

SOME TOOLS FOR ANXIETY

*Practical exercises to help you find calm,
reclaim your body and restore your sense of self.*

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Understanding anxiety



Anxiety is the body's natural response to perceived threat. It is not a character flaw or a sign of weakness — it is your nervous system doing exactly what it was designed to do: keep you safe. When the brain detects danger, the sympathetic nervous system floods the body with noradrenaline, priming you to fight, flee or freeze. The result is a cascade of physical sensations — a rapid heartbeat, shallow breathing, a tight gut, dizziness, tingling fingers, hot flushes — all of which are purposeful, even when they feel deeply uncomfortable.

The difficulty arises when there is nothing concrete to fight or flee from. When the source of anxiety is a looming deadline, a difficult relationship, or a persistent sense of unease, the physical alarm response has nowhere to go. The body stays on high alert, and the emotional fallout — restlessness, poor concentration, irritability, nausea and that unsettling sense of dread — can become a constant companion.

This can also lead to avoidant behaviour: scrolling, watching television, shopping or drinking to temporarily quieten the noise. These responses are entirely understandable. The amygdala — the part of the brain that governs the fear response — operates beneath conscious awareness, which is why simply telling yourself to calm down rarely works.

Over time, it helps to explore the connections between your thoughts, feelings, physical sensations and actions. But in the immediate moment, the most powerful signal of safety travels through the body and the senses. Every exercise in this guide works with that principle.

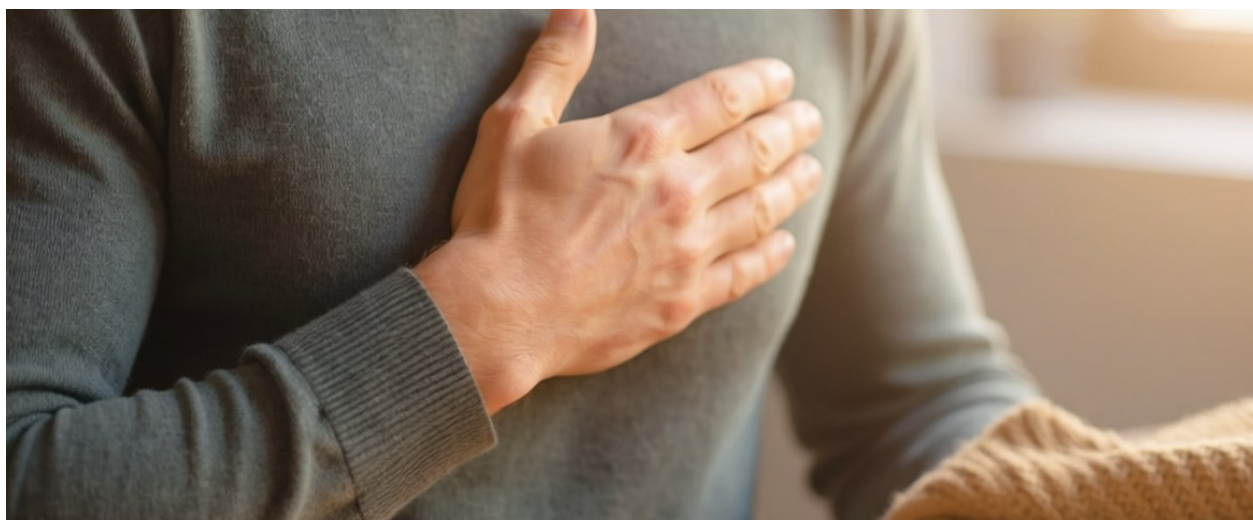
In the moment

The following techniques are designed for moments of acute panic or overwhelm. Their purpose is to bring your attention back to the present — grounding your body and senses in the here and now. Some may feel unfamiliar at first; it is worth practising them when you are calm, so they become instinctive when you need them.

01 Box Breathing

- Inhale slowly through your nose for **4 counts**.
- Hold your breath gently for **4 counts**.
- Exhale fully through your mouth for **4 counts**.
- Hold again for **4 counts**. Repeat five times.

You may like to rest one hand on your heart and one on your abdomen as you breathe. If it helps, visualise a colour for your discomfort and breathe in a calm, soothing colour in its place — releasing the difficult colour on each out-breath.



02 The 3–3–3 Rule

- Look around and name **3 things you can see**. Observe them carefully — colour, texture, shape.
- Listen and identify **3 sounds**. Notice pitch, volume, and where they come from.
- Move **3 parts of your body**. Name each one aloud as you do — "right index finger" — and feel the muscle engage.

This technique works by drawing your attention outward, away from the internal spiral, and anchoring it in concrete, observable reality.

03 The 5–4–3–2–1 Technique

- Slow your breath first (see Box Breathing above).
- On each out-breath, name **5 things you can see** around you.
- Then **4 things you can hear**.
- Then **3 things you can feel** physically — clothing, a chair, the ground beneath your feet.
- Then **2 things you can smell**.
- Then **1 thing you can taste**.

It is worth preparing for this one. A piece of chewing gum or a small scented item in your bag gives you reliable anchors for taste and smell when you need them most.

04 Progressive Muscle Relaxation

- Lie down comfortably, arms and legs uncrossed, and focus gently on your breathing.
- Beginning at the top of your head, tense each muscle group for 5 seconds, then release fully for 10 seconds.
- Work downwards: face, neck, shoulders, upper arms, forearms, hands, chest, abdomen, thighs, calves, feet.
- Notice the contrast between tension and release. This contrast is the reset.

If tensing feels difficult, simply scan your body from head to toe with curiosity — noticing areas of tension without forcing anything. Keeping to the same sequence each time, for around 15 minutes, builds a reliable sense of ease. Particularly helpful at the end of the day or after exercise.



Wider practices for your whole self

Long-term wellbeing is built through regular, gentle practices that help restore your sense of safety and ground you in your own life. These are not prescriptions — they are invitations. Begin with whatever feels most accessible, and let the rest follow.

The Mind

Small journalling exercises, done reasonably regularly — perhaps every two or three evenings — can shift your inner narrative over time. The aim is not to produce polished writing, but to create a brief, honest conversation with yourself.

Self-compassion and achievement

Write down three things you did well today, or three things you genuinely like about yourself. Be specific. Linger with what comes up — notice any resistance with curiosity rather than judgement.

Gratitude

Write down four things you are grateful for, in as much detail as you can. Over weeks, these reflections can become words or phrases that anchor a short daily meditation.

Other practices that support the mind: spending time with friends, reading, travel, or simply doing something different — disrupting habitual patterns of thought by placing yourself in a new context.



The Body

When thoughts are circling relentlessly, physical movement can break the loop. Anxiety is exhausting — but paradoxically, gentle or vigorous exertion can release the tension that rumination only deepens.

Walking in nature, exercise alone or with others, eating well, and returning to breathing exercises are all ways of resetting through the body. The key is consistency rather than intensity — a regular walk matters more than an occasional burst of effort.



The Emotions

Emotions are not obstacles to be managed — they are information. They tell us what we need. The practice here is one of curiosity: starting from where you actually are, rather than where you feel you ought to be.

Music, art, journalling and keeping a dream journal are all ways of creating a dialogue with your emotional life. None of them requires expertise — only a willingness to pay attention.

You do not have to do this alone



These tools are a starting point. They work best when practised regularly — ideally before you are in crisis, so that they become familiar and instinctive when you need them most.

If anxiety is significantly affecting your daily life, your relationships, or your sense of self, I would encourage you to reach out. Counselling offers a safe, confidential space to explore not just the symptoms of anxiety, but the connections and patterns beneath them.

Get in touch

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