of hunger)
  + Employment and Money/Finances (fear of poverty)
  + Caregiving (children, adult with needs, elderly, pets)
* Fear of not being or doing or having “enough”
* Fear of failure or disappointing others or being a burden to others
* Fear of separation, abandonment, isolation and loneliness
* Fear of loss of autonomy, choice, control and/or power
* Fear of uncertainty

**Fight, flight or freeze**

When we are threatened, our brain responds as if we are getting physically attacked. It shuts down the higher cognitive functions like thinking, creating, connecting and appreciating. And it turns on the physical reaction and survival functions: fight, flight or freeze.

* The fight response may present as frustration, anger, or defensiveness
* The flight response may present as impulsive actions, like quitting or moving
* The freeze response may present as denial, avoidance, or procrastination

# Signs of anxiety

The following are signs that someone may be feeling a lot of anxiety, and may need help:

* Verbal and emotional signs:
  + Rapid thoughts (spoken or written) and unable to think through solutions
  + Excessive worry about uncertainties and not knowing what to do
  + Expressing anger, being defensive, making threats, or crying
  + Expressing signs of deep despair, depression, or suicidal ideation
* Physical signs:
  + Rapid breathing
  + Sweating or shaking
  + Digestive or sleep disturbances
  + Muscle tension and physical pain
  + Lifestyle coping behaviors that can become problematic:
    - Disordered eating (overeating, undereating, binge/purging)
    - Substance use (alcohol, tobacco, or other drug use)
    - Body-focused behaviors (nail biting, cutting, hair pulling)
    - Impulsive behaviors (shopping, gambling, etc.)

# How to help someone

## When someone is feeling anxious, and their brain and body is in fight, flight or freeze response, to help them, we can use the 3 R’s approach:

* **Regulate**– help them physically feel present and safe
* **Relate**– help them feel seen, heard, valued and validated
* **Reason**– help them identify solutions to respond

*Source for the 3Rs approach:*[*Bruce Perry, MD, PhD*](https://www.bdperry.com/)

## How to help them regulate (shifting their brain out of fight-flight-freeze):

* As the listener, be present, calm, and grounded yourself (you can do the following process just before you talk to someone, or throughout the call to keep you grounded):
  + Feel your feet on the floor
  + Feel your body in your chair
  + Bring your attention to your breath
  + Breathe slowly and deeply (in for a count of 5 out for a count of 5)
  + Repeat three times
* If the person is very anxious and sounding like they are in a panic, and you feel that they would be open to it, you can invite them to pause and breathe with you for a minute. You can cue them using the same cues as above.
* Express that you are there for them (so they know you are a ‘safe person’ to talk to). You can say things like: “We are going to figure this out together.” Or “I’m here to help you through this.”

## How to help them relate (help them connect; and feel seen, heard, valued, and validated):

* Ask them to explain why they are calling
* Listen (without interrupting them; let them finish their thoughts)
* Recognize their courage to be vulnerable (e.g., "Thank you for sharing this with me.")
* Repeat back to them what you are hearing, so they know you heard them
* Ask questions to help understand issues more deeply, if needed
* Respond with empathy/compassion (e.g., “I’m sorry you are going through this.”)
* Validate their issues and feelings (e.g., “You're not alone;” “You have a right to feel that way.”)
* Validate their struggle (e.g., "This sounds so tough to go through.")
* You can also ask them how their family members are doing, to show that you care about their loved ones; and ask if there is anything you can do to assist them.

## How to help them reason (help them find solutions to respond):

* Help them identify things that they can control and do, today, or this week
* If you do have resources, e-mail those to them
* If there is something you can do for them, offer to assist and get back to them
* Offer to follow-up or to have them call back if they need
* If you are concerned for their or their family’s mental health, you can remind them of their mental health resources. You can also call these resources with the person on the phone, so you can assist them in talking and asking for the help they need.
  + **Employee Assistance Program (EAP)** – check with household employers for any EAP services (e.g., counseling, legal & financial assistance, resources or referrals)
    - Steps to do: check with the employer(s) (if needed); then call the EAP for assistance and scheduling appointments
  + **Mental health care** – check with their health plan for mental health benefits (e.g., counseling, diagnoses, medication, treatment, etc.)
    - Steps to do: call the health plan; locate provider(s); select and call provider(s) to get an appointment.
      * Mental health counselors or social workers for counseling
      * Psychiatrists or Medical Doctors for medication
      * Addiction centers for comprehensive addiction treatment
  + [**Local or online support groups** - see the Resilient Wisconsin list of resources](https://dhs.wisconsin.gov/resilient/help.htm)
  + [**# 211** - Local help to find any assistance, referrals or resources](https://211wisconsin.communityos.org/) (e.g., food, housing, utilities, clothing, taxes, human trafficking, sexual assault, domestic violence, employment, addiction, health and dental services, veterans, aging and disabilities)
  + [**# 988** - Suicide & Mental Health Crisis Lifeline](https://dhs.wisconsin.gov/crisis/988.htm) (available 24/7)
    - If the person is suicidal or in a mental health crisis (i.e., in a significant depressed, hopeless, anxious or panicked state), call this number together to talk with a crisis counselor. They have the expertise to help.
  + [**# 911** - Emergency services (call if someone's life is in immediate danger)](https://www.911.gov/)