

The logo consists of an orange speech bubble shape with the text "HEALTH MEANS" inside in white, uppercase letters. The background of the entire page is a warm, orange-toned sunset or sunrise over a beach, with a person's silhouette in a yoga pose on the right side.

HEALTH
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27 ANXIETY- BUSTING STRATEGIES

by HEALTHMEANS



Anxiety is a state that often includes worried thoughts, fearful emotions and bodily changes like tension, rapid breathing, dizziness and digestive issues. Experiencing some amount of anxiety is completely normal. However, 30 percent of women and 19 percent of men, develop an anxiety disorder at some point in their lives [1]. Regardless of whether or not you have an anxiety disorder, anxiety is unpleasant, to say the least.

The thoughts that go along with anxiety are generally future-oriented—we worry about our health, relationships, success and other outcomes. We can even mistakenly believe that our anxious thoughts are helpful in preventing these undesired outcomes, but anxiety feeds itself—we worry a little, we get stuck in our anxious thoughts and we end up worrying even more. Then we experience more of the bodily changes that go along with anxiety. These bodily changes can be intense and can easily be mistaken for other illnesses, which may explain

why people with anxiety tend to go to the doctor more often than others [1].

Good news, though. There are many research-supported ways to reduce and manage anxiety, perhaps making anxiety more “treatable” than any other mental health challenge. That means that each of us has the power to reduce our anxiety, grow our well-being and improve our quality of life.

So what, exactly, should we do? What do we do when we’re right in the middle of an anxiety attack and need a fast-acting anxiety stopper? How do we limit the effect that anxiety has had on our bodies? And how do we build healthy habits to prevent our anxiety from coming back?

These are the questions we’ll answer in this e-book. These tools will help you better understand what anxiety is and how to stop it for good.

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YOUR ANTI-ANXIETY ACTION PLAN

When building your anti-anxiety action plan, it's good to keep a couple of things in mind.

First, everyone benefits from different strategies. Just because research has shown such-and-such strategy reduces anxiety, that doesn't necessarily mean it'll be the right fit for you. That's because research results are based on averages—the average person benefits from the strategy, but that doesn't mean everyone benefits from that strategy [2]. You're the best judge of how something is making you feel. So after trying each of the strategies presented in this e-book, take a moment to reflect on whether it was helpful for you. Just keep in mind that some strategies take a little while to start having an impact (e.g., exercise).

Second, we benefit more from strategies that we will stick to. The research may suggest that some strategies are generally more helpful for anxiety than others. But even the most effective strategy won't help you unless you're willing to do it. That's why creating an effective anti-anxiety action plan is all about finding things that work for you and that you like doing.

Third, try as many strategies as you can. Research suggests that the more different strategies we use, the greater effect they are likely to have [3, 4]. By having a greater number of tools in our toolkit, we can more easily reduce anxiety in a greater variety of situations and circumstances. So, as you're going along, keep trying new anti-anxiety strategies to build a greater arsenal of anti-anxiety skills.

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1. EVERYONE BENEFITS FROM DIFFERENT STRATEGIES
 2. WE BENEFIT MORE FROM STRATEGIES THAT WE WILL STICK TO
 3. TRY AS MANY STRATEGIES AS YOU CAN.

27 ANTI-ANXIETY STRATEGIES YOU CAN START USING TODAY

1. JOURNAL

Although we don't want to obsess about every little thing that makes us anxious, keeping a journal to record the thoughts, emotions, physical sensations and behaviors that arise when we're anxious can help us gain more awareness about, and perhaps a greater sense of control over, our anxiety [5]. We can also benefit from reflecting on how different anxiety-reducing strategies work for us. This exploration of what our anxiety is and what actually works to reduce it is key for helping us undo our anxiety in the long-term.



2. CONTROL YOUR BREATHING

The autonomic nervous system is made of two sub-systems. These systems are largely responsible for modulating bodily functions including emotions like stress and anxiety. The sympathetic nervous system is generally responsible for activation (e.g., stress, anxiety, excitement) and the parasympathetic nervous system is responsible for relaxation (e.g., calm, content, bored) [6]. When we get caught up in

an anxiety cycle, the sympathetic system is highly active. So when we want to calm down, we can use the parasympathetic nervous system to stop our fight or flight responses and relax.

One of the simplest ways to activate the parasympathetic nervous system is with controlled breathing. And indeed, some have suggested that controlled breathing is one of the best ways to reduce excessive anxiety [7]. For example, SKY breathing—a technique involving cycling slow breathing (2-4 breaths per minute) then fast (30 breaths per minute), then 3 long Oms, or a long vibrating exhale—has been shown to reduce anxiety [8]. Controlled breathing techniques like this tend to be both fast acting and have lasting impact on anxiety.

3. TAKE A COLD SHOWER

Perhaps one of the most surprising ways to activate the parasympathetic nervous system is with cold water. Research has shown that spending 20 minutes immersed in ~80 degree Fahrenheit (26 degrees Celsius) water significantly increased parasympathetic activity [9]. So if you're feeling stressed, taking a cold shower or going for a swim can be an effective way to help your system reboot and relax fairly quickly.



4. EXERCISE

You probably already know that exercise is good for you. But did you know that regular cardiovascular and weight training exercise is a good way to increase parasympathetic activity (and feelings of relaxation) in the longer-term [10, 11]? Although exercise increases sympathetic activity in the body during the physical activity, exercise has longer-term benefits on parasympathetic activity, helping us to stay calmer as we go about our daily life.

5. GO FOR WALKS

Sometimes, you can short-circuit an anxiety cycle with a slight change in scenery. Something as simple as going for a walk can be helpful for anxiety [12]. Whether it's the change of scenery, the fresh air, the distraction, or the exercise, regular walks may be exactly what you need to get your anxiety under control.



6. EAT FOODS THAT LOWER ANXIETY

Research suggests that some foods cause anxiety while other foods relieve it. For example, foods naturally rich in magnesium and zinc are thought to help us feel calmer [13, 14]. Similarly, foods like salmon, which are high in omega-3 fatty acids [15] and foods like sauerkraut or kefir, which are high in probiotics, appear to help reduce anxiety, at least in some people [16]. By eating more anxiety-relieving foods, we may be able to prevent ourselves from getting overly anxious.

7. LIMIT CAFFEINE INTAKE



Caffeine is stimulating and can result in increased energy, but whether that energy is positive or negative can depend on how anxious-prone we are. In fact, research has shown that among people who tend to be more anxious, consuming caffeine resulted in greater negative emotions and greater panic symptoms [17]. So if you tend to be an anxious person, try opting for herbal tea instead of caffeinated black or green tea. And drink decaf or dandelion coffee instead of regular coffee to keep your anxiety at bay.

8. LISTEN TO CALMING MUSIC

When we experience something anxiety provoking, we produce the hormone cortisol. Cortisol helps prepare our bodies for a fight or flight response and curbs other bodily functions that are not essential to the stressful situation. A little cortisol is needed to function. But too much cortisol is not good for our bodies and it can inhibit things like sleep. So we really want to get our cortisol levels back down after we experience something that arouses anxiety.

One study showed that listening to calming music after a stressful event helps us more quickly reduce the cortisol levels in our bodies [18]. Without this calming activity, the study suggests that our cortisol response continues to rise, even after the stressful event has ended. So next time something is getting you really amped up, put on some calming music and turn down your stress response.



9. LIMIT USE OF PLASTICS

Xenoestrogens are a type of hormone disrupter that is found in polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAH), pesticides, some drugs, bisphenol A (BPA; a plastics additive), cosmetic products and a variety of other places [19]. Bisphenol A (BPA) and other estrogens have been shown to increase anxiety in mice, suggesting that avoiding them may help reduce anxiety [20]. So to be safe, avoid products like reusable water bottles, reusable food containers and food cans that are not labeled BPA free, as these often include BPA [21, 22].

10. HELP YOUR BODY PROCESS STRESS HORMONES

When we're anxious, our bodies release hormones like norepinephrine/adrenalin [23]. Genes like catechol-O-methyltransferase (COMT) play an important role in getting rid of these extra stress hormones in our bodies. Some people have a fast version of this gene while other people have a slower version of it. And it turns out that people with the slow COMT gene tend to be especially "anxiety-prone" [24]. That's why if you tend to be "anxiety-prone" it may help to avoid catechol-containing foods that further slow the COMT gene. In particular, it seems helpful to avoid xenoestrogens and quercetin in foods like green tea, coffee and red wine [25].

11. SLEEP UNTIL RESTED

You may already have a hunch that anxiety makes it hard to sleep. But a lack of sleep can also contribute to more anxiety [26]. That's why poor sleep and high anxiety can create a cycle that's hard to stop. So it's super important to do whatever you can to get some good sleep. Basic tips for improving sleep include exercising earlier in the day, not drinking caffeine after lunch (or not at all) and turning off TVs, computers and smartphones at least a half hour before bed.



12. COLOR IN COMPLEX SHAPES

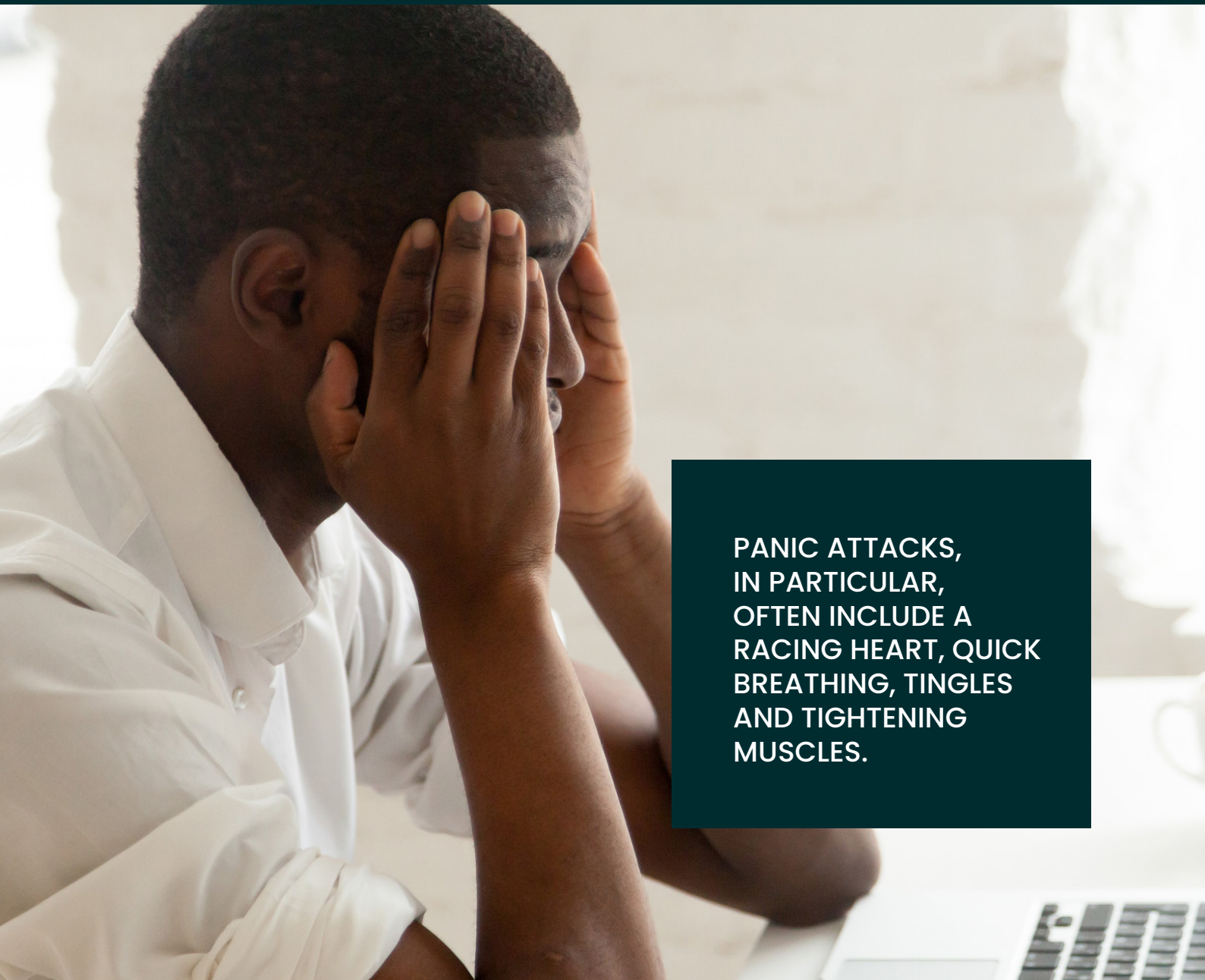


You have likely seen adult coloring books at the bookstore or online. Indeed, there has been a surge of coloring books for adults as a method to reduce anxiety and calm the mind. It turns out that these coloring books are indeed effective in reducing anxiety, as long as they are sufficiently complex [27].

A plain piece of paper to draw on doesn't seem to have the same effect. So if you're looking for something to occupy the mind just enough to ease your anxieties, grab a complex coloring book with mandalas or other complicated or geometric designs.

13. INCREASE BODILY AWARENESS

Anxiety often goes along with a lot of physical sensations in the body. Panic attacks, in particular, often include a racing heart, quick breathing, tingles and tightening muscles. These sensations can be unnerving and trigger even more anxiety, which can spiral out of control if we're not careful. But if we take the viewpoint of a passive observer and practice observing our bodily sensations without judgment or avoidance, we can stop the anxiety spiral [5]. We need to remind ourselves that these sensations are just anxiety and explore them with curiosity instead of fear. As a result, they can dissipate much quicker.



PANIC ATTACKS, IN PARTICULAR, OFTEN INCLUDE A RACING HEART, QUICK BREATHING, TINGLES AND TIGHTENING MUSCLES.

14. TRY MINDFULNESS

Anxiety is often characterized by a desire to avoid the things that induce fear. Mindfulness, in some ways, is the opposite. It involves turning toward our emotions or the things that cause our emotions with present focused awareness and acceptance. It involves noticing what is happening all around us and inside our bodies in a non-judgmental way [28]. Mindfulness often involves meditation, but it doesn't necessarily have to, as mindfulness is really just the combination of present awareness and compassionate acceptance [28]. So next time you are feeling anxious, try to just sit with those emotions, observe them openly and then let them float away like clouds in the sky.



15. PRACTICE IDENTIFYING, LABELING AND DIFFERENTIATING EMOTIONAL STATES

Anxiety can feel overwhelming. The emotions are strong, and there are so many of them. But if we can be more precise about exactly what we're feeling, we'll better understand how we can prevent those feelings in the future [5]. For example, maybe you're feeling anxious about being alone after a good friend moved away. But if you reflect on and then identify the specific emotions you're feeling, you may realize you're feeling more sadness and loneliness rather than anxiety. So to reduce the negative feelings, you have learned to spend more time with other people.



16. CLARIFY YOUR VALUES

Sometimes we end up anxious because we're harping on every little detail in our lives or aiming for perfection. Our unrealistic expectations set us up for worry (and disappointment) because we can't possibly be or do all the things we might think we should be or do. That's why getting clear on your values can be so helpful for anxiety. Start by getting clear on what you want to do with the time you have in your life [29].

Ask yourself: **WHAT KIND OF PERSON DO YOU WANT TO BE?**

And, **WHAT ARE THE STRENGTHS YOU WANT TO DEVELOP?**

Once you're clear on these things, aim to prioritize them, and try to let the rest go. Once we limit the number of things we allow ourselves to worry about, we give ourselves a much-needed break from non-stop anxieties.

17. THINK ABOUT YOUR FUTURE IN A NEUTRAL WAY

Those of us who tend to be anxious often worry about what's going to happen in the future [30]. We have a difficult time with uncertainty, and we often fear the worst. That may be why thinking about neutral or even boring future events each day can actually reduce anxiety [31]. More specifically, we can think about waking up in the morning, brushing our teeth or getting ready for work tomorrow. Using this daily practice may help us reduce our anxiety.



18. COMBAT ANXIETY WITH JOY



Positive emotions are a powerful tool for undoing negative emotions like anxiety and the bodily responses that go along with it. The research suggests that positive emotions broaden our thought processes, enabling us to consider a wider range of options. In addition to just feeling better, positive emotions also help us become more creative, flexible and efficient [32]. These changes in both our thoughts and emotions may explain why positive emotions are so great at undoing the effects of negative emotions like anxiety.

19. TRAIN YOURSELF TO FOCUS ON THE POSITIVE THINGS

It turns out that people high in anxiety tend to focus more on the negative things than the positive things. By deliberately focusing attention away from the negative things and onto positive and neutral things, we may be able to reduce anxiety [33]. Although the research used a computerized task to train people's attention toward positive things, we too can do our best to focus on the good things and not focus so much on the bad.

20. USE SELF-AFFIRMATIONS

Self-affirmations, or reminding yourself about the good things about yourself, can help buffer the effects of failures [34]. That means that if we're worrying about things related to failure, we can curb these thoughts by focusing on our positive qualities, perhaps especially on our ability to succeed. So next time you're worrying about not succeeding, try to think of times you've succeeded in the past instead of thinking about the possibility of failure.

21. DON'T MAKE MOUNTAINS OUT OF MOLEHILLS

An interesting study showed that people high in anxiety tended to interpret ambiguous information in a threatening way [35]. For example, if Bob and Jane were talking at the water cooler, you might think that they were saying something negative about you while a less anxious person might think they were just talking about work or even saying something positive. That's why when we're anxious, we need to be careful not to assume something is bad without any evidence—we often see more bad things than actually exist.



22. DECREASE NEGATIVE EMOTIONS WITH COGNITIVE REAPPRAISAL



Cognitive reappraisal is defined as the attempt to reinterpret a situation in a way that alters its meaning and changes its emotional impact [36]. When we use cognitive reappraisal, we reframe our situation, this time paying more attention to the good things (or downplaying the bad).

The first way to use cognitive reappraisal is to think about how things could be worse for us and to be grateful that things are not worse for us. The second way is to focus more on what's actually good about our situation, even if the situation seems bad at first. Maybe the situation provides an opportunity to grow or learn something new. Because shifting our thoughts shifts our emotions, cognitive reappraisal can be really effective for reducing emotions like anxiety [37].

23. PUT A STOP TO RUMINATION

You know when you just keep thinking about the same thing over and over again? Maybe you're replaying something someone said to you—**WHAT DID THEY REALLY MEAN WHEN THEY SAID THAT?! SOMETHING BAD, I'M SURE. WHAT WAS IT?** You probably know that thoughts like these aren't helpful, but they just keep going on a loop, and you're not sure how to stop them. That's rumination. And it leads you to get anxious about something in the past that you have no control over. So how do you stop?

One of the most effective ways to stop rumination cycles is to distract your mind. For example, one study showed that focusing on an unrelated problem helped reduce rumination [38]. Specifically, this distraction involved generating solutions to an unrelated problem, choosing a solution, and then giving yourself an imaginary pat on the back for doing so. So next time you're worrying about something that happened in the past, try solving an unrelated problem to stop the cycle.

24. DEVELOP A HEALTHIER RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR PHONE

These days many of us are glued to our wireless mobile devices—we're addicted in some sense of the word. As a result, if we're away from our phones or turn them off even for a short time, we feel anxious [39]. By creating a healthier relationship with our phones, we can actually reduce much of this anxiety. You could start building a better relationship with your phone by creating "no phone zones" (places where you will not use your phone) or "no phone times" (times when you will not use your phone) [40]. By becoming less addicted to our phones, we can reduce the anxiety that comes from being away from them.

25. DISSECT YOUR ACTIONS


We often don't realize how our own behaviors contribute to our anxiety. So one thing we can do to rein in anxiety is dissect our behaviors. First ask yourself what do you do that makes you more anxious or make your life worse? Then ask yourself are there any positive situations, activities or people you have started avoiding [29]? Now that you know the answers to these questions ask yourself how you will engage in more positive activities and limit exposure to activities that make your life worse.



26. CONFRONT YOUR FEARS

A considerable amount of research has found that confronting your fears (often with the help of a counselor or psychologist) is a highly effective way to reduce them [41]. For example, if we're afraid of heights, going to high (but safe) place and staying there until our anxiety subsides teaches the body and mind not to be afraid. Confronting chronic anxieties is a bit more complex, but can still be helpful. For example, the best way to reduce anxiety related to stage fright is get on stage again and again until our body learns that it's not so scary after all.

To confront your anxieties, spend some time thinking about what it is exactly that makes you anxious. Keep asking yourself "why?" to try to get to the root of the anxiety. Then you know what you're dealing with and can address it more effectively.

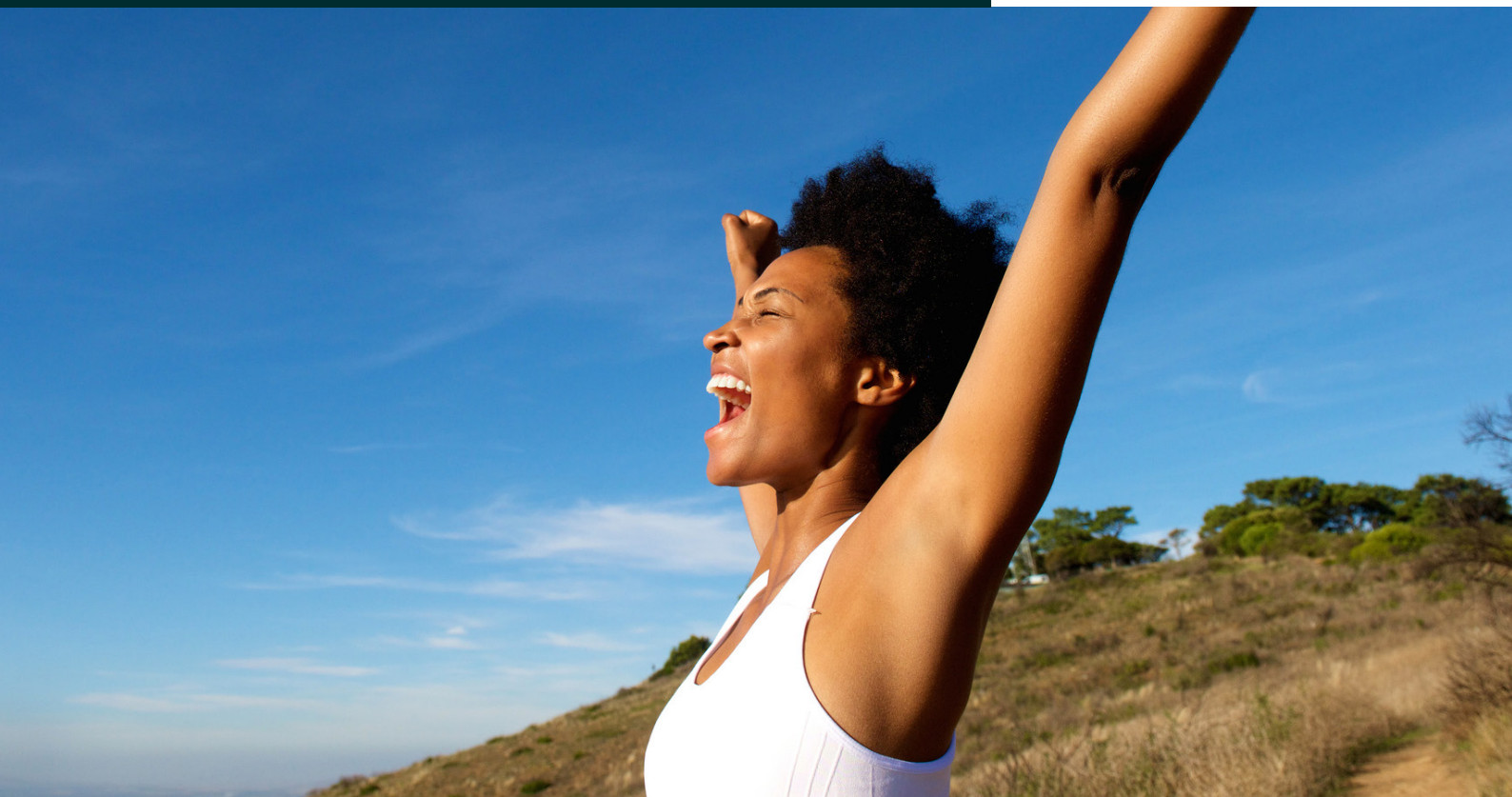
A photograph showing a man in a blue button-down shirt and a woman in a light-colored blouse shaking hands. The woman is holding a clipboard and pen. The background is a blurred office or professional setting.

**IF THIS ISN'T
WORKING FOR
YOU, A GOOD
THERAPIST CAN
REALLY HELP.**

27. LET GO

Most of us want some level of control over our lives, our emotions and even others. But, ironically, trying too hard to control how we feel actually gets in the way of a good life. Our culture reinforces this, encouraging us to reduce the bad feelings and increase the good ones [29]. But it turns out that many “control strategies” don’t really work—for example, when we use drugs or alcohol, opt out of situations or distract ourselves to avoid feeling our anxiety.

So ask yourself, what strategies have you tried to use to control your life, your feelings and your thoughts. Note which ones worked and which one didn’t work. With this insight you can more easily stop using the strategies that don’t work for you and start using the ones that do.





**HERE'S
TO HEALTH.**

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