

Understanding and **Coping with** **Adolescent Anxiety**

Merima “Meri” Ruhotina
Medical Student University of Vermont

What is Anxiety?

- Anxiety is a **normal reaction** to **stress** and can actually be beneficial in some situations.
- Anxiety **disorder** is characterized by **chronic unfocused worry and stress**
- For some people anxiety can become excessive.
- While the person suffering may realize their anxiety is too much, they may also have difficulty controlling it and it may **negatively affect their day-to-day living.**
- There are a wide variety of anxiety disorders, including post-traumatic stress disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and panic disorder



Signs and Symptoms

- Symptoms generally include **excessive fears** and **worries**, feelings of inner **restlessness**, and a tendency to be excessively wary and vigilant. Even in the absence of an actual threat, some teenagers describe feelings of **continual nervousness**, or **extreme stress**.
- Teenagers who suffer from excessive anxiety regularly experience a range of physical symptoms as well. They may complain about **muscle tension** and **cramps**, **stomachaches**, **headaches**, **pain** in the limbs and back, fatigue, or discomforts associated with pubertal changes. They may **blotch**, **flush**, **sweat**, hyperventilate, tremble, and startle easily.
- In a **social setting**, anxious teenagers may appear **dependent**, **withdrawn**, or **uneasy**. They seem either overly restrained or overly emotional. They may be preoccupied with worries about losing control or unrealistic concerns about social competence.

Some things you might feel when you are anxious...

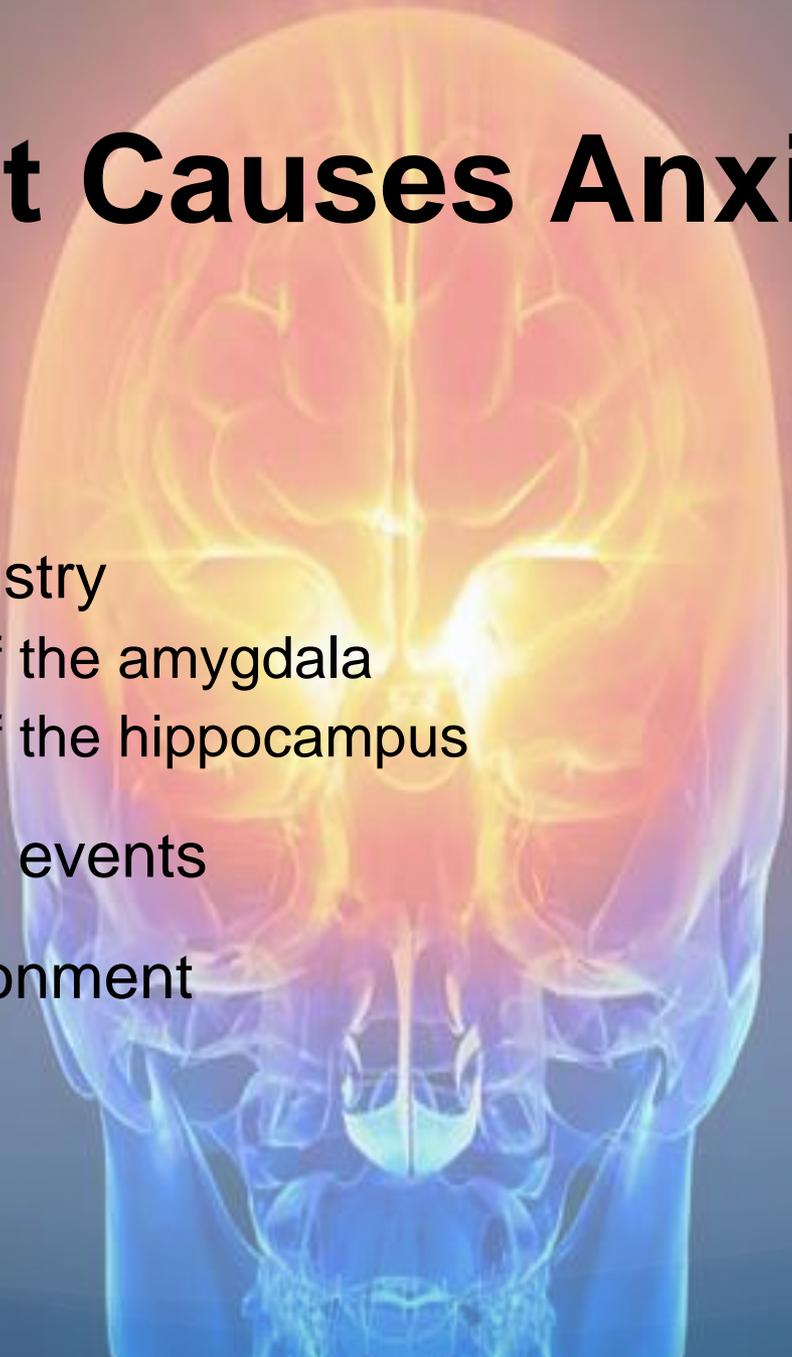
- Restlessness, feeling on edge
- Difficulty swallowing
- Difficulty concentrating
- Trouble falling asleep (mind will not “shut off”)
- Trembling, twitching
- Hot flashes
- Nausea
- Lightheadedness
- Going to bathroom frequently
- Air hunger – feeling as if you cannot get enough air
- Difficulty relaxing
- Easily startled
- Anticipating the worst outcome for any situation
- Excessive concerns and worries about usual daily activities

Who gets anxiety?



- National data indicate that nearly **40 million people in the United States** (18%) experience an anxiety disorder in any given year.
- **Most prevalent** among **adolescents** between the **ages of 13 and 18** and have the **earliest** median age of first onset, around **age 6**.
- **8%** of teens 13-18 have anxiety disorder

What Causes Anxiety?



- Genetics
- Brain Chemistry
 - The role of the amygdala
 - The role of the hippocampus
- Stressful life events
- Home environment

Diagnosis



- A doctor must conduct a **careful diagnostic evaluation** to determine whether a person's symptoms are caused by an anxiety disorder or a physical problem.
- If an anxiety disorder is diagnosed, the type of disorder or the combination of disorders that are present must be identified, as well as any coexisting conditions, such as depression or substance abuse.

Types of Anxiety Disorders

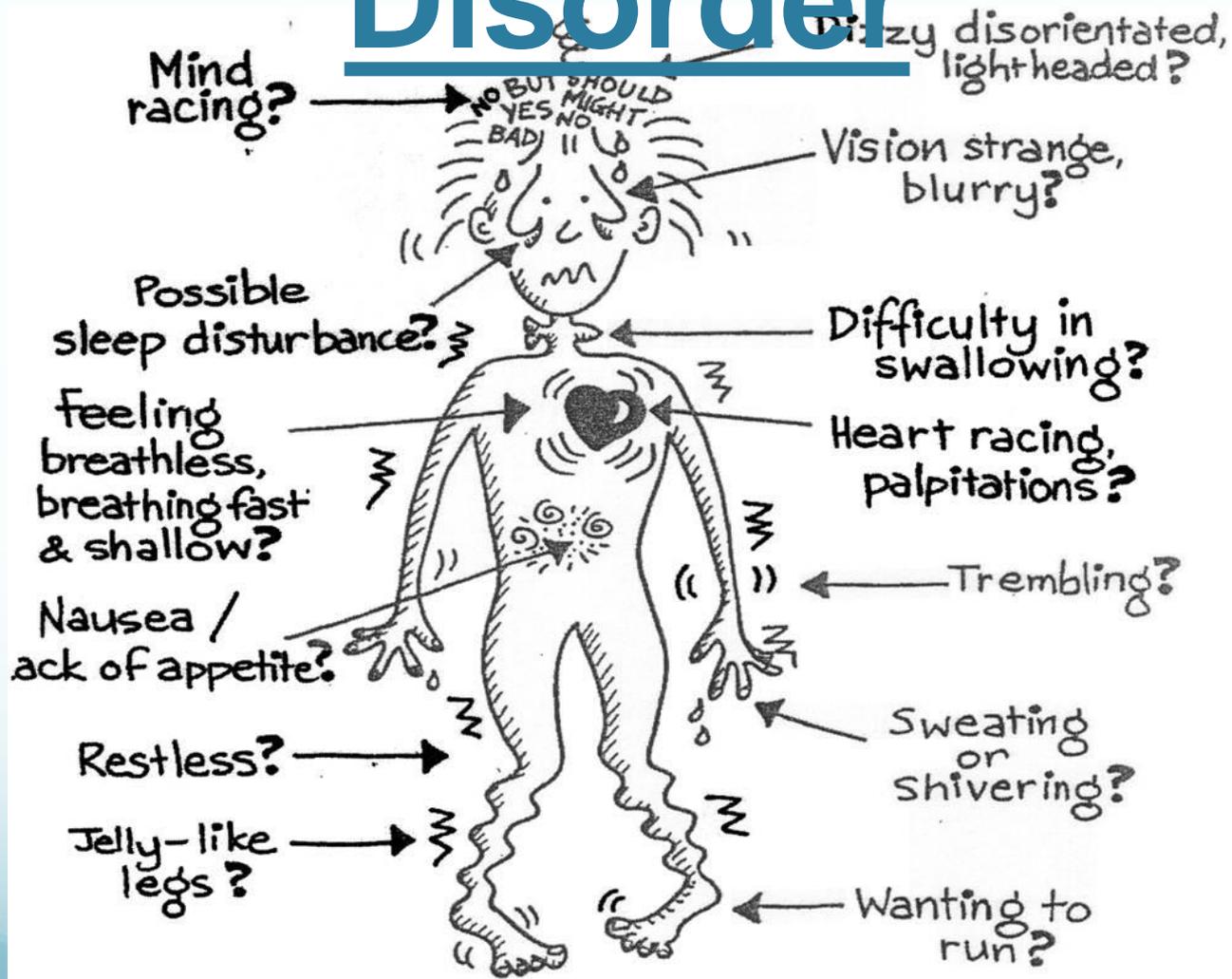
- **Generalized Anxiety Disorder**
- **Panic Disorder**
- **Phobias**
- **Post Traumatic Stress Disorder**
- **Obsessive Compulsive Disorder**



CASE 1

- Mitchell is a 17-year-old boy. His school counselor says he used to be a good student, but over the past year **his grades have dropped** and he often skips classes. Mitchell is very **withdrawn**. He avoids friends and family, and tends to stay home alone in his room. He states he is **very anxious** whenever he is at school, and **he worries a lot** about what others think of him - whether he is wearing the right clothes, or if he will give the correct answers in class. Mitchell also worries a lot at home, especially when he watches the news and hears about crime in the city. He worries about his own and his family's safety, and tries to deal with his anxiety by avoiding the news and newspapers. He also tries to avoid being around others, including his friends at school. Mitchell often **has muscle cramps in his neck and shoulders**, and he has difficulty paying attention in class. He also **doesn't sleep well**, usually just 'tossing and turning' throughout the. He worries a lot about his future - whether he will ever have a girlfriend or a job.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder



Generalized Anxiety Disorder

- Most people experience anxiety at some point in their lives and some nervousness in anticipation of a real situation
- **Chronic exaggerated** worry, **tension**, **irritability** that appears to have no cause or is more intense than the situation warrants
- **Restlessness**, trouble falling or staying asleep, **headaches**, **trembling**, **twitching**, **muscle tension** or sweating

CASE 2

- Ben is 15 years old, and lives with his mother. Four months ago, while riding as a passenger in a car that was traveling through a tunnel, Ben said his **throat started to tighten and he was having trouble breathing**. His mother noticed that he was very upset, and immediately took him to the E.R., where he was tested for allergies. The results were negative. Although he eventually settled and was able to breathe normally, he was shaken by the experience and was unsure why it happened. Unexpectedly, Ben had the **same choking sensation** a week later, while sitting alone in his bedroom. This time, he also felt **dizzy and nauseous**. Since the first attack in the tunnel, Ben has experienced 10 more episodes. Each time, the sensations come on suddenly and intensely, **last for about 10 minutes, and passes over the next 30 minutes**. Ben has started to worry about having additional attacks. He refuses to drive through tunnels and has started to avoid going shopping, out for dinner, or spending time with friends, especially if it means leaving his neighborhood.

Panic Disorder



Panic Disorder

- **White knuckled, heart pounding terror strikes** suddenly without warning.
- Attack is unpredictable and therefore people live in persistent worry that another one could overcome
- Attacks usually last for 10-15 min
- Symptoms include pounding heart, **chest pains**, **lightheadedness**, **dizziness**, **nausea**, shortness of breath, shaking or trembling, choking, **fear of dying**, sweating, feelings of unreality, numbness or tingling, hot flashes or chills and feeling of going out of control or going crazy
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hdOK1k6RSII>

CASE 3

- The story of 14-year-old Jesse: Jesse is really **afraid of getting needle injections**. When he was eight years old, he passed out at the doctor's office during a blood test. Since then, Jesse **avoids watching or thinking about anything that has to do with blood, needles, or medical procedures**. He says they make him feel like his "heart is racing" and he "can't breathe or think", and he will either "freak out" or "faint again". Before a doctor's visit, Jesse repeatedly asks for reassurance and promises from his mom that he will not need to get a shot. During his last check-up, the doctor tried to bring up the topic of getting a TB test, which would involve a little shot in the arm. When the doctor said this, **Jesse got very upset and started to breathe heavily and shake**. He also began crying and telling his mom repeatedly that he wanted to go home. Jesse's mom was very surprised by her son's reaction, and thinks he may have had a panic attack. She is worried that Jesse will never want to go to the doctor again.

Phobia Disorder

THE NATION'S TOP TEN PHOBIAS

- 1 Arachnophobia – spiders
- 2 Social phobia – social or public situations
- 3 Aerophobia – flying
- 4 Agoraphobia – open or public spaces
- 5 Claustrophobia – enclosed spaces
- 6 Emetophobia – vomiting
- 7 Acrophobia (vertigo) – heights
- 8 Cancerphobia – developing cancer
- 9 Brontophobia – thunderstorms
- 10 Necrophobia – death (your own and others')



Phobia

- **Irrational fear** that lead people to altogether **avoid specific things or situations** that trigger intense anxiety
- Phobias occur in several forms, for example **agoraphobias** is the fear of being in a social situation that might trigger a panic attack and from which escape might be difficult.
- Many of the same symptoms as panic attacks

CASE 4

- Eric is a 13-year-old boy who was always very outgoing and had lots of friends in school. About a year ago, he **dropped out of soccer and karate lessons, even though he used to love both activities**. He started staying at home after school instead of seeing his friends, and arguing with his mom about going to school. Eric also started calling his mom many times on her cell phone whenever she left the house.
- Eric's **problems started after a trauma he experienced about a year ago**. While driving to the mall with his mom, a car ran a red light and **hit the side of their car**. Eric's mom's car spun several times and hit a tree. The driver of the other car suffered a serious head wound. Luckily, neither Eric nor his mom were hurt. Eric said that he could still remember what the man in the other car looked like with blood trickling down from his forehead to his face, "**like a color picture in my head**".
- After the accident, Eric was terrified of being in cars. He was even afraid of walking down the street, saying that there are "crazy drivers everywhere", and he was worried that he would get hit by a car. When he does leave the house, he insists that his mom come with him, and he becomes very anxious when she is out of his line of sight. Eric also **has nightmares** about car crashes, and he says he keeps having thoughts pop into his head about the accident. **He gets very anxious when he hears a car horn honking, or if he sees a news article about car accidents**. He no longer watches the news or TV shows that contain any violence.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder



Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

- Anyone who has **experienced, witnessed, or participated** in a **traumatic occurrence**
- Symptoms can range from **constantly reliving** the event to emotional numbing. Persistent anxiety, **exaggerated startle reactions**, difficulty concentrating, **nightmares**, and insomnia are common
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RdQcpFz8nbU>

Case 5

- **Jamal's Story:** Jamal is a 16-year-old boy whose parents have been concerned that he might be **depressed and suffering from an eating disorder**. Jamal was always a shy and friendly boy. In the last year, however, he has started avoiding his friends and family, he dropped out of soccer, and now spends most of his time alone in his room. In the last few months, he has started sleeping over 12 hours every day, and he eats much less.
- His parents noticed that he seems to **avoid going into the kitchen**, and he even asked his mom **to take away all the sharp instruments** (such as knives, razors, and tweezers), and lock them up so he wouldn't hurt himself or anyone else. Jamal's parents did as he asked because they were afraid that he was suicidal, but when they asked him about it, he denied that he was depressed or suicidal. After a while, he admitted that he kept **having thoughts like "cut yourself" or "cut your friends and family"**, and that he sometimes had this **strong and unwanted urge to act on the thoughts**. Jamal said he was terrified by these thoughts. He would never want to hurt anyone, but he is worried that, because he has these thoughts, he might act on them. **Jamal tries to push these thoughts out of his head, but it doesn't work**. So, he avoids being around other people and around sharp objects, in an attempt to try to stop these upsetting thoughts from coming into his head.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder

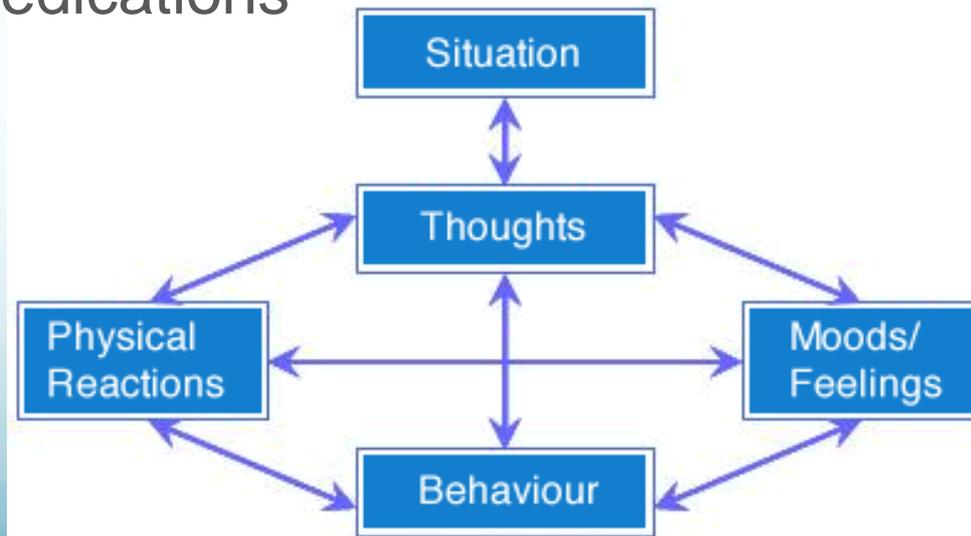


Obsessive Compulsive Disorder

- **Obsessions** are unwanted and **disturbing thoughts**, images, or impulses that **intrude** into the **mind** and cause a great deal of anxiety.
- **Compulsions** are **repetitive behaviors** or mental acts that children feel a very strong urge to do, in order to reduce their anxiety.
- The obsessions or compulsions cause significant anxiety or distress, or they interfere with normal routine, academic functioning, social activities, or relationships.
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=44DCWslbsNM>

Treatment Options

- **Cognitive behavioral therapy**
- **Biofeedback** to control muscle tension
 - Arousal decreasing techniques
- **Relaxation techniques**
- **Medication-** anti-anxiety medications
- **School Supports**
- **Community Supports**
- **Regular Routine**



Living With Anxiety

- If you think you have an anxiety disorder here are some resources you can contact include:
 - Your **guidance counselor**
 - Your **school nurse**
 - Your **Teachers!**
 - Your **parents**
 - Your **doctor!**
 - **Anonymous** crisis hotline
 - Crisis Hotline Numbers: 1-800-273-TALK.
 - Chittenden County Crisis hotline: 802.488.6400
 - If you are in immediate crisis dial 911.

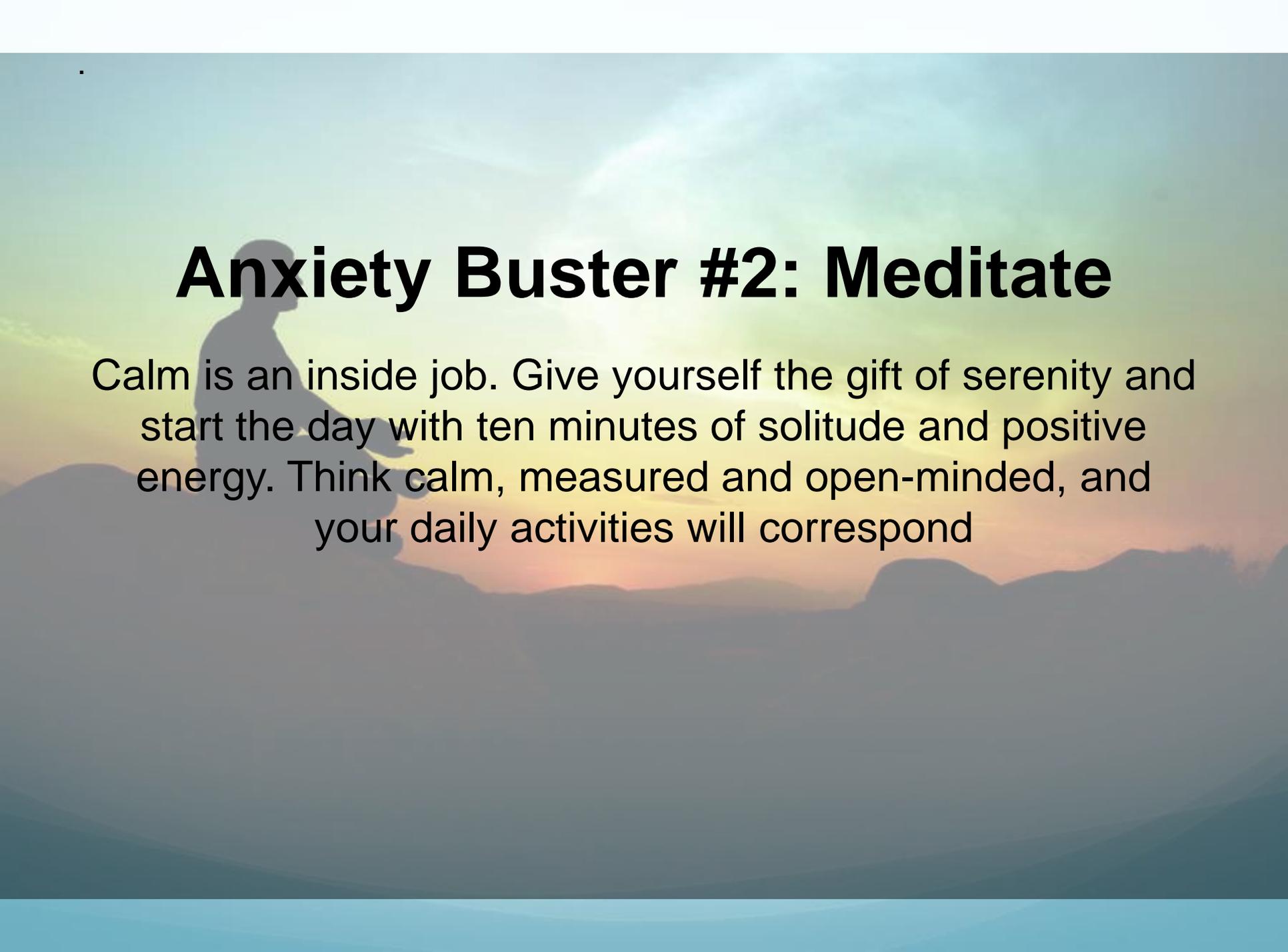
What can you do if you are concerned that someone you know might have GAD?

- **Encourage** the person to **seek help** (or take him or her to a trained health professional yourself, if appropriate).
- Ask the person a few questions to get a better sense of what is going on:
 - Do you feel very anxious more often than not?
 - Is there anything you can do to control your worry?
 - Do you have difficulty concentrating when you feel anxious?
 - Do you feel anxious about a lot of different things? Or only certain things

Quick Tips and Tools of Anxiety Attacks

Anxiety Buster #1: Start Deep- Breathing

- If you're not focused on how to calm your body through slow, intentional belly-breathing, you're missing out

A silhouette of a person sitting in a meditative pose on a rocky outcrop. The background is a soft, hazy landscape of rolling hills or mountains under a sky with a warm, golden glow, suggesting a sunrise or sunset. The overall mood is peaceful and serene.

Anxiety Buster #2: Meditate

Calm is an inside job. Give yourself the gift of serenity and start the day with ten minutes of solitude and positive energy. Think calm, measured and open-minded, and your daily activities will correspond

Anxiety Buster #3: Practice Self- Care

- Exercise
- Eating well
- Spending time doing the things you enjoy

**CARING FOR
MYSELF IS NOT
SELF-INDULGENCE,
IT IS SELF-
PRESERVATION
AND THAT IS
AN ACT OF
POLITICAL
WARFARE.**

AUDRE LORDE



TED TALK and Mindfulness Meditation

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qzR62JJCMBQ>

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qwp_mVTM4us

Resources

- <http://www.ncsacw.samhsa.gov/files/TrainingPackage/MOD3/AnxietyDisorders.pdf>
- <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3181686/>
- http://www.jaoa.osteopathic.org/content/106/5_suppl_2/S9.full
- <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/anxiety-disorders/index.shtml>
- http://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Resource_Centers/Anxiety_Disorder_Resource_Center/Your_Adolescent_Anxiety_and_Avoidant_Disorders.aspx
- <http://www.aafp.org/afp/2006/1015/p1393.html>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qzR62JJCMBQ>
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q2_UfFlszkY
- <http://www.aafp.org/afp/2010/0415/p987.html>
- <http://www.anxietybc.com/self-help/how-do-progressive-muscle-relaxation>
- <http://www.anxietybc.com/self-help/calm-breathing>
- <http://www.anxietybc.com/resources/selfhelp.php#step2>
- <http://teenmentalhealth.org/learn/mental-disorders/generalized-anxiety-disorder/>