

Anxiety: Practical Coping Strategies

Anxiety is a state of apprehension, uncertainty, or fear. Worrying and nervousness are generally a part of feeling anxious as are any number of physical symptoms (sweaty palms, increased heart rate, dry mouth, breathlessness, difficulty sleeping, feeling sick, butterflies, visual blurring, pale skin, muscular tension or aches, feelings of pins and needles, etc.).

People can become anxious about any number of things, and situations can trigger anxiety. Of course, when anxiety is severe enough to qualify as a disorder it is generally treated with psychotherapy and/or medicine. We'll leave all that to the professionals. This is about what you can do – now, today! These strategies can and do work to help decrease anxiety levels, but remember – you have to do them, practice them every day, and cement them into your daily routine!

NOTE: Don't be afraid to tailor some of these strategies to meet the age or level of the child.

This handout covers the following:

[Four Pillars of Stress Management](#)

[Relaxing the Body](#)

[Reining in Thoughts](#)

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[Releasing Fear](#)

[Get Organized](#)

Obey the 4 Pillars of Stress Management

The four pillars of stress management enumerated below often help to cope with everything from anxiety to depression to anger and frustration. Find a way to make these pillars a regular part of your daily life.

The acronym **HALT** can help with these. Check in with yourself a few times a day and “**HALT**” (ask yourself if you are **Hungry, Angry, Lonely, or Tired**). If you are any of those things, try to find a healthy way to deal with it from the four foundational pillars described below.

○ Get Enough Sleep

- Link to Sleep Strategies Handout: 

○ Exercise

- Doesn't have to be a 10k; light jogging or walking on a regular basis can boost your mood and lower anxiety
- Try taking a little jog up and down some stairs when feeling anxious (like before giving a speech or performance or before a test).
- Regular exercise will also help with sleep

- Eat Well

- Always eat something for breakfast; If you're too nervous try eating something easy to digest – trail mix, bananas, yogurt, dry toast
- Cut down on sugar; Try eating more small meals if you're often too nervous to eat

- Relax or Engage in Leisure Time

- Engage in an enjoyable stress-free activity – these types of things can often distract you from your worrying thoughts.
- Take a bath or shower
- Take a walk
- Make crafts, play music, draw

Relax the Body

When you are anxious your body enters a state of apprehension and stress. Relaxing your body makes puts it into a state that is not compatible with being anxious. Plus it distracts your mind from worrying thoughts and helps you to think rationally. These really do work, but you need to practice them on a daily basis.

7-11 Breathing

- Sit in a chair with shoulders relaxed and hands over your stomach
- Breathe in through your nose for a count of 7 and out through your nose for a count of 11 (or start with breathing in 3 and out 6 if 7-11 is too difficult at first)
- Your shoulders should remain still while breathing, but stomach will become bigger and smaller as you breathe in and out
- Try breathing with eyes closed while “seeing” the numbers (1 through 7 or 1 through 11) in your head as you breathe. When your mind wanders, gently bring it back to seeing the numbers again.
- Do for 5-10 minutes every morning and evening to practice
- Do when beginning to feel anxious
- TRICK: If you say or whisper the word “relax” every time you breathe out, then over time your body will associate that word with being relaxed. You'll just have to say it and your body will enter a relaxed state. This “trick” can be used with any relaxation exercise.

Guided Visualization

- Imagine a place where you feel safe, comfortable, and calm. It can be a real place you've been or a place totally made up. Examples might be a quiet beach, a cool shady spot in the woods, snuggled up by the fire, etc.
- Sit down in a comfortable position and close your eyes
- Take a few deep breaths – perhaps do the 7-11 breathing for a few moments
- Let your chair fully support your body as you breathe and relax
- Now imagine yourself in your calm place. Use all of your senses. For example, see the light filtering through the trees, hear the grass rustling or birds chirping, smell the grass, flowers, salty air, feel the breeze or the warmth of the fire, etc.

- o Really feel yourself in this calm place.
- o Smile and let your body relax in this place
- o Enjoy being there for a few minutes
- o When you are ready to depart, stretch gently and open your eyes
- o HELPFUL HINT: You might record yourself or someone calmly describing this happy place that you can play back to help your imagination.
- o Guided Imagery Example Script (After lying on the floor and doing some 7-11 breathing)

Imagine that it is a beautifully warm and sunny day and that you are lying on the beach in a small sandy cove, surrounded by grey cliffs that have small green rock plants growing out of their crevices. You feel the softness of the sand beneath you and its slight movement as some of the small grains trickle through your fingers. Look at the blue sky above and sense the warmth of the sun penetrating your body. Close your eyes and listen to the cry of the seagulls and the roar of the waves as they break on the shore.

Lying and listening to these sounds, you become aware of the waves breaking on the shore and the sea travelling across the beach until it very gently laps over your feet. Initially the water feels cold in comparison with warmth of the sun. As the water recedes, you feel it draw out and take with it any tension that has accumulated in your feet. Your feet relax and feel heavy. The next wave breaks and gently rolls over the sand, covering your feet and your legs. The coldness of the water feels invigorating. It recedes and takes your tension with it. Your legs relax. Hearing the next wave coming and breaking on the shore, you wait for the water to touch your feet and then move over your legs, hands, lower part of your arms and abdomen. The muscles and organs in your abdomen contract slightly as they experience the coldness of the sea. The water recedes and you allow it to take your tensions with it. Listening, and waiting expectantly, you prepare yourself for the next wave. It comes and covers your body up to your neck. A slight shiver goes through your body as the water comes into contact with your chest. But this is compensated by the feeling of lightness and relaxation that you experience when the water has drawn out and takes with it all your tension.

You know that the next wave will cover your entire body, but you are not afraid. Your intuition tells you that you will be able to breathe normally under the water. Wait and listen. It is coming. You embrace the water as it covers you and you give to it all you tension, toxins, and pain with gratitude and love. The water slowly recedes. It leaves you feeling completely relaxed and renewed physically, mentally, and spiritually. A feeling of joy pervades you as you once more become aware of the warmth of the sun revitalizing and re-energizing the whole of your being.

When coming out of relaxation, gently start to move your feet; then flex the muscles in your legs; gently move your fingers; breathing in, raise your arms over your head, stretching the whole of your body. Breathing out, bring your arms back

down to your sides. Repeat this twice more, then open your eyes and slowly roll over on to your left side and sit up.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

- o This helps relax muscle groups that may have become tight due to anxiety
- o This exercise may take as long as 15 minutes so allow enough time
- o Sit down in a comfortable position and close your eyes
- o Take a few deep breaths – perhaps do the 7-11 breathing for a few moments
- o Let your chair fully support your body as you breathe and relax
- o **PMR Method:** Now begin to tense and relax muscle groups from the bottom of your body to the top in the manner described below.
 1. **Toes:** Pretend you are barefoot and standing in the mud. Now squish your toes in the mud and hold them there for 5 seconds. Now relax your toes and feel the tension ebb away. Try it again. Squish and hold for 5 seconds; now relax your toes a little more slowly.
 2. **Legs:** Pretend someone is vacuuming under your legs. Lift your legs straight out in front of you and hold them there for 5 seconds. Now let them drop like they are too heavy to hold up anymore. Try it again. Hold your legs out for 5 seconds, but this time let them down very slowly and feel the difference between being tensed and being relaxed.
 3. Take some 7-11 breaths before moving on
 4. **Stomach:** Tighten your stomach as tight as you can for 5 seconds; imagine your belly button touching your spine. After 5 seconds relax it. Try it again, but this time after 5 seconds relax it a little more slowly.
 5. **Back:** Move a little bit forward in your chair. Bring your arms up like you're holding on to the chains of a swing. Now bring your elbows back and try to get them to meet behind your back. Hold for 5 seconds and feel the tension in your shoulders and back. After 5 seconds move your hands back and drop them into your lap. Try this again.
 6. **Shoulders:** Stretch your arms way up over your head like a cat might do and spread out your fingers. Hold for 5 seconds, and feel the tension in your shoulders. After 5 seconds let your arms drop back into your lap. Do this again, hold for 5 seconds, and now drop your hands way down. Feel how relaxed your shoulders and back feel now.
 7. **Arms:** Pretend you have a lemon in each hand and squeeze those lemons as hard as you can. Pretend you're squeezing all of the juice out. Hold for 5 seconds, and then let the lemons drop to the floor as you relax your arms. Try it again.
 8. **Jaw:** Smile as big as you can; make the corners of your lips touch your ears. Hold for 5 seconds. Now let your smile relax back to normal. Make a big stretchy smile again, hold for 5 seconds, and relax. Wiggle your mouth around a little to make sure it is relaxed.
 9. **Nose:** Pretend that you have a fly on your nose and wiggle your nose around to try to get rid of it. Keep moving your nose from side to side for 5 seconds. Now stop and relax like the fly is gone. Try it again.

10. Eyes: Close your eyes very tightly like you don't want to see the scary part of a scary movie. Feel how tight it is above and below your eyes. Hold for 5 seconds. Now relax your eyes slowly and open them if you want to. Try it again and relax nice and slowly.
11. Forehead: Wrinkle up your forehead like you are really surprised at something. Pull your eyebrows up into your hair. Feel how tense the top of your head is. Hold for 5 seconds. Now relax it and try it again.
12. Wrap Up: Sit quietly in your chair with your eyes closed. Feel how relaxed your body is starting with your toes. Note how relaxed your toes, legs, stomach, back, arms, shoulders, and face feel. They all feel very relaxed. Do some 7-11 breathing for a few minutes. Say the word "relax" as you breathe out if you want to. When you are ready, open your eyes.

Reign in Those Thoughts!

When you become anxious your thoughts act like out of control horses galloping through your brain, and whisking your mind to many and varied horrifying futuristic possibilities. These wild beasts of the anxiety apocalypse thrive on wreaking havoc in your poor mind and body as you become hyper-aroused, unable to sleep, and unable to think rationally. How can we reign in these heinous beasts?

- If you can't beat 'em, join 'em!
 - When your thoughts are thinking the worst about what might happen in a situation, try to make up an even wilder outlandish story on purpose. Rather than letting your anxiety have all the fun – you make up the future possibilities.
- Helpful Mindfulness Activity: Snow Globe
 - Find a snow globe (or even just a jar with some water and sand or glitter) and shake it. Imagine that the falling snow flakes are your thoughts; take a few moments and watch as they settle.
 - Now close your eyes and bring your attention to your mind. Try to imagine all of your thoughts settling with each breath. They never go away, but they can move aside and allow more clarity and calm in your own head.
- Helpful Mindfulness Activity: Thoughts on Parade
 - Find a comfortable posture, and notice your thoughts
 - Imagine you are sitting or standing and watching a parade going by on the street
 - Now try to imagine that each of your thoughts are on floats going past in the parade, or maybe they are on signs or banners going by. Just imagine the thoughts going by for a few minutes.
 - Remember – don't join the parade and start marching with the thoughts. Just stand back and enjoy the show knowing that even the biggest thoughts will pass by of be carried away.
 - This can work with any kind of imagery (e.g., bubbles, traffic, boats, clouds drifting, etc.)

- Recognize thoughts and possibilities for what they are: they're just thoughts, and they don't necessarily reflect reality.
 - Next time you have racing and worrying thoughts, grab hold of it and add the words, "I'm having the thought that..." in front of the thought. Write it down that way if you can. So for instance if you're worrying that you're going to fail your geometry test you say to yourself (or write down) "I'm have the thought that I'm going to fail the geometry test." It helps you to think more rationally.
- Write your worries away
 - Write down your anxious thoughts to get them out of your head. Then tear them up and throw them away.
- Watch your self-talk
 - Engage in positive self-talk, and try to reframe negative thinking. For instance a thought about failing an upcoming test could be reframed into something like "I studies for this, and will probably pass if I do my best." Make sure your positive talk is sincere and reflects reality.

Establish Control over the Worry

When people are anxious they often feel out of control. These strategies help you gain more control over your worry.

- Worry on Purpose
 - When you find yourself worrying, it's difficult or impossible to reason rationally. So set a timer and concentrate on worrying for 2 minutes. You will likely find that your mind will get tired of worrying and move onto something else.
- Schedule Worry Sessions!
 - Set appointments for 5-10 minutes sessions (once or twice per day) to do nothing but worry. Perhaps put a reminder in your phone, agenda, or calendar. When a worrying situation comes up, note that you will worry about it at the appointed time and move on. Face that anxiety on your terms!
- Figure out what you can and cannot control
 - Write down your anxious situations including all of bad and worst-case possibilities
 - Draw a circle around the things you can control and underline those you can't
 - Think about and write down what you could do to make the situation better
 - Think about and write down what you don't have the power to change about the situation
 - Think about what could help you let go of worrying about it so much
- Watch who you spend time with.
 - If you tend to spend time with people who are also anxious, nervous, or worried, this will tend to feed your anxiety. Try to find people who do not tend to be nervous or anxious.

Release the Fear

Often fear underlies and feeds anxiety, and can impede your ability to remain calm. These strategies can help you cope with fear including social anxiety.

○ Helpful Mindfulness Activity: Releasing Fear

- a. Close your eyes and think of an upcoming situation that tends to raise your anxiety level. Imagine this situation in your mind's eye: the people, place, sounds, smells
- b. Now turn your attention inward and recognize where you're beginning to feel stress or anxiety in your own body. Notice what those sensations feel like.
- c. Imagine yourself breathing into that part of the body experiencing anxiety sensations. With just a breath at a time, slowly breathe into that spot. With each breath imagine you are breathing calm and warmth into that area and breathing out fear and anxiety.
 - Breathing in calm...
 - Breathing out worry...
 - Breathing in peace...
 - Breathing out fear...
- d. You can do this for any emotion – breathe in what you want to feel and breathe out what you don't want to feel.

○ Helpful Mindfulness Activity: STOP (Stop, Take a Breath, Observe, Plan) the Social Panic

1. Stop what you are doing
2. Take a breath. Focus on all the sensations of the in-breath: the cold air hitting your nose and the back of your throat, moving down your throat, then your belly and diaphragm expanding as you inhale. Feel your diaphragm release now, the warm air traveling upward and out through your lips and nostrils
3. Observe. What is happening right now in your external environment: what are the sounds, sights, and smells of the space around you? Now shift to your internal experience, sensations in your body, comfort or discomfort, and observing your mind: what thoughts, emotions, and images are floating through your mind?
4. Plan and proceed. Is there a way you can bring your inner state more in line with the outer world? Are there any adjustments you can make to your outer world to help it align with your inner world? Are there any actions you can take at this moment to improve the situation?

Get Organized

When people's lives are in a state of clutter, it becomes easier for fear and anxiety to take hold. Some of these are just basic mechanisms to help become organized and therefore more in control.

- Agendas, Checklists, and Scripts

- Keep an agenda or calendar for upcoming assignments, quizzes, and important dates
- Create checklists or reminder notes to help with routines
- Create scripts for how to do things that tend to cause anxiety (like how to approach certain types of math problems, or how to do certain projects)

- Break it Down

- Learn how to break large tasks down into small manageable pieces, and work on the smaller pieces one by one.

- Learn how to actually study – helps a lot with test anxiety

- Space and Time Considerations:

- Create a quiet and neat study area
- Make and follow a study schedule
- Study frequently for short periods – cramming only leaves you tired for the test
- Study during times of day when you tend to have more energy
- Study the most difficult or challenging material first while you are still fresh
- Make sure your study notes / information is complete. If there are gaps in your notes, or you need a textbook get these from a teacher or a classmate
- Reward yourself after studying for the prescribed amount of time

- Help with Memory and Recall

- Review previously learned material before starting to study more current material
- Recite information out loud (you both speak and hear yourself saying it) – helps with remembering it.
- Pose difficult questions. Every so often stop studying and ask questions like, “What questions am I most afraid will be on the test?” Your answer will give you clues as to what you still find difficult and should spend the most time on.
- Teach the information to another person – can be a “learning check”. If you can teach material in your own words and make it understandable, then you have likely mastered the material.
- SQ3R – Survey the chapter to get an overview, create questions (like those that might be on a test) based on each chapter heading, read through the chapter and try to answer your questions as you read, recite your questions and verbally answer each one from memory (writing them down helps even better), revise your answers to see if you were right.