

Strategies and Tools to Support Anxiety

Having some anxiety can be helpful in lots of life situations. Anxiety, with its accompanying adrenaline, is activating — it increases our awareness, attention and motivation so, when we need to, we can act with focus. However, if we experience too much anxiety we go into in fight, flight, or freeze mode. This can happen even when there is nothing to be worried about — when we are scared about the future or worrying about the past, rather than feeling connected to the present. Anxiety can also act as a protective emotion that happens when our mind is triggered by a past trauma or sense of being out of control.

Anxiety is made up of four parts: physical sensations, emotions, thoughts, and actions. Often physical sensations begin to happen before we're even aware that we're anxious. By noticing the subtle changes in our bodies, like tension in our muscles or jaw, we can actually become aware that we are starting to experience anxiousness and we can bring that awareness to our thinking and our feelings.



Before we start on the below strategies: what we resist persists

When we experience anxiety our instinctive urge is to want to 'get rid of it'. It's only natural to want uncomfortable feelings to go away. Research has shown, however, that when we stay curious about our anxiety and when we use strategies that help us to stay in the present moment our anxiety tends to lessen in intensity. As we use these tools regularly our awareness grows and we learn to better understand the anxious feelings and then feel less fearful about experiencing anxiety.

When we learn to ride a bike practicing feels clunky at first. We feel like we'll never get any good at it. We feel wonky, unsafe and incapable. But as we practice anything our body memory grows stronger and before we know it we're getting more fluid and skilled without even thinking about what we're doing. It might even start to feel effortless. This is definitely the case in practicing new strategies for anxiety or for any intrusive thoughts or feelings — it might feel a bit unnatural at first.



The Strategies

Below are a bunch of evidence-based strategies. You can dip in and out of the practices. Go easily and without putting pressure on yourself as you learn each new tool. Building your confidence and patience in the process takes time. Be aware that we're not trying to eradicate the anxiety, we're just aiming to bring in tools that support being present. As a result the intensity of the anxiety will possibly reduce but it's important to use the strategies with curiosity rather than the expectation that you'll feel instantly amazing and that rainbows will suddenly appear.

The five senses 5-4-3-2-1 practice

The beauty of our five senses is that they are with us everywhere we go. You can do the five senses practice while on public transport, at work or at home. Before starting this exercise bring your attention to your breath, seeing if you can take in a few long, slow, deep breaths. This will begin to support taking down the intensity in what you're feeling.

The practice:

1. Name five things you can see around you.

It could be a mug, a plant, a mark on the wall — anything you can see around you.

2. Name four things you can touch around you.

It could be the ground under your feet, a pet, a coffee table.

3. Name three things you can hear.

It could be a passing car, a bird, the dishwasher in motion — anything you can hear outside of your own body.

4. Name two things you can smell

If you're in your office it might be a pencil. Maybe you're outside and you can smell a blossom or grass. Perhaps you could walk to your bathroom to smell the soap. If you're in the bedroom you might smell the pillow.

5. Name one things you can taste

What does the inside of your mouth taste like? Maybe coffee, a mint you just ate or the pasta you had for lunch?



Accepting the emotion practice

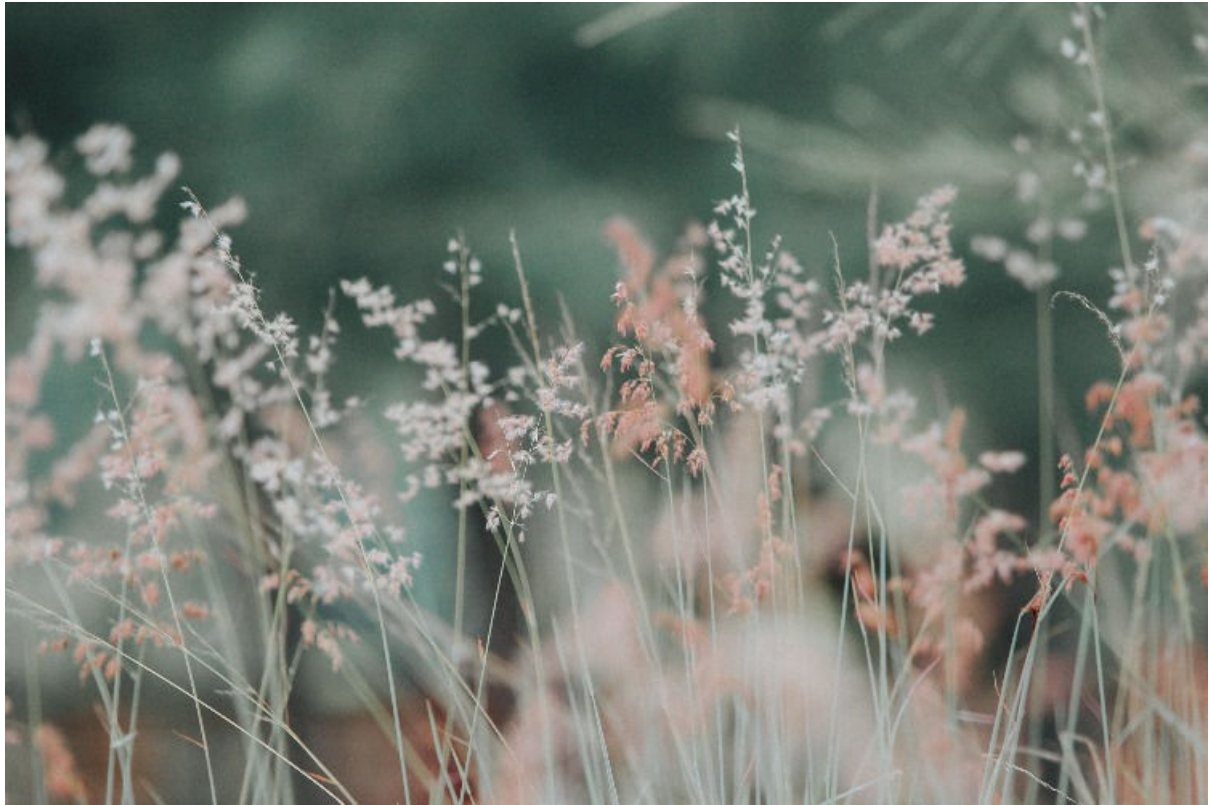
This practice draws from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, which is a mindful-oriented form of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. The practice is about really noticing what is happening within when we experience an emotion like anxiety – or any other emotion too! The strategy helps us to stay present and to understand what's happening around the emotion, both physically and emotionally.

If you'd like to listen to this practice you can use the guided version on the media player in the resources section of the Stable Self website. (It's also available for download so you have it with you all the time on your device).

The practice:

1. Sitting upright with your back straight and your feet flat on the floor.
2. You can close your eyes or focus them on a space in the room (whichever feels most comfortable for you).
3. Take a few full breaths. As you do, notice the breath moving into your lungs and out.
4. Briefly scan over your body from your head to your feet noticing all the sensations as you go in your: scalp, face, throat, chest, arms, hands, belly, pelvis, buttocks, thighs, calves and feet.
5. Hone in now on the part of your body where you notice a sensation or emotion is feeling strongest. Notice if there's resistance here.
6. Start to notice this sensation and any emotions that come with it. You're aiming to do this with curiosity, as though you are a curious scientist examining something unknown.

7. Observe the sensation and the feelings there carefully, being aware of where the sensation starts and ends, noticing if there is a colour associated, if it has a shape, noticing how deep the sensation goes or how shallow. Where is the sensation more and less intense?
8. If your mind is wanting to come in and take over that's okay. Just allow the other thoughts to come and pass through like cloud, like passing cars, and then bring your attention back to the sensation, observing the feelings.
9. Again, if you notice you've been distracted come back to re-focus your attention on the sensation, on the feelings, allowing the thoughts to pass by like leaves on a stream.
10. Observe the sensation with curiosity. Is the sensation different in the middle to the edges. Is there pulsation or vibration? Is it light or heavy? Moving or still? How about the temperature? Are there hot spots or cold spots?
11. Notice the different elements. Is there just the one overall sensation or are there sensations within the sensations?
12. As you notice the sensations and the feelings or emotions breath into them. See your breath moving into and around these sensations.
13. Start to get a sense that as you breath into the sensation or the feeling that a space starts to open up around it.
14. Continue to breath into that sensation and allow that space to open up a little more around the sensation or feeling, noticing that expansion growing, the space expanding with each breath.
15. See if you can just be with this sensation, with the feeling. You don't have to like it or want it to be there. Just watch it, observe it.
16. Continue to watch and observe this feeling. Continue to allow your breath to move and expand around it, allowing it to be there as it is.
17. You might, right now, feel an urge to fight the sensation and feelings and to get rid of them. If so, just acknowledge these feelings without giving into the urge and come back to noticing the sensations and observing.
18. As you sit with the sensations just be with the awareness that we are not trying to get rid of what's there. If it changes by itself, that's okay. If it doesn't change, that's okay too. Changing or getting rid of your discomfort is not the goal. Your aim is to simply let it be, creating space for the sensations or emotions to also be present.
19. Tune into how you're doing around resisting the sensation or emotion. If you notice you're resisting it and aiming to eradicate it just allow yourself to stop for a moment and allow it to be there. Allow yourself to say 'I don't like this feeling but I can allow it to be there.'



Box Breathing

This strategy is great if you can sit yourself down comfortably to do it, but you can be anywhere to use it. There is a guided version of box breathing in the Mindfulness Library section of the website. You can listen to it on the media player in the resources section of the Stable Self website (It's also available for download so you have it with you all the time on your device).

The practice:

Exhale out

Start by exhaling so that you let all the air out of your lungs, focus on this as you do it.

Slowly inhale

Then slowly and deeply inhale through your nose to the count of four. You can count in your head as you breathe in. If you're finding the count of four feels challenging it's okay to change it to the count of three.

Hold your breath

Gently hold your breath for the count of four. You might notice how it feels to hold.

Exhale again

Exhale from your nose for a count of four letting the air out of your lungs. And then repeat from the start for as many times as feels okay for you.



Progressive muscle relaxation

This is a simple and very effective practice where we tense up and relax different parts of the body in a progressive sequence. You can do this practice in a chair if you're at work but it's ideal if you can recline back or lay down to really allow for full tension and relaxation of each of your muscle groups.

The practice:

When you're ready to begin you'll be tensing up the muscle group described below. You'll be tensing, but not to the point of strain or any pain. You'll be keeping these muscles tensed for about five seconds, then you'll be releasing and relaxing for about ten seconds before tensing the next muscle group. As you get used to the practice you might want to change up the order of the muscles.

To start using this strategy I would highly recommend listening to the guided version on the media player in the resources section of the Stable Self website (click play on the media player) so you can simply follow the guided practice. (This is also available to download to your device.)

Muscle groups to work with in the tensing and relaxing:

- Feet
- Calves and ankles
- Upper legs, pelvis and buttocks
- Stomach and chest
- Shoulders and back
- Arms and hands
- Face, jaw and mouth

- Whole body tense



Willing Hands practice

The Willing Hands practice comes from Dialectical Behaviour Therapy. Willing Hands reduces our sense of discomfort around the emotions of anger, frustration and anxiety and increases our feelings of freedom, by allowing us to come to terms with life as it is in the current moment. Willing hands is a way of accepting things as they are physically within our bodies.

Before moving in to a description of this practice I'd like to say a few words about anger as this can be linked to other emotions. Often if we are experiencing anger it's because we feel hurt and we might hold a belief that things should not be as they are and this can create a sense of dis-ease and anxiety. Anger shows us that something needs attention, that there is something for us to release and feelings of hurt beneath it to see. There are some situations that we cannot change no matter how angry we feel about them, acceptance is a wiser strategy, one that causes us less suffering.

The practice:

1. As you feelings of anger or frustration arise, start by unclenching your hands and turning them palms up with relaxed fingers. You can rest your hands on your lap or the arms of a chair. If you're upright you can stand with relaxed hands, palms forward with relaxed shoulders, arms and hands.
2. Next we add a half smile. Scrunch your face up, tensing the muscles. Then release, allowing the tension to drain from all the facial muscles. Turn your mouth up just slightly to make a half smile. Keep your half-smile relaxed and natural rather than strained or tense. The aim is for a very slight 'serene' smile. With our palms up and a half-smile we send calming and reassuring signals to the brain.

Extending the practice (if you'd like to):

Sit still with your eyes closed and imagine a conflict you had recently with someone where you felt strong anger. Notice how the anger returns a little when you re-visit this event in your mind's eye. Move your hands into the Willing Hands position in your lap and add in the half-smile. Notice what happens to any feelings of anger. Because of its effect on our brain, mostly people say they feel more accepting and notice less anger is present when the hands are in this position.

You can practice the Willing Hands exercise throughout your day - when you first wake up, when you feel irritated or impatient, when you have thoughts about someone who has hurt you or a situation that has feelings of pain associated.

Alphabet Breathing

In this exercise we simply use the alphabet as a focus for the mind as we breathe. Using each letter of the alphabet allows us to give the mind something to hone in on as we experience inhaling and exhaling.

First get your self comfortable. You might sit or lay down or you could do this standing on public transport or in the car.

Take an inhalation, allowing the breath to come into your belly and then up into your chest and then exhale, letting the air drain from the lungs and belly.

Next, start with the letter 'A' and say the letter 'A' as you breathe into your belly, allowing the air to move into the chest and then exhale on the letter 'A'.

Repeat this with each letter of the alphabet.



Quick strategies to re-focus and ground:

These really quick strategies bring us back into our body and press pause on unhelpful thoughts. Each of these is about coming back to the present, to the body and feeling in control.

- Take a bath
- Walk around the block (notice things like plants, houses, animals)
- Take a break from social media
- Plan what you will make yourself for your next meal
- Do something (even really small) that you've been putting off
- Cuddle a pet
- Write down three things you are grateful for today (even tiny things)
- Do a household chore
- Taking a moment to massage one or both of your hands (this releases oxytocin)
- Smell something (hand soap, a flower, a jar of coffee)
- Write down your thoughts
- Listen to a quick meditation
- Do 5 star jumps
- Clear out a cupboard

- Place a hand to your heart and notice the warmth moving into that heart space
- Sit or stand up straight, shoulders back
- Watch a funny video
- Suck on an ice cube (notice temperature and sensations)
- Bypass stimulants like caffeine and sugar and limit alcohol
- Plan a good night's sleep with a bath beforehand and calm music
- Take off your shoes and walk on grass noticing sensation
- Remind yourself that feelings are feelings rather than facts
- Tap into your personal creative thing: your instrument, painting, writing, drawing, making
- Schedule in your personal helpful activities: volunteering, counselling, massage, choir, sports class.