

## 7 Strategies for Dealing with Needle Fear and Anxiety



As the vaccine rollout continues throughout Canada and in many other countries, it is gratifying to see so many people do their part to bring down the impact of COVID-19. If a fear of needles is either keeping you from getting your vaccine or making it a very anxiety provoking experience, the strategies below may help to lessen the fear and make it more likely that you will get a vaccine and/or make it a more tolerable experience.

### 1. Learn about anxiety, phobias and fear

Fear is a useful emotion. Without it, we might do things that would actually be dangerous. However, using the analogy of a smoke detector, not all alarms are a sign of fire. If your body's smoke detector goes off in the absence of danger (e.g., burnt toast) but you continually react as if there is a fire, then this fear response could become problematic. If it stops you from completing important activities (e.g., getting a blood test, obtaining a vaccine), then you might be experiencing needle phobia, which is also known as "Trypanophobia" and blood-injection-injury phobia.

There are lots of ways to learn more about anxiety and phobias through [Anxiety Canada](#).

[Online Article: Specific Phobia](#)

[Free Downloadable Resource: Learn About Anxiety](#)

[Online Article: Fight-Flight-Freeze](#)

YouTube Video - [Fight-Flight-Freeze: Anxiety Explained for Teens](#)

Free app: Anxiety Canada's [Mindshift CBT](#) app "Learn" feature includes information about anxiety and Phobias.

Dr. Martin Antony has also made his book “Overcoming Medical Phobias: How to Conquer Fear of Blood, Needles, Doctors, and Dentists” freely available for [DOWNLOAD HERE](#).

## **2. Identify your “good reason” for getting vaccinated.**

Identifying a good reason(s) can help you rise to the challenge of doing something that scares you, even when it seems like your body is telling you to avoid it.

Take some time to consider the benefits of getting vaccinated. Why is it important to you to do so? Is it important for your own health? For the health and safety of others? Maybe you are getting a vaccine to protect older relatives that are vulnerable or babies who have not been vaccinated. Perhaps your workplace requires you to be vaccinated. Maybe you want to travel to places that require proof of vaccination. It could be that you want to wear an “I got vaccinated sticker” on your jacket. Your reason does not have to make sense to anyone else – it’s YOUR reason.

Figuring out your “good reason” can help you focus on opportunities instead of threats. It can help you move toward the things you want even when you are tempted to avoid or run away. What is your “why”? Remind yourself of your reason(s) as you take each step – getting registered on a vaccine website, making your appointment, and of course as you are getting yourself to your appointment and you are sitting in the chair awaiting your vaccine.

## **3. Figure out the real source of your anxiety.**

Figuring out the real focus of your anxiety can help you determine what steps you need to take to achieve your goal.

Ask yourself the following questions,

“What exactly is it about needles or injections that is frightening?”

“What exactly is it about needles that seems most threatening or dangerous?”

“What aspect of getting a needle do I think I will not be able to handle?”

If you still don’t know the specifics of your concerns or what is fueling your anxiety, here are some additional clarification questions that might help you discover your anxiety provoking beliefs.

*Is it the needle itself? What is it about the needle? The material? Size? Sharpness?*  
*Is it the thought of something poking into your body?*  
*Is it blood?*  
*Is it pain that concerns me?*  
*Am I afraid of immunizations or vaccines rather than needles?*  
*Is it the fear of side effects or adverse consequences?*  
*Am I worried that I am going to “freak out” or lose control before or during my vaccination?*  
*Am I worried that other people are going to judge or socially reject me for being afraid of needles or for getting vaccinated?*  
*Am I afraid my morality will be compromised?*  
*Am I concerned that I will faint?*  
*Am I nervous I will have a panic attack?*

Check out Anxiety Canada’s page on [How to Make a List of Fears](#) – the first step in facing one’s fears.

#### **4. Identify thinking traps and challenge those thoughts.**

There are certain types or patterns of thoughts that can trap us in anxiety. Overestimating the danger (e.g., “what if I get a disease from the needle”) and awfulness of needles, and underestimating the ability to cope with getting a needle (e.g., “I’m going to scream with pain”) are two common types of thinking traps.

You can learn more about thinking traps [HERE](#).

As with all thinking traps, identifying the anxiety-related thought as it occurs is the first step. To change something, we need to know when it occurs. Identifying these automatic thoughts is not easy because they can occur quickly. If you have trouble catching your thoughts, it might be helpful to begin by recognizing that there has been a shift in your emotions or feelings. If you notice that you are more tense or anxious, ask yourself what you are thinking or what went through your head in the seconds before your emotions shifted.

Once you have identified your automatic thought, it is time to question it. Don’t accept that it is true just because you thought it. For example, if you believe that you won’t be able to handle the pain of needle, remind yourself of all the times when you *have* coped with painful procedures or painful injuries. Remember that coping doesn’t mean not showing emotion and being completely stoic, but rather tolerating the discomfort (e.g., wincing or having a sharp intake of breath or deep breathing during a painful procedure is perfectly acceptable).

For more detailed information on challenging anxiety-provoking thoughts, check out these online articles:

[Online Article: Helpful Thinking](#)

[Online Article: Realistic Thinking](#)

## **5. Managing your bodily reactions during anxiety-provoking situations.**

Fear and anxiety are associated with typical physiological changes in our body, such as increased heart rate and blood pressure. Dizziness and feeling lightheaded are also common responses in anxiety-provoking situations. In the case of most other types of anxiety and phobias, the “feeling” of faintness does not actually lead to fainting. But a small minority of people do faint in response to needles, seeing blood or an injury due to a sudden drop in blood pressure called the vasovagal response.

Fortunately, there is hope. There are things we can do to manage our bodily reactions. For example, The Applied Tension Technique is a strategy to temporarily increase blood pressure to help prevent fainting. The technique involves tensing the muscles in your body on purpose to raise your blood pressure and reduce likelihood of fainting. Check out the online articles below to learn more.

[Online Article: Applied Tension Technique - For People Who Faint at the Sight of Blood or Needles](#)

[Online Article: Muscle Tension Technique](#)

While some people may need to tense their muscles and get their blood pressure up to prevent fainting during a needle, others may need to calm down enough to get through the door of the vaccine clinic. There are body management skills for that too – such as focused breathing. Anxiety Canada’s MindShift CBT app can be downloaded for free [HERE](#). The *Quick Relief* feature is helpful for those times when you feel overwhelmed and stuck – it includes multiple options such as taking a breath and grounding. The *Chill Zone* has audio recordings of guided relaxation and mindfulness meditations.

Anxiety can make us feel like we can’t cope. The CARD System is a method that helps people develop a plan for coping before, during and after vaccination. It stands for C-comfort A-ask R-relax D-distract. You can learn more about the CARD System [HERE](#).

## **6. Engage in Brave Behaviour.**

Avoiding needles keeps anxiety going because it prevents opportunities to learn that they are safer than you imagined and that you are braver than you thought. A key strategy in helping overcome anxiety and phobias is to actually face your fears in a gradual and consistent manner. The process of “exposure” involves voluntarily and repeatedly dealing with needles in a controlled way. Although it may not always be possible to create the situations for repeated real-life exposure (e.g., getting your vaccine), there are still ways to slowly build up to the last step of getting the vaccine. For example, imaginal exposure (imagining yourself getting the vaccine) while experiencing (and coping) with discomfort is a good first step. Some tips for helping you with exposure exercises can be found [HERE](#).

People often want to adopt what we call a “mastery” approach (i.e., no fear) when in anxiety-provoking situations. A “coping approach” is far more useful and realistic. You don’t have to like needles. You don’t have to be comfortable getting an injection. You don’t even have to feel calm. Rethink your goal as being willing to tolerate some uncertainty and discomfort while you engage in brave behaviour.

Keeping in mind your reasons for getting vaccinated (Step 2 above) may help with your willingness to tolerate discomfort. Managing your bodily reactions in anticipation of or getting your vaccine (Step 5 above) should lower the anxiety you experience. Challenging your feared thoughts (Step 4 above) will also help to lower your anxiety.

Anxiety Canada Resources: Use Mindshift CBT FACING FEARS tool to help you overcome your fears by gradually facing them in small manageable steps. Check out this resource:

[Online Article: Build a Fear Ladder](#)

## **7. Seek Support if necessary.**

Sometimes self-management strategies are not enough. If you have tried to manage on your own and you have stalled in your progress, or if you are too anxious to even get started on your own, it is time to ask for help. Sometimes a supportive friend or relative can help you get or keep moving. Other times, professional help may be needed. Consult with a health care provider to find out if psychological interventions would be appropriate for you.

Mental health professionals trained in Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy (CBT) and Exposure-based treatment of needle phobia can be found through the [Canadian Association of Cognitive and Behavioural Therapies \(CACBT\)](#).

Overcoming fears and anxiety is not easy, but it is worth it. Enhancing understanding, motivation, and skills can help you do hard things. And you CAN do hard things, including getting a needle.

When you manage your anxiety and get your vaccine, congratulate yourself for a job well done! Remember the goal is to tolerate and manage the anxiety and to show yourself that experiencing anxiety does not mean that there is danger. Congratulate yourself for getting your vaccine and being part of the solution as we all hopefully come together to put COVID-19 in the rearview mirror.

*Thanks to Scientific Advisory Committee members [Dr. Melanie Badali](#), [Dr. Maureen Whittal](#), and [Dr. Martin Antony](#) for creating this resource.*