

Managing Anxiety

Practical techniques drawn from evidence-informed resources — breathing, thinking, lifestyle, and knowing when to ask for help

BREATHING TO CALM YOUR NERVOUS SYSTEM

Belly Breathing (Diaphragmatic) —

Place one hand on your chest, one on your belly. Inhale slowly through your nose — belly rises, chest stays still. Exhale through pursed lips. Practice 5 min daily; use anytime you feel overwhelmed.

4-7-8 Breath —

Inhale through your nose for 4 counts, hold for 7, exhale through your mouth for 8. Acts as a natural tranquilizer for the nervous system. Repeat 4 cycles.

Box Breathing —

Inhale 4 counts → hold 4 → exhale 4 → hold 4. Repeat. Regulates the autonomic nervous system and lowers blood pressure. Used by Navy SEALs for stress under pressure.

Lion's Breath —

Inhale deeply, then exhale forcefully while sticking out your tongue and making a 'ha' sound. Releases jaw tension and activates the parasympathetic system.

CHANGING HOW YOU THINK

Spot Your Cognitive Distortions —

Watch for: Catastrophizing (assuming the worst), All-or-nothing thinking (no middle ground), Mind-reading (assuming others' thoughts), Emotional reasoning (feelings as facts), Overgeneralizing (one event = always).

Challenge & Reframe Anxious Thoughts —

Ask: What's the evidence for and against this thought? What would I tell a friend? What's a more balanced way to see this? Replace 'what if' spirals with 'even if this happens, I can cope.'

Schedule a Daily Worry Period —

Choose a consistent 20–30 min window (not near bedtime). Throughout the day, jot worries on your phone. At worry time, review them — many resolve themselves. This keeps worry from bleeding into the rest of your day.

Use the 'Courtroom Test' —

Ask: Would this thought hold up as evidence in court? Is 'possible' the same as 'probable'? Zoom out: How will this feel in 30 days? Trade certainty for direction — take one small step, even when anxious.

WHAT TO DO WHEN OVERWHELMED RIGHT NOW

5-4-3-2-1 Grounding —

Name 5 things you see, 4 you can touch, 3 you hear, 2 you smell, 1 you taste. Anchors you to the present moment and interrupts the anxiety spiral.

Name It to Tame It —

Simply labeling your feeling ('I notice I'm anxious') activates the prefrontal cortex and dials down the amygdala's alarm response. You don't have to fix it — just name it.

Break It Into One Next Step —

Overwhelm comes from seeing everything at once. Ask: 'What is the one smallest thing I can do right now?' Do only that. Then reassess.

Move Your Body —

Even a 10-minute walk releases endorphins, shifts your nervous system, and interrupts rumination. Physical movement is one of the fastest mood regulators available.

BUILDING DAILY RESILIENCE

Prioritize with the Eisenhower Matrix —

Sort tasks into 4 boxes: Urgent + Important (do now), Important + Not Urgent (schedule), Urgent + Not Important (delegate), Neither (eliminate). This reduces the overwhelm of undifferentiated to-do lists.

Protect Your 'Joyspan' —

Schedule small pleasures as seriously as obligations. Joyspan — your capacity for positive experience — shrinks under chronic stress. Hobbies, leisure, and play are recovery tools, not luxuries.

Limit Caffeine, Sugar & Alcohol —

Caffeine and sugar produce quick highs followed by mood crashes that amplify anxiety. Alcohol, though calming at first, raises anxiety levels overall. Omega-3s (salmon, walnuts, flaxseed) measurably improve mood.

Practice Gratitude Daily —

Write down 3 specific things you're grateful for each day. Shifts the brain's attention away from threat-scanning toward what is working. Even mundane things count.

LIFESTYLE AS MEDICINE

Foods That Calm Stress —

Eat more: leafy greens (magnesium), fatty fish (omega-3s), blueberries (antioxidants), oats (serotonin support), dark chocolate (in moderation). Reduce: processed sugar, excess caffeine, alcohol.

Move Every Day — Any Way —

Walking, gardening, swimming, yoga, dancing — all reduce cortisol and increase endorphins. Aim for 20–30 min. Focus on how your body feels while moving, not on solving problems.

Cozy, Repetitive Hobbies —

Knitting, baking, gardening, jigsaw puzzles — rhythmic, low-stakes activities occupy the anxious mind, produce a sense of completion, and activate the parasympathetic nervous system.

Sleep as a Reset —

Poor sleep amplifies anxiety the next day. Establish a consistent sleep/wake time. Before bed: dim lights, avoid screens, use slow breathing or journaling to offload the day's worries.

RECOGNIZING BURNOUT & WHEN TO SEEK HELP

Signs of Burnout —

Chronic exhaustion unrelieved by rest, cynicism or detachment, declining performance, feeling numb or 'going through the motions,' physical symptoms (headaches, GI issues, frequent illness).

Signs Stress Is In Your Body —

Muscle tension, headaches, jaw clenching, chest tightness, shallow breathing, digestive upset, skin flare-ups, sleep disruption, increased startle response. Your body signals what your mind may not yet recognize.

Stop Doing These When Stressed —

Avoid: isolating yourself, doom-scrolling news, catastrophizing future scenarios, numbing with alcohol or binge eating, taking on more commitments, suppressing feelings entirely. These maintain the stress cycle.

When to Reach Out —

If anxiety interferes with daily functioning, relationships, or sleep for more than 2 weeks — talk to a therapist. CBT and other evidence-based approaches can significantly reduce anxiety with structured support.