

Introduction to Anxiety

Anxiety is the body's response to situations that are interpreted as threatening. Without any anxiety you would probably make bad decisions, such as driving too fast on the highway or not paying your bills. However, too much anxiety can lead to avoidance or unpleasant physical, emotional, and cognitive symptoms.

What are some things that trigger your anxiety?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

What physical symptoms do you experience when you are anxious?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

What are some thoughts that I have when I am anxious?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

What do you do to cope when you are anxious?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Exposure Hierarchy

Describe, in broad terms, what makes you anxious:

Describe specific situations related to your anxiety that make you feel varying levels of discomfort. On a scale of 0 to 10 (0 being not at all anxious, and 10 being extremely anxious), rate how much each situation affects you.

Anxiety-Producing Situation	0 - 10

Relaxation Techniques

When we experience anxiety, our body enters a state called the *fight-or-flight response*. During fight-or-flight, our bodies release chemicals that prepare us to either confront or flee from danger. Immediate symptoms include a reduced ability to think clearly, increased blood pressure, sweating, tensing of muscles, and more. These changes prepare us for survival from physical threats, but they do little to help against modern stressors such as presentations, meeting new people, or long days at work or school.

Deep Breathing

It's natural to take long deep breaths when relaxed. However, during the fight-or-flight response, breathing becomes rapid and shallow. Deep breathing sends messages to the brain to begin calming the body. Practice will make your body respond more efficiently to deep breathing in the future. It helps to do deep breathing 2-5 minutes every night, even if you aren't particularly stressed.

1. Breathe in slowly. Count in your head and make sure the inward breath lasts at least 5 seconds. Pay attention to the feeling of the air filling your lungs.
 2. Hold your breath for 5 to 10 seconds (again, keep count). You don't want to feel uncomfortable, but it should last quite a bit longer than an ordinary breath.
 3. Breathe out very slowly for 5 to 10 seconds (count!). Pretend like you're breathing through a straw to slow yourself down. Try using a real straw to practice.
 4. Repeat the breathing process until you feel calm.
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Imagery

Think about some of your favorite and least favorite places. Some places instantly cause stress, and others fill us with a feeling of calm and relaxation. Our brain creates an emotional reaction just by thinking about these places—we don't actually need to be in them. The imagery technique uses this to our advantage.

1. Make sure you're somewhere quiet without too much noise or distraction. You'll need a few minutes to just be in your head.
2. Think of a place or a situation that's calm to you. Some examples are the beach, hiking on a mountain, relaxing at home with a friend, or playing with a pet.

Relaxation Techniques

3. Paint a picture of the calming place in your mind. Don't just think of the place briefly—imagine every little detail. Go through each of your senses and imagine how they feel. Here's an example using a beach:
 - a. Sight: The sun is high in the sky and I'm surrounded by white sand. There's no one else around. The water is a greenish-blue and waves are calmly rolling in from the ocean.
 - b. Sound: I can hear the deep pounding and splashing of the waves. There are seagulls somewhere in the background.
 - c. Touch: The sun is warm on my back, but a breeze cools me down just enough. I can feel sand moving between my toes.
 - d. Taste: The lemonade I'm drinking is sweet and tart.
 - e. Smell: I can smell the saltwater and fresh air.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

During the fight-or-flight response the tension in our muscles increases. This can lead to a feeling of stiffness or even back and neck pain. Progressive muscle relaxation teaches us to be aware of this tension so we can identify and address stress that we may not have even been aware of.

1. Find a private and quiet location. You should lie or sit down somewhere comfortable.
2. The idea of this technique is to intentionally tense each muscle, and then to release the tension. Let's practice with your hands.
 - a. Tense the muscles in your fingers as hard as you can. This will make your hand go into a claw shape. Notice the feeling of tension in your hand. Hold this tension for 5 seconds.
 - b. Release the tension from your fingers. Let them relax. Notice how your fingers feel differently after you release the tension.
 - c. Tense the muscles all throughout your hand to create a fist. Notice the feeling of tension. Hold this tension for 5 seconds.
 - d. Release the tension from your fist and notice the feeling of relief in your hand.
3. Follow this pattern of tensing and releasing tension all throughout your body. Begin with your toes and move up through your feet, legs, buttocks, stomach, chest, back, shoulders, arms, fingers, hands, neck, face, and finally your whole body.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation Script

Progressive muscle relaxation is an exercise that reduces stress and anxiety in your body by having you slowly tense and then relax each muscle. This exercise can provide an immediate feeling of relaxation, but it's best to practice frequently. With experience, you will become more aware of when you are experiencing tension and you will have the skills to help you relax. During this exercise each muscle should be tensed, but not to the point of strain. If you have any injuries or pain, you can skip the affected areas. Pay special attention to the feeling of releasing tension in each muscle and the resulting feeling of relaxation. Let's begin.

Sit back or lie down in a comfortable position. Shut your eyes if you're comfortable doing so.

Begin by taking a deep breath and noticing the feeling of air filling your lungs. Hold your breath for a few seconds.

(brief pause)

Release the breath slowly and let the tension leave your body.

Take in another deep breath and hold it.

(brief pause)

Again, slowly release the air.

Even slower now, take another breath. Fill your lungs and hold the air.

(brief pause)

Slowly release the breath and imagine the feeling of tension leaving your body.

Now, move your attention to your feet. Begin to tense your feet by curling your toes and the arch of your foot. Hold onto the tension and notice what it feels like.

(5 second pause)

Release the tension in your foot. Notice the new feeling of relaxation.

Next, begin to focus on your lower leg. Tense the muscles in your calves. Hold them tightly and pay attention to the feeling of tension

(5 second pause)

Release the tension from your lower legs. Again, notice the feeling of relaxation. Remember to continue taking deep breaths.

Next, tense the muscles of your upper leg and pelvis. You can do this by tightly squeezing your thighs together. Make sure you feel tenseness without going to the point of strain.

(5 second pause)

Progressive Muscle Relaxation Script

And release. Feel the tension leave your muscles.

Begin to tense your stomach and chest. You can do this by sucking your stomach in. Squeeze harder and hold the tension. A little bit longer.

(5 second pause)

Release the tension. Allow your body to go limp. Let yourself notice the feeling of relaxation.

Continue taking deep breaths. Breathe in slowly, noticing the air fill your lungs, and hold it.

(brief pause)

Release the air slowly. Feel it leaving your lungs.

Next, tense the muscles in your back by bringing your shoulders together behind you. Hold them tightly. Tense them as hard as you can without straining and keep holding

(5 second pause)

Release the tension from your back. Feel the tension slowly leaving your body, and the new feeling of relaxation. Notice how different your body feels when you allow it to relax.

Tense your arms all the way from your hands to your shoulders. Make a fist and squeeze all the way up your arm. Hold it.

(5 second pause)

Release the tension from your arms and shoulders. Notice the feeling of relaxation in your fingers, hands, arms, and shoulders. Notice how your arms feel limp and at ease.

Move up to your neck and your head. Tense your face and your neck by distorting the muscles around your eyes and mouth.

(5 second pause)

Release the tension. Again, notice the new feeling of relaxation.

Finally, tense your entire body. Tense your feet, legs, stomach, chest, arms, head, and neck. Tense harder, without straining. Hold the tension.

(5 second pause)

Now release. Allow your whole body to go limp. Pay attention to the feeling of relaxation, and how different it is from the feeling of tension.

Begin to wake your body up by slowly moving your muscles. Adjust your arms and legs.

Stretch your muscles and open your eyes when you're ready.