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Trouble Relaxing? There's an App for That!

— Danielle Romano-Cihak, Psy.D.

WINTER IS A TIME FOR HOLIDAYS, family, vacation, and . . . stress! It would be helpful to have some support at our fingertips, and with modern technology, this is now possible. Below are some apps that provide strategies for dealing with anxiety, depression, and anger.

Breathe2Relax (Free):

Teaches different breathing techniques to help manage stress. Includes video coaching, demos, and a way to chart your progress and/or favorite exercises.

Calm (Free):

Provides guided meditation exercises; some available with visual imagery focused on nature.

Meditation exercises range in length (3, 5, 10, 15, 20, or 25 minutes), with variety of topics (Calming Anxiety, Happiness, Forgiveness, Calm Kids). Also includes "Sleep Stories," a feature that tells "adult tales to help you drift off to dreamland," combining body and mind relaxation.

Headspace (Free):

Guides you through daily mindfulness exercises. Exercises range in length (2 minutes to 60 minutes) and in themes (Health, Relationships, Performance). Also allows you to track progress and receive reminders based on individual preferences. With a paid subscription, you may access additional meditation exercises, including "SOS" or crisis support, as well as exercises specifically designed for children.

Insight Timer (Free):

According to Apple, the most popular free meditation app with more than 1.2 million meditators.

Includes 3,000 guided meditations, as well as 500 free music tracks for meditation. In addition, the app provides a connection to a "worldwide community of meditators" for both local and online support.

a place to record worries in the moment. The app prompts you later to review the outcome of the worry. The app tracks and charts trends within your experiences, typically to reflect that the worry is worse than experience.

Virtual Hope Box (Free):

Developed to create a virtual "hope box" or a place for someone to keep important pictures, people/support, quotes, strategies, and/or coping skills. The app provides a place to refer to when away from physical resources. Also provides distraction techniques, games, and comforting pictures.

What's Up (Free):

Focuses on using methods based in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT) to

cope with feelings of depression, anxiety, and anger. Features include identifying negative thought patterns and strategies to address these thoughts, as well as motivating quotes, social forums, and "grounding" games to help you stay "grounded" during intense emotions.

Other recommended apps: *Buddhify (mindfulness)*, *Fitness Builder (exercise)*, *Operation Reach Out (crisis support)*, *Sleep Cycle (sleep monitoring)*, and *Stop, Think & Breathe (meditation)*.

These apps may help to support a healthy mood and body. Please use with discretion, and continue to reach out to resources if you need additional support. Happy App-ing! ■

Danielle Romano-Cihak, Psy.D., is a Licensed Clinical Psychologist dedicated to helping children, young adults, and families improve mood, anxiety, and communication



MoodKit (\$4.99):

Provides coping tools to support quick improvement in mood, as well as a "thought check" to monitor thinking patterns, and a journal to work through emotions. In addition, the app links to your calendar, allowing you to easily track mood and reflect back on patterns.

OMG (Free):

Features 10-minute meditation techniques, with the goal to use the app daily to deal with specific issues of anxiety, sleeplessness, sadness. Also provides a mindfulness program specifically for children.

Relax Melodies (Free):

Allows you to listen to 50 different sounds and songs, as well as create your own combination of sounds. Aimed to help sleeplessness, this app helps you to calm your mind and your body.

Worry Watch (\$1.99):

Functions similarly to a journal, password protected and provides

Q&A

Q I'm having trouble sleeping. Would something like Xanax help me?

A Commonly prescribed benzodiazepines (BZD) include alprazolam (Xanax), clonazepam (Klonopin) and lorazepam (Ativan). Often these medications are recommended for short term use and/or used in conjunction with other agents for anxiety and insomnia. These agents typically work much faster compared to other classic antidepressants prescribed for anxiety and may be useful for more rapid relief of symptoms as other medications have time to reach a clinical effect.

Short term use of these medications is generally safe and effective; however, the long term use of BZD is controversial, because of the potential of tolerance (needing more and more medication to get the same effect), dependence (physical and emotional reliance on the medications that leads to withdrawal with cessation of the medication), and other adverse effects. Long-term BZD therapy has the potential for a protracted, uncomfortable withdrawal syndrome that can last for months. Withdrawal symptoms are possible after only one month of daily use. Also, some people who stop taking these medications experience a rebound effect, increased anxiety or restlessness. For example, BZD have been linked in the elderly with falls, car accidents, confusion, and amnesic effects. ■

Anna Mackender, M.D.,
Psychiatrist

Unhealthy Coping Strategies

DURING STRESSFUL TIMES, WE have a tendency to look for ways to cope in the short term. Some of these less-than-healthy coping strategies may seem like a good idea, but they can often end up causing more problems down the road. Below are some of the more common unhealthy ways people use to try to cope. Any of them sound familiar?

■ **Drugs, Food, Drink, Internet, Shopping, etc.:** People look for something to distract or comfort themselves when stressed, and this compulsive type of behavior can fit the bill. It can often start out as a way of treating oneself, but soon enough the compulsive behavior becomes a problem of its own.

■ **Sleep:** Either too much or too little sleep are signs that this is becoming unhealthy. Too much,

and sleep is being used as an escape. Too little, and one can easily become sleep deprived under the guise of trying to "get things done."

■ **Anger:** This can show up in a number of ways. An early sign might be snapping at loved ones. Full-blown anger can manifest as road rage or other hostile acting out. Passive aggressiveness, such as the silent treatment or sarcasm, can also be a sign of anger,

■ **Procrastination:** People often say they work best under pressure. What they don't realize is that they add greatly to that pressure by procrastinating. Not only is there anxiety when they worry about what they are not doing, but also they are building up stress and tension trying to beat an approaching deadline.

■ **Isolating:** Stressed people tend to cut back on socializing and keep to themselves more. This is a great loss, as others can help by possibly pitching in to deal with the stressors, pointing out some of the compulsive behaviors, and providing support in general. Asking for help is one of the best ways of dealing with stress.

If any of the above coping strategies sound familiar, be patient with yourself. Being aware is the first step to making changes. Work on choosing healthier alternatives with the help of supportive persons. While life will still be stressful, hopefully you will develop more effective ways to deal with that stress. ■

Lisa Hopkins, NCC, LCPC, CADC, PCGC is a licensed clinical professional counselor who enjoys working with persons with anxiety and other stress-related conditions.

Your Breath is Key to Less Stress

WE ALL KNOW HOW STRESSFUL life can be. Besides the tragic losses and setbacks in life, we all live with low-level chronic stress. This part of everyday life involves juggling multiple, conflicting demands on our limited time and energy. The end result is that our stress response system can run amok, and if stuck in overdrive for too long, chronic health problems ensue. In fact, the CDC estimates that over 80% of doctor visits are stress-related.

So what can we do about it? In the long-term, we all need to consider a lifestyle adjustment. But in the short-term, we can decrease the body's stress response by paying closer attention to our breathing. Why our breathing? Because it is easily affected by our response to stress and it is the cornerstone of all forms of relaxation and meditation. Taking deep, diaphragmatic breaths counteracts our stress response and initiates a relaxation response.

Our breathing becomes rapid and shallow when under too much stress, resulting in anxiety and systemic inflammation in response to the stress hormones. But when we change our breathing to be slower and deeper, the body's relaxation response stimulates the brain to release neurotransmitters that produce a sense of calm.

So when feeling stressed try taking a few long, slow, deep breaths. As you breathe in through your nose you should feel your belly bellow out. Hold your breath several seconds, and then slowly release it through your lips, completely emptying your lungs. At first you may need to practice this breathing technique by lying on your back and placing one hand slightly below your navel and the other hand on your chest. If you are breathing correctly, you'll feel the hand on your belly rise up as you inhale and feel it fall back



down toward the spinal column as you exhale. In no time, you will be able to apply this technique while standing and going about your day. It helps to breathe like this as often and for as long as you can. ■

Jeffrey L. Santee, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist with advanced training in cognitive psychology and behavioral medicine. In addition to his work in men's and marital issues, he specializes in the treatment of depression, anxiety disorders, and stress-related health problems. Treatment modalities include individual, marital, and group therapy.