

Anxiety toolkit

Understanding Fight, flight, freeze

The sympathetic nervous system is the body's survival mechanism. It is activated when we think we are under some kind of threat and helps us face that immediate threat by providing the body with the energy and resources it needs in order to fight, flight (run away) or freeze (play dead). This system comes on-line automatically, which is to say, we don't need to THINK about it, as it is activated on an unconscious level. Some of the effects of this system will be familiar to you, the racing heart, shallow breathing, cartwheels in the tummy, and in some cases, the brain starts to feel like it's shutting down. After all, we don't need to waste energy thinking too hard if all we need to do is run away.



There's nothing wrong with us if this system is activated – it is simply the body trying to help keep us alive. However, this system comes online, not just with real and immediate threats like a speeding car when we're crossing the road, but with imagined ones as well – whether that's speaking up in public or dealing with anxious thoughts about the future.

Our anxious thoughts can keep the sympathetic nervous system online way beyond when it's useful and this can take its toll on our physical and mental health. However, even if there are stressful times around us, the good news is that we can control how we cope with them, and start to help the body “stand down” from threat mode. Even if it's just for a short period of time, it will still be beneficial. Little and often may well be the way to go in these current times.

Understanding rest and digest – the parasympathetic nervous system

The parasympathetic nervous system is the flip side to the sympathetic nervous system and it is crucial for our wellbeing. It's this system that brings us back into 'homeostasis' – balance. When the parasympathetic nervous system is triggered, our body starts to calm down, digestion begins again, saliva increases, the heart rate slows, muscles relax, and breathing returns to normal; we can thrive again. Although this our thriving natural state, it is probably the most neglected aspect of wellbeing. In order to mitigate the ill effects of long-term stress on the body, it's essential to trigger the parasympathetic system, and allow our systems time to calm down and balance out. There are many ways to trigger the parasympathetic nervous system. We've included a few of them in this toolkit.



After any calming activity you do, it's worth spending a bit of time logging the change in your body and mind. This can help act as a positive reinforcement, meaning that you're less likely to reach for a distracting activity which may not actually make you feel better in the long run. So, instead of reaching for the phone, or checking the news, try one of these activities instead and logging any positive benefits it has for you.

Breathing

One of the most easily accessible ways to calm down is to take control of the breath, which becomes faster and more shallow when we are stressed and anxious. There are a few different techniques that are worth trying.

Belly Breathing

Belly breathing helps control breathlessness and panic attacks and the vicious circle of anxiety. Practising this breathing technique at times when you are not breathless will help when need it most. A good tip is to focus on the out-breath for longer. If you are not used to this type of breathing, it might take a while to get used to. This is why it's useful to practice.

How to do it:

Breathe in slowly through your nose, taking the breath all the way down into the lower belly. Exhale slowly through your mouth. Keep this up for a few breaths. If you like, put your hands on the belly to see if it moves out and in when you breathe. As much as possible you're trying to make the belly move, but the chest stay relatively still. See if you can notice any changes in the body and mind. If you don't like focusing inward you can also use your hands to mimic the movement of the breath and focus on the movement of the hands instead.

Box breathing

When we are stressed and anxious, our breath can get very short. This is another technique which can be helpful with anxiety, overwhelm and stress, and help improve mood. Like belly breathing, this technique can help regulate the breath, sending a signal to the brain and to the rest of the body to slow down. It is a message to say; "it's safe, you can relax, there is no threat here".

How to do it:

Breathe in to a slow count of four, hold the breath to a count of four, breathe out to a count of four, and then hold for a count of four. Repeat 4 times. Try this three or four times a day. If you're new to box breathing, it may be difficult to get the hang of it. You may get dizzy after a few rounds. This is normal. The more you practice, the easier it will get. However, if you get too dizzy, resume your normal breathing and just stay sat down for a bit.

Other types of calming breathing include

- Making the breath equal by breathing in for four counts and out for four counts.
- Extending the outbreath so that you breathe in for four counts, and out for six.
- Another alternative is to breathe in for three, hold for four and out for five counts. It's worth trying them all to see which you prefer.

Using other anchors to bring you to the present

Breathing isn't the only way to help the body and mind calm down. You can focus instead on your senses. These techniques can be great for people who find focusing on the breath increases feelings of anxiety.

Grounding meditation

When you notice yourself having anxious thoughts, it can be helpful to use the senses to shift the attention away from the thinking mind and into the physical body and what's happening right now.

This short exercise uses all of your five senses to help refocus the mind and body. Look around you, note five things you can **see**. Repeat them as a list in your head or out loud. Then note four things you can **feel** or **touch**. List them in your head or say them out loud. Then list or say three things you can **hear**, two things you can **smell** (or your two favourite smells), and one thing you can **taste** (or your favourite taste). Take some deep belly breaths before and after this exercise. If you prefer, you can list just one thing of each. You can try out a guided version of this [here](#):

Other ways of doing this might just be to repeat something silently about what's actually happening right now, rather than what's happening in your imagination. So you might be sat on a chair, and then you would repeat to yourself "I'm sitting on a chair. I'm breathing. I'm safe" a few times.

Focusing awareness on the body

If you are sat down, it can also be very grounding to focus on the sense of your feet on the floor and the body on the chair. Firstly bring your attention to your feet, noticing that not all of the foot is in contact with the floor – notice the sense of contact and pressure. As much as you can, rest your awareness here, just noticing that feel of the feet resting on the floor. You might also notice the feel of where your feet might be touching the edge of any footwear too. Focusing your attention on any sensations that you notice here. You might like to move your toes to see how that feels too. Then you can also notice the feel of the bum and legs resting on the chair, being curious about how it feels to rest your attention on the feeling of the body sat down. You can stay with this feeling of the body being still and grounded as long as you need. A short guided version of something similar can be found [here](#).

Focusing JUST on the sounds around you

You might like to start with finding one sound to focus your attention on, and then moving your awareness by listening to each individual sound around you in turn. Try and do this for a couple of minutes and see how you feel afterwards. Thoughts may come and go – don't worry too much about them – just come back to focusing on the sounds (or the silence). This is nice to do outside. A short guided version is [here](#)

Shake it off!

One way of calming the nervous system down is to learn from our furry canine friends. After a dog has been in a stressful situation, it will literally “shake it off” – shaking its fur and body out until the body has reset. We can do the same! Short bursts of aerobic exercise may have a similar effect on us. If you find yourself with a build up of anxious energy, why not put on a happy up-beat tune and have a vigorous dance to it. Check in with your mind and body afterwards. How does it feel now? Do you notice the benefits? Allow yourself to absorb any benefits you feel.

Social relationships

Our social relationships are important for our rest and digest systems. In typical life, we’d be seeing friends and family regularly, hopefully giving them hugs and enjoying the interaction. During lockdown, this may not be possible. However, it is important to recognise that there are ways of making the distance easier. Video calls and facetime are more beneficial for our wellbeing and sense of connection. In fact, it’s said that the brain can’t really tell the difference between seeing someone on video or seeing them in person. Even if you can’t video call, a telephone call may still help you feel calmer and more connected than a text or message on social media.

Drinking in the good or being grateful

Whenever you have a nice, pleasurable or enjoyable experience – however small – spend some time taking in everything about it. Notice how it feels in the body; are there any physical sensations? What emotions are present? See if you can hold these feelings in awareness for 20 – 30 seconds and drink it in. It helps the experience stick in the memory more and contributes to your feelings of wellbeing. Another way to increase feelings of wellbeing is to keep a grateful or positivity diary – listing at the end of the day the things you were grateful for on that day, or the positive things that happened.

Other things you can do

- **Limit your news intake:** Yes it’s important to know what’s going on, and what the current situation is, but do you really need to know what’s going on 24 hours a day? Instead of logging onto the news at random times throughout the day, set a time once or twice to check in and leave it at that. Perhaps also schedule one of your favourite calming activities straight afterwards if you notice any anxiety levels start to rise again.
- **Limit your social media:** Social media can make our anxieties and stresses worse. Perhaps take a look at who you follow and avoiding or muting people whose posts are likely to trigger more anxious thoughts and feelings. Like the news, you might also want to control when you look at social media rather than doing so randomly. Avoid both news and social media first thing!
- **Food and drink:** Stick to regular mealtimes and follow a healthy diet. Avoid excess caffeine which can make stress or anxiety symptoms worse.

- **Nature:** Even if you can't get into nature, perhaps consider acquiring some houseplants to give you some greenery to focus on, or try looking at some photos of beautiful places.
- **Sleep:** Stick to regular sleep windows if you can, and try and maintain normal sleep and wake times. When our sleep is disturbed, it's natural for the brain to become more negative and anxious; this is part of the body's survival mechanism.
- **Little and often:** Little and often is what's important in times like this. Perhaps schedule in a few times a day for some belly breathing or one of the other strategies, and then start to use it whenever you feel anxious thoughts are starting to spin you out.
- **Laughter** can be very calming for the nervous system. Find some comedy to listen to or watch and see if you can laugh away some anxiety.
- **Turn off notifications** You might want to set your phone to 'do not disturb' and only check in a few times a day. Some phones allow you to only be notified about texts and calls from favourite individuals such as close friends or family.
- **Going from me to we:** Connecting with others is so important for our nervous system as already mentioned, but kindness and compassion is even more powerful. Finding ways to support and help others can really help calm things down, give us more of a sense of control, connection, and purpose.
- **Set up a routine:** When our routine is out of sorts, so are we. As much as possible, see if you can set yourself a timetable and routine that you can stick to. Setting a routine, will also give you back some control – as a lack of perceived control that can feed our anxiety.

Let us know how you got on – we'd love to hear any positive stories or feedback about any of these techniques. Find us at on Facebook at Manchestermind or @manchestermind on twitter.

Further resources from Manchester Mind:

- <https://www.manchestermind.org/mindfulness-march/> - download our 31 days of mindfulness handbook with a different suggestion every day
- [Soundcloud.com/mindfulmarch](https://www.soundcloud.com/mindfulmarch) – a variety of relaxations and short meditations

Also Recommended

- Headspace app
- Calm app
- Breathe app
- Oak – has some breathing exercises to calm you down as well as meditations
- Unwinding Anxiety app by MindSciences (has had some very good results in treating anxiety according to researchers)
- Dr Rangan Chatterjee's podcast "Feel Better Live More" episode with Dr Judson Brewer, also the one with Gabon Mate