

## ANXIETY AS A WAVE

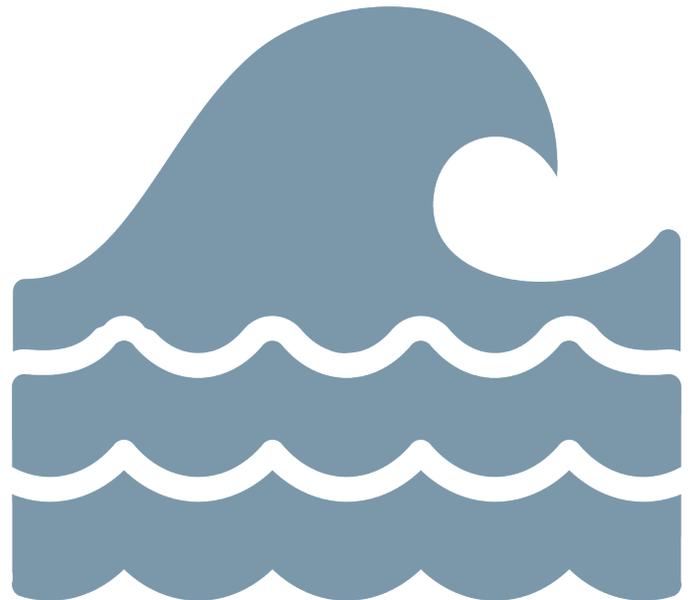
When experiencing significant anxiety, many people come to believe that the feeling will never go away on its own unless they do something in response. Or they may tell themselves that the anxiety will just continue to build, eventually leading to some terrible outcome, such as a heart attack or “nervous breakdown.”

It is important to understand that these beliefs—that anxious feelings and thoughts will never go away on their own—are maintained and reinforced by the behaviors we have habitually used in response, specifically worrying or seeking reassurance. This creates a cycle where anxiety causes people to react in ways that reduces the anxiety in the short-term, but increases it in the long term. These reactions are giving the anxiety attention—in a sense, “feeding” it. In fact, there is a lot of evidence that the more we engage with, or give attention to, a feeling or a thought, the more likely it is to either remain or come back again, often with more intensity the next time. In other words, what we focus on, becomes bigger.

Despite our beliefs, we know that not engaging with anxious thoughts and feelings will eventually cause them to reduce and be replaced by “something else.” It may feel like this has never happened for you, but it’s highly likely you’ve developed a worry habit as a response, and haven’t fully given yourself a chance to experience its natural reduction and replacement.

For example, imagine you’re sitting at your desk, you feel a stitch in your side, and think,, “What if this pain in my side is something really serious?” Your old way of responding might have had you starting to look up information on the Internet to learn what the symptom could mean (e.g., seeking reassurance) or ignoring your other work and thinking about what would happen if you really were sick (e.g., worrying).

Now, instead of those reactions, imagine you told yourself, “I’m just having a thought that this pain is something serious. For now it’s just a pain,” and then engage in a few seconds of breathing. As you did that, you might find that your thoughts eventually turned to something else in your environment, like an email that just came in from a coworker that you wanted to respond to. As your thoughts “turned” to something else, you might notice the anxious feeling you had about the pain starts to reduce naturally as your attention and “mental energy” focuses elsewhere.



# SURF THE WAVE

To reinforce this experience, it's useful to utilize a guided imagery practice **in the moment you're feeling anxious**, that connects you with the understanding that anxious thoughts and feelings will eventually “crest” and break on their own, without you having to do anything with them. As an image, it can be helpful to think of your anxious thoughts and feelings as waves.

“Surfing the wave” could go something like this:

1. Take a few moments to notice where you're experiencing tension in your body, and what your anxious thoughts are trying to make you pay attention to. You can do this by taking some time to sit in a quiet place, and if you are comfortable doing so, closing your eyes, and just allowing your attention to go to your body and your thoughts.
2. Imagine that the feeling and thoughts of anxiety are waves. Visualize the waves rising and falling over and over again as the intensity of your feelings and thoughts peak and subside. Your job is to use your breath as a surfboard to ride these waves. No matter how big the wave gets, no matter how much you feel as if the wave will consume you, you are a skilled surfer and you will use your breath to ride each wave as it comes until it naturally breaks. Practice this for at least one minute—longer is probably better, particularly the first few times you practice this.
3. As you're riding the wave (or just noticing the anxious feelings and thoughts), you may find it helpful to silently describe the sensations in an objective and non-judgmental way (e.g., “I notice my heart is beating a little faster and my mind is sending me thoughts of a bad event happening. Now, as the wave crashes, I'm noticing I feel less tense, and I'm starting to think about other things.”)
4. When you are done surfing the wave, thank yourself for taking the time and being willing to do something different with your urges. You can also take a moment to set your intention for the next few minutes, hour, or day.

One nice thing about using a wave image as a representation of anxiety is that it can be utilized again if anxious thoughts or feelings “try to come back” either because they're prompted by something in our environment (such as the pain in our side in the previous example) or just out of the blue. Just as waves constantly rise and fall in the ocean, so too will our anxiety continue to try to rise up again for the purpose of getting our attention and energy.

Although this may seem frustrating, we know that the more and more you “starve” your anxious feelings and thoughts of the response it's looking for (namely worrying and seeking reassurance), the less intense the “crests” of the anxiety wave become, and the less frequently they occur. In a sense, you begin to “calm the waters” of your mind, and feel more in control of the reactions you have to whatever negative thoughts and associated feelings your mind may send your way.