6 Easy Ways to Reduce Your Anxiety

by ANNA SCANLON

How to Deal With Rheumatoid Arthritis and Anxiety

Anxiety can be a powerful and negative emotion or state of being that you experience when you have rheumatoid arthritis (RA). It may manifest itself in a variety of ways, due to the fact that your RA both makes you more vulnerable in terms of health complications and the fact that in general, the diagnosis of a disease (or the uncertainty it brings) can make one anxious.

This can be especially troubling if you are adjusting to life with RA, the possibility of disability and the uncertainty of the future. However, there are many things you can do to keep your anxiety at a manageable level.

Personally, I struggled with anxiety even before I was in constant pain. Although general anxiety and panic attacks don't necessarily go hand-in-hand with RA, a diagnosis or chronic pain main trigger it for those who are more prone to anxiety in general.

If you find you are suddenly beginning to have panic attacks or are having frequent racing thoughts, it is important to discuss this with your doctor, as he or she may be able to prescribe medication to help bring you to a calmer state.

Many people I have spoken to worry that anti-anxiety medication will make it so they can no longer feel, but this is simply not the case. Instead, the anti-anxiety medication will help you relax and cut down on panic attacks.

If your panic attacks are especially bad, you may also be prescribed something to help stop them while they are happening, which is extremely useful for getting "over the hump" of the most difficult parts.

However, medication isn't warranted in all anxiety situations and it won't cure anxiety, simply help it become more manageable.

How to Cope With Rheumatoid Arthritis and Anxiety

There is a variety of other things people with RA can do to help lessen anxiety. Here are just a few ways I manage my rheumatoid arthritis and anxiety when it attacks:

1. Cutting Out Caffeine

Caffeine can alter your mood and cause things like racing thoughts because it is a stimulant. For people who feel they need coffee to function, this may be a pretty huge setback, but it may be necessary in order to keep anxiety under control.

Although quitting caffeine isn't going to eliminate the uncomfortable feelings associated with the disorder, it may help you feel better and keep things a little bit better control.

2. Get Plenty of Sleep

This is especially important for RA sufferers, as I notice my arthritis tends to be worse without a proper night's sleep. Additionally, a lack of sleep can heighten anxiety, making it that much more difficult to get through the day.

Try to gauge how much sleep you need at night time by experimenting with different time periods and figuring out where you feel your best. This may be more sleep than most people need since your immune system is a bit lowered, so ensure you get a full night's rest every night.

Anxiety can make sleeping more difficult, so you can try non-medication alternatives like hot tea or using guided meditation (many are found on YouTube or for free on podcasts) to help you relax before bed. Try to unwind by reading or watching a film about an hour before you go to sleep.

If you find your anxiety is too out of control before bed, speak to your doctor about something to help you sleep better. Be very careful with over the counter sleep aids, however, especially melatonin, as they can interact with medication taken to help RA.

3. Aromatherapy

Have you ever noticed that when you go to the spa there is a distinct, but quite pleasant, smell in the air? That is because of the benefits of aromatherapy, which some claim can alter your brain activity and make you more relaxed.

Therapist Terri Cole suggests that those with anxiety use oils such as jasmine, rose, chamomile and sandalwood to help ease their heightened state of alert.

You can carry some of these oils or scents with you during the day to smell if you are feeling particularly anxious or you can take a bath with these scents to help foster a sense of calm and peacefulness. You can even try filling your space with one of the scents and meditating while breathing deeply.

4. Deep Breathing

Deep breathing is a great way to calm down when you are particularly anxious, although breathing too deeply can make you dizzy.

If you find you are particularly anxious, focus on your breathing, which may have shifted to hyperventilating during an episode of anxiety or panic. These short breaths you take during an episode of panic may make you feel dizzy or like you are going to faint, contributing to your anxiety.

Instead, sit calmly and focus on your breathing. Breathe in slowly and count to four and then breathe out slowly counting to four. These deep breaths will encourage you to feel calmer and at peace. Focusing on your breath will also take your mind off of whatever it is you are anxious about, at least temporarily.

5. Exercise

When you're in constant pain, exercise is one of the last things you want to think about. However, exercise releases endorphins and helps combat both anxiety and depression. It is, in a way, a natural anti-depressant and anti-anxiety medication.

Although I don't recommend exercising if you're in extreme pain, exercising when your pain is minimal can actually be very helpful in reducing anxiety (and helping with your RA in general).

It can also help reduce that dreaded joint stiffness that many people with RA find they struggle with. But instead of pushing yourself to run a marathon, do exercise that is gentle on your joints.

Swimming laps, slowly riding a bike, using the elliptical machine, doing yoga and taking long walks are all great forms of exercise that will increase your mobility while decreasing your anxiety—and won’t wear on the joints too heavily.

6. Meditation

Meditation is a wonderful way to help put the mind at ease and keep it at rest. As mentioned above, YouTube and iTunes podcasts are great places to start in order to find free guided meditations.

You can do guided meditations or progressive muscle relaxation – either way it will help you feel more in tune with your body, relax, de-stress and take your mind off of what is troubling you. After you finish a session, you will inevitably feel more relaxed and at ease.

The Bottom Line...

Now that you have a few rheumatoid arthritis and anxiety coping mechanisms, the next time you have a panic or anxiety attack, you'll be prepared to manage and reduce it head on.

However, if you find that these strategies don't work for you, be sure to schedule an appointment with your doctor to discuss if you're suffering from an anxiety disorder and next steps in treating it. Anxiety is a very treatable condition, so don't allow it to take over your life.