

## 5 Ways to Stop Your Racing Thoughts

Remember that the worst-case scenario probably won't come to pass. *by Patricia Harteneck, Ph.D.*

Racing thoughts—fast, repetitive thought patterns about a particular topic—are a common feature of anxiety and other mental-health disorders. But they can happen any time you are in an anxious or stressed state, even if you are *not* experiencing other symptoms.

Racing thoughts may be replays of past events which generated anxiety or sadness for you. They may also be worries about things that could happen in the future. They are strings of thoughts that are blown out of proportion, have a pattern, consume time, and often have no rational conclusion.

They can look like this:

*"I always forget what I have to do. I'm so stupid. If I don't remember everything, I'll get fired. I don't know what I'll do if that happens. I should have taken that job I was offered six months ago. If I lose my job, I won't have any money. I need to work longer hours to keep this job. That just makes me more depressed. I'm so miserable. What am I going to do?"*

When thoughts like these flood your mind, they drain your energy, stop you from living in the present moment, and can create a loop in your brain that feels difficult to escape. They can also make it harder to concentrate and accomplish daily tasks, and impair your memory and sleep.

Having racing thoughts is often disturbing and frightening because it creates a sense of being out of control. But having racing thoughts does *not* mean you're out of control or crazy. It does mean that you are anxious and that your stress level is higher than usual.

Here are some ways you can work to calm your mind and stop racing thoughts:

### 1. Use cognitive distancing

Our mind usually worries about things it is convinced are true but, most of the time, are actually *not* true. You can balance your mind's tendency to predict the worst outcome by coming up with positive alternative scenarios. For instance, your spouse seems distant and is sending out a lot of emails. You decide he must be having an affair. An alternative scenario: He is working extra hard on a project. Analyze what's most likely to

happen. Most of the time, the worst-case scenario your brain comes up with is not the most likely one.

### 2. Use a mantra

A mantra is just a simple phrase or word that you repeat to calm your mind. Research has shown that repeating a mantra reduces activity in the part of your brain that is responsible for self-judgment and reflection. This is the part of the brain that spends so much time rehashing the past and worrying about the future. You can use any word, sound, or saying you want. You could try something like, "Om," "Life is good," or "Everything is OK." Repeat your phrase over and over, focusing your thoughts only on your mantra. If your mind wanders, return to your mantra. You can practice this almost anytime, even going around the supermarket or on your commute home from work.

### 3. Focus on the present

Returning your focus to the present will help you accept and let go of what you cannot control. It will also help you realize that you can't change the past, and that the future hasn't happened yet, so it's a waste of time to keep thinking about them. (This doesn't mean that you are *unaware* of what happened in the past or what is about to happen in the future.) Try taking a deep breath and asking yourself how you are feeling *right now*.

### 4. Write things down

Putting your concerns on paper allows you to return to them later. You don't have to dismiss them entirely, and you can feel comfortable knowing you will revisit the concern. Also, the act of writing engages your mind and reduces the power of racing thoughts. When thoughts are in your mind, they feel chaotic. Putting them on paper organizes them. Use a notebook or a designated computer document. Once you've taken a few minutes to organize your thoughts on paper or onscreen, your mind should be calmer. If you want, set aside a time limit for thinking about them before taking a break and coming back to them later.

### 5. Breathe

This shifts the fight-or-flight response of your sympathetic nervous system to the relaxed response of the parasympathetic nervous system. Try counting to 3 as you breathe in and to 5 as you breathe out. Pay attention only to your breathing as you try to slow it down. Your mind will wander, but just bring it back to your breathing. (See more tips on breathing exercises [here](#).)

It takes time to develop new habits.

Whichever of these tools you use, it will take regular practice over a long period of time to see results.

Unfortunately, many people expect the effects to be immediate and abandon the practice too soon.

Instead, be consistent and patient.

And If you find that you are not able to get racing thoughts under control, consider consulting a mental health provider. Anxious thoughts can be part of a mental health disorder that professionals can treat effectively with psychotherapy, medication, or a combination of the two.