

Simple Strategies for Instant Anxiety Relief

When anxiety hits, we don't always have a lot of time to deal with it. We may have to run off to our next meeting, pick up the kids from school, or get dinner on the table. These quick, simple exercises will help get your anxiety back under control in minutes.



Tune In to Your Senses

Why It Works

Your body always lives in the present. By focusing on your senses, you're able to get out of your anxious mind that is spinning with worries for the future and endless "what-ifs," and back into the present moment.

How to Do It

There are two effective ways to bring focus to your senses:

1. Ask yourself, "What do I see, feel, and hear right now?" Consciously move through each sensation you are experiencing at the moment. For example, if you are lying in bed unable to sleep, use the rhythm of your breath to mentally list five things you can see: the moon out your window, the silhouette of your nightstand, etc. Say to yourself, "I see the moon. I see my nightstand." You can even close your eyes and use your mind's eye to see what images come up. Next, notice five things you feel: your sheets against your skin, the softness of your pillow. Say to yourself, "I feel the sheet touching my shoulder" and "I feel my pillow." You can also "feel" emotions or sensations: "I feel my heart racing" or "I feel chaotic." And finally mentally note five things you hear: the rise and fall of your partner's breath, the sound of crickets outside. Use your inner voice to say, "I hear my partner breathing," then "I hear crickets." Don't judge your list, simply be aware of it.

Continue with this awareness exercise; next move to four items you see, feel, and hear, just as you did in the first round. Then three. Then two. Then one. Don't worry about repeating – you don't need to have unique lists each time or even unique items within the list. The point is to consciously be aware of things you are experiencing in the moment. If, after you get through this five-round, three-sense process, you need further relaxation, start the process over with five things again – remember to breathe. Once you become comfortable with this exercise, it gets easier over time.

2. Slow down. Focus on only one behavior with complete awareness. Take one minute to wash the dishes, and notice how the water feels on your skin and the way the soap smells. Go for a short walk around the outside of the office, paying attention to the sensation of the wind on your face and taking in every detail of what you see around you.

Make a List

Why It Works

When the obligations of day-to-day life pile up, our minds begin to race with everything we have to do, and anxiety ultimately creeps in. When your brain is feeling overwhelmed, it fires off active thoughts over and over again, as well as triggers adrenaline, in an effort to ensure its perceived needs get resolved. By writing your recurring thoughts or to-do list down on paper, your brain is no longer burdened with remembering this overpowering amount of responsibilities. This frees it up to actually focus on the task at hand – helping you feel productive and less prone to giving in to runaway emotions. Essentially, transferring the responsibility out of the brain into a tangible format, such as a list, slows the release of anxiety-related chemicals by reassuring the mind that its needs have been documented and are more likely to be addressed.

How to Do It

Jot down a list of everything you have to do. Note every task you can think of, everything your brain is telling you. Don't worry if you don't have time to write out details or put them in order of importance – you can always come back and do this later if you like. The important thing is to get your to-do list out of your head and onto the paper. Many people also use apps on their smartphones for lists and reminders.



Breathe Slowly and Sigh Out Stress

Why It Works

Relaxation is the body's natural anxiety cure because relaxation techniques actually reverse the stress response. Rapid breathing is part of the fight/flight/freeze response triggered when anxiety hits. By consciously slowing down our breathing, we counteract anxiety by triggering the relaxation response, helping our anxiety to pass. Furthermore, the sound of an audible sigh activates a deep sense of release and healing within our mind-body system.

How to Do It

Breathe in slowly through your nose and silently count to four. Keep your jaw relaxed and your shoulders down, and allow your stomach to expand as you breathe in. Hold the breath for a moment, then release out through your mouth with an audible sigh, slowly and smoothly as you mentally count to seven. Repeat as many times as you like.



Tense and Relax Your Muscles

Why It Works

Stress and anxiety cause our muscles to tighten and become tense. By gathering up all the tension in your muscles and then consciously releasing it, you help to trigger the relaxation response that counteracts the stress response.

How to Do It

Either sitting or lying down, tense all the muscles in your body as tight as you can: clench your fists, tighten your stomach, squeeze your eyes shut. Hold for a few seconds, then release, feeling your body melt into whatever surface is supporting it: the chair, the bed, the ground. You can also let out a sigh as you release. Repeat this process as many times as you like.



Interact with Your Pet

Why It Works

If you are a pet owner or an animal lover, you know that whether it's a dog chasing a ball, a cat enjoying a nap in the sun, or a hamster racing on his wheel, animals live for the present moment. While your pet may remember things like when it's dinner time, where the treats are kept, or how to get home, they only access that information when they need it. Animals experience no regrets about the past or worries for the future, and don't concern themselves with the judgments of others, dwell on past mistakes, or feel burdened by an endless number of to-dos. They can teach us so much about enjoying the present moment. When we spend time with our pets, this calm, carefree attitude rubs off on us, reducing anxiety-related chemicals and releasing feel-good endorphins.



How to Do It

This one's easy – spend time with your pet! Give your dog a belly rub, play with your cat – even watching the rhythmic movement of a fish swimming can be soothing. If you're not a pet owner, perhaps you have a friend or family member who will let you enjoy some quality time with their animal companions.

Try these simple exercises and see which work best for you. The more often you consciously respond to anxiety in a healthy way, the easier it becomes to stay calm in the face of fear.