

How to Cure Anxiety — One Workaholic’s Story, Six Techniques That Work

Written by [Tim Ferriss](#) Topics: [Filling the Void](#), [Low-Information Diet](#), [Mental Performance](#)



Charlie Hoehn was a full-time employee of mine during the making and launch of The 4-Hour Body. It was an intense period.

In this post, [Charlie](#) will share his M.E.D. (Minimum Effective Dose) for overcoming anxiety and managing workaholism. There are six techniques in total.

If you haven’t already, be sure to read his previous post on [preventing burnout](#).

Enter Charlie

Do you feel a constant sense of dread? Do you have trouble breathing, relaxing, and sleeping? Do you worry that you’re losing control, or that you’re going to die?

In other words: are you trapped in your own personal hell?

I've been there (here's the [backstory](#)), and I know what it's like. Shallow breathing, tension in the gut, chest pains, rapid heartbeat... Every moment is exhausting, crushing, and painful. Anxiety destroys your confidence, your productivity, your relationships, and your ability to enjoy life.

For a long time, I thought I was going crazy. I was convinced that something horribly wrong was about to happen. I tired and afraid all the time, and I didn't know how to shake it. One half of me pretended to be normal while the other half tried to keep it together.

I tried *everything*: meditation, yoga, high-intensity workouts, long runs, therapy, therapy books, keeping a journal, super clean diets, extended fasting, drugs, deep breathing exercises, prayer, etc. I even took a six-week course, made specifically for men who wanted to overcome anxiety.

What I discovered is that the most effective “cures” for anxiety are often free, painless, and *fun*. When I was doing the six techniques I cover in this post on a daily basis, I was able to get back to my normal self in *less than one month*.

It's my sincerest hope that this post helps you eliminate your anxiety, once and for all. Surprisingly, it's not as hard as you think...

1. Enjoy Guilt-Free Play with Friends

“A lack of play should be treated like malnutrition: it's a health risk to your body and mind.”
— Stuart Brown

When I asked Tim for his advice on overcoming anxiety, he said, “Remember to EXERCISE daily. That is 80% of the battle.”

I completely agree. Exercise is scientifically proven to reduce [anxiety](#), [stress](#), and [depression](#). But what's the best type of exercise? Running on the treadmill for an hour? Doing hundreds of sit-ups? Self-inflicted torture via P90X?

How about ‘None of the Above.’ All of those activities are miserable. People only do them because they think getting in shape has to be a punishment.

Exercise does not have to feel like *work*; it can be *play*. In other words, physical movement that gets your heart racing, causes you to sweat, and is legitimately FUN for you and your friends. You don’t have to track your time, measure your heart rate, or count your calories. Forget all that noise. Just focus on having fun while moving around with your friends.

In my experience, the best forms of anxiety-reducing play are outdoor sports. They are social (more than one person is required), mildly competitive, and cause everyone to break a sweat in the fresh air and sunshine. However, any fun play activity that you can do on a regular basis with your friends should work.

Almost every weekend, my friends and I play [home run derby](#) or go to the [driving range](#). For me, taking batting practice or hitting golf balls is the most rewarding form of play. Plus it gives me an excuse to move around outside for an hour or two.



I also take frequent trips to the park with an [Aerobie Flying Ring](#) (a flat rubber Frisbee that flies really fast). The Aerobie is perfect for playing because I have to call up a friend to join me, and we both end up running around chasing it.



Playing with an Aerobie at the [House of Air](#) trampoline house in San Francisco.

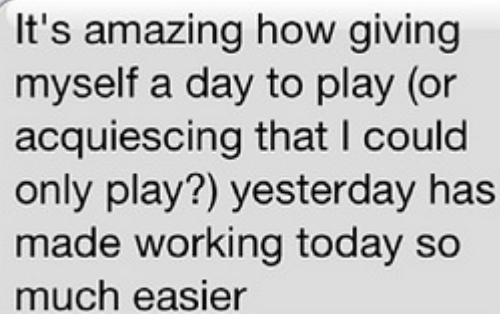
Incorporating play into my weekly routine helped my anxiety and workaholism more than anything else. It was such a massive relief to hang out with my friends and have guilt-free fun again. Playing helped me decompress and unplug from work, which actually made me more productive.

After each round of catch or home run derby, I would return to my laptop feeling light and happy. And to my surprise, I was able to produce better work at a faster pace. My brain was operating at a higher level because it was happy, playful, and recharged. And I wasn't the only one who attested to a boost in productivity and creativity because of play.

[Note from Tim: Exercise also elicits measurable biochemical effects (like [increased BDNF production](#)) that improve cognitive performance.]

My friend Ann (a book editor) texted me one afternoon to say that she was trying to work, but was so bored that she'd spent the last hour staring at a turtle swimming in a pond. I told

her to come pick me up so we could play catch. We drove over to a park and played with the Aerobie for two hours in the sun. The next day, she sent me this message:



It's amazing how giving myself a day to play (or acquiescing that I could only play?) yesterday has made working today so much easier

All work and no play makes Jack an anxious boy — **literally**. Isolating yourself erodes your health, and sitting in a chair all day is a recipe for neuroses. Get off the Internet, turn off your screens, and go have guilt-free fun playing with your friends! You'll be less anxious, less lonely, more relaxed, and a whole lot happier.

DO IT NOW

Schedule a daily reminder to *Play*. Ask a friend, co-worker, or neighbor to play catch. Search Yelp.com for “co-ed sports” or “improv comedy,” then sign up. For a negligible fee, you get to be surrounded by fun people who like to play. Totally worth it.

You can take baby steps toward playing more, of course. You could invite a friend on a long walk, or play catch instead of drinking coffee, or take a date to the driving range. The important thing is to schedule guilt-free fun with good people.

FREQUENCY

Aim for 30 minutes per day (or more, if possible). Reducing your anxiety through play only takes 2% of your total time each week, but it's up to you to decide that your happiness is worth the effort.

[Note from Tim: Schedule this recreation in advance or it won't happen. If you're a type-A personality, work will swell to fill your unfilled calendar.]

COST

Free, or very cheap. Try not to think of play in terms of costs. This is an investment in your health and happiness, with a guaranteed return.

RESOURCES

[Aerobie Flying Ring](#). This is the best toy for playing catch. It's light, durable, portable, and extremely fun.

[Charlie's Play Picks](#). Check out my list of fun activities and toys.

[Play by Dr. Stuart Brown](#). If you want to read more about the science behind play and its essential role in fueling happiness, pick up a copy of this book. It's fantastic. Also worth reading: [The Play Deficit](#) (article) by Peter Gray.

2. Unplug from All Sources of News

“Learning to ignore things is one of the great paths to inner peace.”
— Robert J. Sawyer

It took me a long time to see it, but the news was my single biggest source of anxiety.

The websites I was reading each day talked non-stop about crime, corruption, economic breakdown, and the end of the world. As a result, my fear of being attacked spun out of control. I became obsessed with protecting myself from every possible threat. I researched what to do if I was arrested and thrown in jail. I spent hundreds of dollars on food and equipment that I hoped would save me in the event of a disaster.

There was nothing inherently wrong with preparing for an emergency, but obsessing over apocalyptic scenarios, every day, for months on end?

One day, it finally dawned on me: my fear of an imaginary future was destroying my ability to enjoy the present.

And what planted those seeds of fear? *The news*.

When I made the commitment to cut the news out of my life completely — no TV, no conspiracy sites or “truth deliverer” blogs, ignoring / blocking every sensationalist link I came across on social media, etc. — my anxiety plummeted in less than two weeks. The negative information I removed from my conscious awareness freed me from the confines of other people’s frightening narratives.

I replaced the scary news with positive, joyful, and fun information. For instance, I listened to uplifting songs and standup comedy. I watched improv, and classic funny & happy movies. I read fun books that sparked my imagination and touched my soul. It really helped.

Of course, I didn’t bury my head in the sand. I still talked with my friends, who would inevitably bring up the noteworthy events that took place that week. And I was always surprised to discover that... I didn’t really miss anything. I was alive, and the world kept turning. That was about it.

The information you allow into your conscious awareness determines the quality of your life. In other words, **you are what you think**. If you are subsisting on content that’s unsettling, anxious, and soulless (see: the news, reality shows, horror movies, books written by hateful authors, porn), your mind will become stressed, scared, and cynical.

But if you are consuming content that’s joyous and playful, your mind will become happy and loving. Simple as that.

DO IT NOW

Cut anxiety-inducing information — especially the news — out of your daily routine completely! If your friends are watching the news in the same room, either change the channel or go do something else. If a scary headline appears in your Facebook feed, don’t click it — block it.

There's no need to subject yourself to unhealthy unrealities. Replace those unsettling thoughts with positive content that will uplift you.

COST

Free.

RESOURCES

[The “Anti-News” List](#). My favorite anxiety-fighting content. Just remember: Sad people tend to focus on the lyrics, while happy people just listen to the music. Don't over-analyze the deeper implications of the art; just enjoy how it makes you feel.

BONUS POINTS: Flip the Shut-Off Switch

Whenever I'm feeling burned out, I have to force myself to unplug.

I relocate to a scenic environment where the skyline isn't cluttered with buildings or human activity, then I disconnect from every device with a screen for a minimum of 24 hours. That means no texting, no calling, no email, no Facebook, no Instagram, and no *Seinfeld*. Only nature, face-to-face interactions, and books are allowed.

Unplugged nature vacations are incredibly refreshing. My mind always feels like a stuffy room that gets a sudden rush of fresh air. Instead of feeling tired all day long from a steady diet of internet content, I'm rejuvenated by real life again.

Give yourself permission to stop working and [unplug](#). Don't feel guilty for taking time off. This isn't an escape from the real world – it's a chance to reconnect with it.

3. Consistent Bedtime & Afternoon Naps

“My girlfriend asked me, ‘Did you sleep good?’ I said ‘No, I made a few mistakes.’”

— Steven Wright

I really can't overemphasize [the importance](#) of consistent quality sleep. Every anxious person I've met has either been in denial about [how little sleep they get](#), or they're overlooking the fact that they're [going to bed at random hours](#) every night.

One of my readers wrote this message to me after reading an early draft of my book:

“When I began forcing myself to sleep eight hours a night, my physical health problems cleared up, my emotions balanced out, and my anxiety disappeared. My mind could function and that tight feeling around my eyes vanished. Eight hours of sleep is a miracle pill.”

I was chronically in a severe sleep deficit, which took a major toll on my mental health.

The endless stream of digital information I was taking in every waking hour only compounded the problem. And because I kept going to bed at random hours, my mind never had enough time to shut down, relax, and digest everything that poured in during the day.

During the month I cured my anxiety, I made consistent sleep one of my highest priorities. The first thing I did was **optimize my bedroom for ideal sleeping conditions**. Here are the steps I took:

1. Plugged my iPhone charger in an outlet far away from my bed so I couldn't grab my phone while I was laying down. This little obstacle prevented me from checking Facebook or watching Youtube before trying to fall asleep. [Note from Tim: I always put my iPhone on Airplane Mode or turn it off while sleeping. Even on silent, the illumination of arriving text messages is enough to wake or aggravate me.]
2. Cranked up the air conditioning so the temperature in my bedroom was around 68 degrees Fahrenheit.
3. Kept the curtains drawn and wore a [sleep mask](#) so that my room was as dark as I could possibly make it.

Once my room was optimized, I committed to a consistent bedtime. I set a daily reminder on my iPhone called “*Get Ready for Bed*,” which went off at 10:00PM every night (i.e. nine hours before I wanted to wake up). As soon as it went off, I’d stop whatever I was doing, hit the bathroom, brush my teeth, and change out of my day clothes. I was dead serious about obeying my phone’s command. Even if I was in the middle of a conversation, I’d abruptly end it so I could get ready for bed.

After I finished getting ready, I’d switch my phone to silent mode, plug it into the charger that was far away from my bed, and lay down to read fiction for 15 minutes (No business or “thinking” books allowed). Then I’d turn off the lights and focus on the rhythm of my breathing until I fell asleep.

It took several nights to adjust to this change, but within a week, I was sleeping like a champion. **The key was getting ready at the same time every night.** It set me in motion toward getting in bed, and ultimately re-trained my body to crave sleep at a reasonable hour.

There was another aspect of my sleep routine that was critical for healing my anxiety: **I took a 20-minute nap every afternoon.**

Each day, immediately after I finished lunch, I would find a spot to nap – a couch, a bench, a reclined car seat, a carpeted floor, a friend’s wedding...



I'd set an alarm on my phone for 20 minutes, lie on my back, and close my eyes. I never *tried* to fall asleep; I just relaxed and focused on breathing in and out. Even if I didn't fall asleep (10-20% of the time), I always felt refreshed and calm when my alarm went off.

Naps are awesome. I wish I could be a salesman for naps. We all took them every day when we were kids, so... why should we stop taking them just because we're older? Take a quick nap in the afternoon, even if you have to cut your lunch break short. Then force yourself to get ready for bed at the same time every night. You'll be more relaxed, **more productive**, and far less anxious.

DO IT NOW

Set a daily reminder on your phone to "*Get Ready for Bed*," nine hours prior to your target wake time. Set another reminder to take a nap after lunch. Plug your cell phone charger in an outlet that's far away from your bed. Cover your windows so your bedroom is as dark as possible. Drop the temperature in your bedroom to 68 degrees.

COST

Free.

FREQUENCY

Aim for 8 hours of consistent quality sleep each night, and one 20-minute nap every afternoon.

RESOURCES

[Relax like a Pro](#) and [11 Tricks for Perfect Sleep](#). Check out Tim's articles for more tips on taking your sleep to the next level.

[Sweet Dreams Sleep Mask](#). The light! It buuurns! Use this mask to block it out.

[Flux](#). The bright white light that you refer to as your "computer" might be disrupting your internal rhythm. Download the free Flux application to have your screen's lighting automatically switch to a sunset hue in the evening.

[Philips Wake-up Light](#). If you despise alarms as much as I do, then check out the Wake-up Light. It makes waking up gradual and pleasant.

4. Eliminate Stimulants

The physical sensations that preceded my panic attacks were the jitters (shaking hands, quivering voice) and a rapid resting heart rate. Guess what gave me both of those sensations? Coffee. And wouldn't you know it, I was drinking 3-4 cups each day, running around like Tweek on *South Park*.

I decided to cut coffee out of my diet for a week. Shortly after I removed the caffeine from my bloodstream, I stopped having the jitters. My resting heart rate remained steady. The physical sensations that came with having a panic attack were no longer there, and I started calming down. [After some experimentation, I found that I could only have a half serving of coffee before I started feeling jittery. I also found that I couldn't have caffeine past 5:00PM without disrupting my sleep routine.]

A friend of mine experienced similar results after removing aspartame. She had horrible anxiety for months but couldn't figure out what was causing it. One day at work, she noticed that she'd finished three diet sodas in just a few hours. Her body was overloaded with caffeine and aspartame (a toxic sugar substitute in diet drinks). As soon as she stopped drinking diet soda, her anxiety disappeared.

Sometimes, we tend to overlook the simple answers that are right in front of us. Let's fix that.

DO IT NOW

Cut out any substance you regularly consume that's correlated with increased feelings of anxiety. Common culprits include: [caffeine](#), [aspartame](#), [gluten](#), refined sugar, alcohol, [cigarettes](#), and [marijuana](#). Keep it out of your body for one week.

If you have that substance in your house, throw it away. If the people you spend the most time with are encouraging you to consume it, politely turn them down and do something else. If you have strong cravings for that substance, find a healthy substitute you can consume instead (e.g. water, tea, sugar-free gum).

After the substance has been out of your system for seven days, you can reassess its toxicity by consuming a typical dose you're used to taking. If your anxiety symptoms return within one hour of ingestion, you've found the culprit. Try to eliminate that substance for good.

COST

Free.

5. Trauma Releasing Exercises

[Note from Charlie: This technique is going to sound bizarre. I don't blame you if you're skeptical, but it worked really well for me and there's a good amount of research to back up the benefits of T.R.E.]

One of the weirdest effects of anxiety is how much tension builds up in your body. I couldn't even take a deep breath because my stomach always trembled, like it was being stretched to its limits. Relaxing felt physically impossible.

My body was so tense because I was constantly in fight-or-flight mode. Every day, I was producing the energy needed to survive a life-threatening event. The problem was that this event was *in my mind*; it was imaginary and it never took place. I had all this excess energy that wasn't being released, so I became extremely high-strung.

A friend recommended that I check out [T.R.E. — Trauma Releasing Exercises](#), which helped him conquer his anxiety. I watched a few videos of T.R.E. on YouTube and immediately thought it was fake. The clips showed people lying on the ground as their bodies went into spastic tremors. Their movements looked comical and freaky, like they were in the middle of an exorcism.

T.R.E. was originally designed as a safe and easy way to induce tremors. Anyone who has gone through extreme trauma, from the emotionally abused to war veterans, can use these exercises to their benefit. The exercises take about 20 minutes to complete, and they're intended to induce tremors by exhausting your leg muscles.



I learned that tremors are a natural means for mammals to discharge excess energy after a traumatic event. The tremors release our body's surplus of adrenaline after it's no longer needed for survival. I watched footage of antelopes, bears, and other animals that had narrowly escaped an attack. Their bodies instinctively trembled for a few minutes, and then they'd act calm and normal again. It was fascinating.

Unlike most species, adult humans typically prevent themselves from having tremors. Why? Because we avoid behavior that makes us look weak or vulnerable. In other words, we are so self-conscious that we unknowingly block our body's natural (yet embarrassing) function during times of great stress. As a result, we make it very difficult to overcome trauma because we're constantly holding in so much excess energy. Thankfully, T.R.E. can help.

I bought the [T.R.E. book](#) on my Kindle and went through all the exercises. After I completed the full circuit, I lied on the ground and was STUNNED as my back, hips, and legs shook rapidly in sporadic bursts for 20 minutes. The tremors weren't painful at all; the sensation actually felt relaxing and natural. I was just astounded by how vigorously my body shook. I looked like a vibrating cell phone. After my body's tremors finally subsided, I went to lie down on my bed and immediately fell into a deep sleep.

I performed these exercises three nights per week, for three weeks. They were hugely effective for releasing the physical tension my body was holding in. I can't show or describe all of the exercises here, as I don't want to take credit for a routine I didn't create. But if you're interested in giving T.R.E. a shot, you can check out the book (or win a free copy by leaving a comment below — see instructions at the bottom of this post).

I know T.R.E. might sound kooky, or even a little scary. But it's really not bad at all. It's basically just a series of stretches that help your body thaw itself out by alleviating your chronic tension. Your tremors will definitely make your body move in strange ways though, so be sure to do these exercises in a relaxed environment where you won't feel self-conscious.

DO IT NOW

Watch the [8-minute Tremors video](#) on T.R.E.'s official website to see how it works.

FREQUENCY

Do the exercises every other day for three weeks. Then as needed.

COST

\$10 for the book.

RESOURCES

[Trauma Releasing Exercises](#). This short book explains the trauma recovery process in uncomplicated language. The last chapter includes photos and descriptions of the exercises, which elicit tremors that release deep chronic tension in the body.

6. Fix Micronutrient Deficiencies

Everyone should get tested for micronutrient deficiencies at some point. There are plenty of reasons why this is a smart move, but the most obvious is because of *our changing soil*.

The vegetables we eat absorb their nutrients from the soil they grow in, and the purity (and depth) of our topsoil has been severely compromised through hyper-aggressive/monoculture agriculture and mining. So even if you are eating a seemingly natural and well-balanced diet, you could still be deficient in key nutrients your brain and body need in order

to function properly. Broccoli in one place doesn't necessarily equal broccoli in another, for instance. Where you get your produce matters; they could be chock-full or devoid of the vitamins, etc. depending on where you source.

Below are two of the most common nutrient deficiencies that *tend to amplify anxiety*:

1. **The Vitamin B club.** A lot of people are deficient in B-12 (methylcobalamin — found in meat), but others might be deficient in B-2 (riboflavin — found in yogurt, spinach, almonds, and eggs), or B-5 (pantothenic acid — found in avocados, mushrooms, and sweet potatoes), or B-6 (pyridoxal phosphate — found in tuna, chicken, turkey, and cod). Fortunately, it's possible to get the recommended dose of all the B vitamins by taking a [B-complex pill](#) once per day.
2. **Omega-3 Fatty Acids.** You can find omega-3 in salmon, fish oil, hemp seeds, and flax seeds. I take 2-4 servings of [Nordic Natural's cod liver oil pills](#) each day, which contains a solid dose of the three fatty acids: EPA, DHA, and ALA.

For a few months, I was feeling unusually fatigued. I had no idea what was causing it. I was getting good sleep, I was eating healthy, and I was exercising regularly. I did some research, and found that I had a ton of symptoms for Vitamin B-12 deficiency: I felt mildly depressed, I had very little motivation, I was short of breath, my brain was foggy, and my fingers occasionally went numb.

Vitamin B-12 is in meat, fish, and certain dairy products (if you're a vegetarian or vegan, you're likely deficient in B-12). The normal range for B-12 is between 500 and 1,000 pg/ml (picograms per milliliter), and if your levels fall below 500 pg/ml, your brain ages twice as fast. In other words, if your body isn't absorbing enough B-12, your mind rapidly deteriorates and stops functioning properly. Holy Guacamole!

When I got tested for B-12 deficiency, the results showed that my levels were **200 pg/ml** — less than half of the minimum amount my body required. Even though I was eating meat almost every single day, I was still massively deficient.

I immediately began supplementing with Vitamin B-12 pills — 1,000 mcg every day, sublingually (under the tongue). Within one week, I could already feel a difference. I was less foggy and more energetic. When I got tested again for B-12 a month later, my levels had shot up to **529 pg/ml**. I was back in the normal range.

A few of my friends took micronutrient deficiency tests, as well. None of them had B-12 levels as low as mine, but they were all deficient in something. One found he was deficient in magnesium. Another was deficient in selenium, while another was deficient in potassium. All of them took measures to correct their deficiencies, brought their levels back up to the normal ranges, and felt like new people. Their minds were clear and sharp, and their energy went through the roof.

One final note on deficiencies: It's possible that your gut isn't absorbing nutrients properly. If you suspect that's the case, you might consider taking a probiotic supplement to introduce more healthy bacteria into your GI tract. You can also get more healthy bacteria by eating fermented foods, like sauerkraut and kimchi.

DO IT NOW

Research the nutrients mentioned above to see if you might be deficient.

FREQUENCY

Once you've been tested for deficiencies, ingest an ample amount of the desired nutrients (via food or supplements) for 30 days. Get tested again and re-assess.

COST

Varies, depending on whether you're ingesting food or supplements (pills average less than \$1.50 per day). \$80 for the B-12 deficiency test at [Any Lab Test Now](#). \$400 for the micronutrient test. I know, I know – it's expensive.

RESOURCES

[None of these resources are affiliate links. Neither Tim nor I will earn money if you decide to make a purchase through them.]

[Any Lab Test Now](#). You can get tested for deficiencies in just a few minutes at Any Lab Test Now and have the results emailed to you within 48 hours. You can also get micronutrient tests at your doctor's office, but (depending on which state you're in) they will probably make you jump through a few hoops first.

[Spectracell](#). This is the micronutrient testing lab Tim used to uncover his selenium deficiency (he used Brazil nuts to correct it).

Vitamin B-Complex Caps. This covers all of your bases for the B vitamins. These pills are free from common allergens, like soy, yeast, barley, wheat, and lactose.

Cod Liver Oil. I take 2-4 servings per day to get omega-3 fatty acids. If you don't like taking so many pills, try **squeeze packets**.

Final Thoughts

Some people have been on the ride for a long time, and they begin to question, “Is this real, or is this just a ride?” And other people have remembered, and they come back to us and they say, “Hey, don't worry; don't be afraid, ever, because this is just a ride.”

- **Bill Hicks**

I couldn't see it for a long time, but I was the creator of my own anxious reality.

I didn't allow myself to have fun. I never slept. I drank coffee all day while staring at screens. I consumed fear-mongering news that convinced me the end was near. People absorbed and reflected my nervousness back at me, and my anxiety perpetuated itself.

I'm not crippled with anxiety anymore, and I'm not burned out. Now, my state of mind is different.

I allow myself to have guilt-free fun in everything I do. The world is a playground, my work is a game, and life is a ride. And you know what? I feel 100 times better than I ever thought I would. I'm back to my normal self.

And I have no fear that those awful feelings will ever return, because I know the antidote — *play*.

#

Want a free copy of Charlie's book, *[Play It Away: A Workaholic's Cure for Anxiety?](#)*

Leave a comment below with your favorite technique for managing or overcoming anxiety.

The top 20 comments, as selected by Charlie, will receive:

- (1) free digital copy of *Play It Away* — [Kindle .mobi](#) or PDF (\$10 value)
- (1) free digital copy of the *Trauma Releasing Exercises* workbook (\$10 value)
- Bonus: Charlie's weekly routine during the month he healed his anxiety

Posted on February 19th, 2014