

Exercises to help reduce anxiety

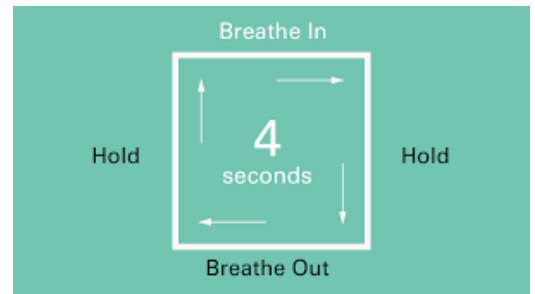
If you struggle with feeling anxious, stressed or panicked there are lots of things you can do to help yourself to cope with these feelings. Some things, such as simple breathing exercises, can be used at the height of a stressful moment to reduce your anxiety and help you to feel calmer. Other techniques, such as meditation and mindfulness, can be built into your daily routine to help reduce general stress and anxiety levels and improve your ability to cope with these feelings.

Here are some simple exercises you can try; see what works for you.

'Square breathing' exercise

This calming breathing technique for stress, anxiety and panic takes just a few minutes and can be done anywhere.

Begin by slowly exhaling all of your air out.
Then, gently inhale through your nose to a slow count of 4.
Hold at the top of the breath for a count of 4.
Then gently exhale through your mouth for a count of 4.
At the bottom of the breath, pause and hold for the count of 4.



Keep doing this for several minutes.

Grounding exercise

Grounding involves trying to take your mind away from uncomfortable symptoms or thoughts, and is a good technique to fend off the feelings of anxiety and stress when they feel overwhelming. You can use the 5,4,3,2,1 method to ground yourself. This uses the five senses to help you focus on the moment and avoid multiple anxious thoughts.

Start by sitting in a comfortable place and taking a deep breath. Then try to focus on the following;

- 5 things you can see
 - 4 things you can feel
 - 3 things you can hear
 - 2 things you can smell
 - 1 thing you can taste
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4 steps for controlling a panic attack

- 1) **Focus:** Feel your feet flat on the floor. Recognise and name three things you see around you.
 - 2) **Breathe:** Check that you are breathing through your nose, slowly in and out to the count of 4.
 - 3) **Accept:** You are doing fine, these are just symptoms caused by the adrenaline in your body. The adrenaline will soon start to decrease and you will feel better.
 - 4) **Relax:** Concentrate on dropping your shoulders as you breathe out.
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Progressive muscle relaxation exercise

Tension often builds up when we feel upset or stressed. This can be painful and can lead to further anxiety. Muscle relaxation exercises can help you to control these unpleasant symptoms.

- Find somewhere comfortable and quiet where you won't be interrupted.
 - Begin by focusing on your breathing. Try to have a slow and comfortable pace. Do this for a few minutes.
 - Start by clenching your toes for a few seconds then releasing them. Notice the difference between the two feelings.
 - Match this to your breathing. Tense your muscles as you take a deep breath in, and relax as you breathe out.
 - Move slowly up your body, tensing and then relaxing each group of muscles in turn. Take time to notice any parts of your body that feel particularly tense, tight or tired, and repeat the process for these areas until you can feel your muscles relaxing.
 - At the end take a moment to relax, then slowly and gently begin to move. When you feel ready, you can stand up slowly.
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Simple mindfulness exercise

Mindfulness is a form of meditation that involves being totally in the present moment, observing what is happening and allowing thoughts and feelings to come and go without getting caught up in them. The aim is to concentrate only on what is happening in the here and now, not the past or the future.

- Find a quiet space where you won't be disturbed and sit comfortably.
- Bring your attention to your breathing.
- Notice the natural rhythm of your breathing, and focus only on this.
- It is natural that thoughts will come into your mind. Just notice those thoughts, then bring your attention back to your breathing.
- You may notice sounds, physical feelings, and emotions, but again, just bring your attention back to your breathing.
- Don't follow those thoughts or feelings, don't judge yourself for having them, or analyse them in any way. It's ok for them to be there. Just notice them, and let them drift past.
- Whenever you notice that your attention has drifted off and is becoming caught up in thoughts or feelings, simply note that this has happened, and then gently bring your attention back to your breathing.
- If you are very distracted it might help to say 'in' and 'out' as you breathe.

The more you can practice mindfulness the more it can help with managing anxiety. Try to build it into your daily routine, for around 15 minutes per day. Further mindfulness exercises can be found by following some of the links below.

Useful resources and sources of support

Phone 111 and select option 2 for NHS urgent mental health support - available 24/7

www.mind.org.uk

www.anxietyuk.org.uk

www.nopanic.org.uk

www.thecalmzone.net - helpline and live chat 5pm until midnight every day of the year

www.mindful.org - guides to meditation and mindfulness

<https://www.freemindfulness.org/download> - free audio mindfulness exercises

Worry Tree App - Anxiety Relief using CBT techniques