

A-W-A-R-E Model for Coping with Anxiety

Acknowledge anxiety. Quit fighting it and learn to accept it as an unavoidable emotion we all experience. Telling yourself “Don’t freak out” only makes it worse. Instead, try telling yourself “I know my nervous system is working. This is normal.”

Watch anxiety. Try not judge as good or bad. Instead, try to rate the intensity (1-100) over time. Assigning a number helps you recognize gray areas and that not all anxiety is the same. As the numbers change you will also notice that there a pattern to your anxiety. The intensity will increase to a peak and then it will predictably decrease. Learn to realize the emotion is time-limited.

Act through. Don’t let anxiety prevent you from living life. Avoiding it makes it grow.

Repeat process. It takes lots of practice to get better at increased acceptance of your anxiety.

Expect the best. Each episode is a fresh try. Try to notice even small gains.

One of the most common maladaptive responses to anxiety or anxious situations is avoidance. Avoidance is maladaptive because you never learn how to tolerate the anxiety to the point that it begins to eventually extinguish itself. In addition, because avoidance feels good on some level (escaping a negative feeling) it serves to reinforce the anxiety reaction that you are trying to avoid. It is similar to feeding a dog to stop it from barking. The dog stops barking temporarily to eat the food, but you reinforce the dog to bark more because the food feels good on some level to the dog. The AWARE model above is adopted from the work by Dr. Aaron Beck and is a tool you can use to learn to better cope with anxiety. By practicing the AWARE model you can begin to change your relationship with anxiety and break the cycle of avoidance that makes your anxiety grow stronger.

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