



If you are experiencing more than a couple of the following on a regular basis, consider speaking to your GP or another professional for advice about managing anxiety.

Physical signs:

Churning stomach, butterflies
Nausea, sickness, diarrhoea
Headaches
Tense muscles
Trembling
Sweating
Palpitations
Lightheadedness, dizziness

Psychological signs:

Overthinking
Catastrophising
Hyper-vigilance
Insomnia
Difficulty concentrating
Wandering thoughts
Tearfulness
Inability to relax
Difficulty looking after yourself

Breathing

When experiencing anxiety or panic, it is easy to forget about the simplest and yet most effective way to manage it: being aware of your breathing. Just thinking about and noticing breathing can help it slow down, and with it, slow the heart rate and even lower blood pressure. A few long, slow deep breaths can really counteract the physical symptoms of anxiety and panic.

Here is a structured breathing exercise which works by focusing the mind as well as getting plenty of oxygen into the body:

1. Close your eyes. Breathe in through your nose while counting to four slowly. Feel the air enter your lungs.
2. Hold your breath inside while counting slowly to four. Try not to clamp your mouth or nose shut. Simply avoid inhaling or exhaling for 4 seconds.
3. Begin to slowly exhale for 4 seconds.
4. Repeat steps 1 to 3 at least three times. Ideally, repeat the three steps for 4 minutes, or until calm returns.

PMR

Progressive muscle relaxation, or PMR, is a technique commonly used in hypnotherapy, yoga and some forms of meditation.

It involves relaxing all the sets of muscles in the body in turn, usually from head to toe. You can practise yourself, and if you prefer a more “guided” approach, try recording the “script” on page 2 and listening to it whenever you need to relax (if you don’t mind the sound of your own voice – it can take some getting used to!). Some people find it especially effective at bedtime.

Affirmations

Sometimes anxiety can be worsened because of the negative “self-talk” we engage in; if you can make a habit of telling yourself positive phrases, they become embedded and accepted as beliefs. An easy way to do this is to repeat daily affirmations.

Remember! *The brain doesn’t like to hear negatives (“don’t think of a purple elephant”) so your language to yourself should focus on how you do want to be rather than how you don’t (“I am calm and in control” will be a lot more effective than “I am not anxious”).*

Choose **one** of the following and repeat it to yourself at least three times, twice daily, for the next 2 weeks. Note any changes to your anxious feelings:

I am calm, confident and in control.

I am relaxed, breathing slowly, responding calmly.

I am at peace, calm and settled in my life. Every day I become more like this and remain like this.

Example PMR:

Take a few deep, slow breaths and move into a comfortable lying or sitting position. Now notice a relaxing feeling that starts at the top of your head. Feel all the muscles in your face start to relax. Your jaw, your cheeks, all around your eyes, all those little muscles are slowly, gently smoothing and releasing. If your mouth wants to fall open a little, let it happen. More relaxed than you've ever been before, just enjoy the feeling, this time is just for you. See your ribcage rise and fall and feel your head and neck become more and more relaxed. Your head may lower now into a comfortable position.

The sensation of great calm is moving now, down into your body. Release all the muscles in your shoulders and back, settling into the chair, notice how they are unwinding gently, you're so relaxed, calm and in control. Your chest and your stomach are also feeling very relaxed as you breathe deeply and enjoy this feeling. Take your time, this time is for you, and really enjoy the peaceful feeling. The sounds and distractions of the outside world are becoming less noticeable now, fading into the distance.

Now the feeling travels down into your arms, letting every muscle relax in turn, and into your hands. Enjoy the soothing sensation of each finger slowly, gently relaxing in turn. Continue to breathe deeply, you are feeling totally relaxed and peaceful.

Now let the relaxing feeling move down into your legs. Notice all the muscles in your thighs start to relax. Enjoy the sensation as the warm sense of relaxation moves through your knees and down into your lower legs. Keep breathing deeply, slowly, visualise your ribcage rising and falling with each breath. The feeling travels all the way through your feet and into your toes. Feel each toe in turn slowly relax as the muscles start to unwind.

As your body relaxes so does your mind and you can stay in this relaxed state for a few moments now, enjoying the peaceful feelings, before coming slowly, gently back to greater awareness. You'll feel refreshed and take this feeling of relaxation and calm with you.



Grounding – 3 things

Exercise to alleviate anxiety or panic:

If you are able to, place your feet flat on the floor and be aware of their connection to the ground.

Notice 3 physical things (objects) around you that you can *see*.

Notice 3 distinct sounds you can *hear*.

Notice 3 things close by that you can touch and *feel*.

Take at least three long, slow deep breaths and let your shoulders droop and relax.

Repeat the exercise until you feel calmer and more in the present moment.

5-point Checklist

Remember to check in with yourself regularly with regard to your relationship with the following common culprits of heightened anxiety:

Caffeine

Alcohol

Sleep

Exercise

Connection with others

Lucky Dip

Everyone's anxiety is a bit different and sometimes it's worth trying something you haven't before. Here is a list of anxiety-beating "top tips" you might like to choose from:

Adult colouring books

Crosswords

Dancing (especially to very loud, upbeat music!)

Gardening

Laughing, with a friend or at something on TV

Meditation

Painting or drawing

Reading

Singing, alone or as part of a choir

Walking

Worry dolls

Yoga

Journalling

For some people, the act of writing down worries or concerns helps to alleviate them: placing them 'outside of the head' and in black and white can make them seem more manageable; it puts them in a safe place where you can allow yourself to take a break from them (for example to sleep) and come back to them when you need to. Writing can be just as effective as talking in 'working through' problems, and in fact for some people *more* effective because it's a conversation only with yourself (unless you choose to show someone) – so you can be open and not fear judgment.

Writer Julia Cameron, in her book *The Artist's Way*, recommends a practice called "morning pages": each morning write up to three pages about anything at all, the first things that come to mind. Then put them away without reading or referring back to them. You might even destroy them. The idea is it clears the mind out a little before you get on with your day.

By contrast, keeping a journal which you *do* look back on, where you record mood, levels of anxiety, and any external triggers, can be helpful in tracking any patterns to your anxiety. You should also record wins, big and small, eg any time you have conquered a specific fear, to remind yourself that you can do it.

Trauma processing

Many therapists advocate writing about traumatic experiences as a relatively safe and non-invasive way to process them and help with anxiety and panic.

If you find it difficult to write about your own experiences, try expressing them in the third person; this means writing about events (or feelings) as though they happened to someone else. Instead of using 'I' use 'he', 'she' or 'they'. Instead of using 'we', use 'they'.

Writing this way, and reading back what you have written, can have a powerful effect on healthy processing of the memory.

You might like to experiment with different tense too, for example initially try writing about events in the present tense (as though they are happening right now), and then write the same thing in past tense. How does that feel?

You can choose to share your writing, keep it for yourself, put it away, or even destroy it.

NB never try to "force" yourself to write about anything that feels really, really uncomfortable or as though you are not ready.