



Self-Help Guide to Stress, Anxiety and Mental Health

When a person feels stress or anxiety, their body undergoes several changes and experiences something we call a *fight or flight* response; the body either prepares for a fight or to flee the danger. During the *fight or flight* response, it is common to experience a 'blank' mind; increased heart rate; sweating; tense muscles and more. Using a variety of skills, people can end the *fight or flight* response before the symptoms become too overwhelming or extreme. These skills will require practice in order to work effectively, so try not to wait until the last minute to try them out.

Deep Breathing

When relaxed, it is normal to take deep, long breaths, however, when your body is experiencing the *fight or flight* response, breathing becomes more rapid and shallow. Deep breathing reverses that as it sends a calming signal to the brain. Continuous practice will allow your body to respond more efficiently to deep breathing in the future.

Practice:

1. Sit or lie down somewhere quiet and comfortable,
2. Place your hands on your stomach,
3. Take a deep inhale through your nose, lasting at least 5 seconds (count if you need to), pay attention to your lungs filling with air and your hands rising with your stomach,
4. Hold your breath for 5-10 seconds (making sure it's not uncomfortable),
5. Exhale slowly through your mouth, paying attention to your hands falling with your stomach.

Repeat this exercise until you feel calmer.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation:

During the *fight or flight* response, our muscles can feel tense and achy, which can lead to stiffness and/or pain in our back and necks. Progressive muscle relaxation allows us to become more aware of our muscle tensions so we can identify and address the stress. The idea of the technique is to intentionally tense each muscle and then release the tension to feel more relaxed, start with the feet and work your way up through your body.

Practice:

1. Lie down somewhere quiet and comfortable,
2. Tense the muscles in your toes by curling them into your foot, notice how it feels when your foot is tense,
3. Hold the tension for 5 seconds,
4. Release the tension from your toes, pay attention to how your toes feel differently after you release the tension.
5. Tense the muscles all throughout your calf, notice how it feels when your calf is tense,
6. Hold the tensions for 5 seconds,
7. Release the tension from your calf, pay attention to how the feeling of relaxation differs.

Follow this pattern of tensing and releasing all throughout your body, after you finish with your feet and legs (including your bottom), move up through your torso, arms, hands, neck and head.



Grounding Techniques:

During stressful or uncertain times, it is normal to feel anxious, worried, upset and even panicked. Grounding techniques help control these symptoms by turning attention away from thoughts, memories or worries and redirecting them to the present moment.

5-4-3-2-1 Practice:



What are 5 things you can see? Look for small details such as a pattern on the ceiling, the way light reflects off certain objects, or even objects you've never noticed before.



What are 4 things you can feel? Notice the sensation of the clothing on your body, the feeling of your chair if you're sitting down. Pick up an object and feel its weight, temperature, texture and other physical qualities.



What are 3 things you can hear? Pay attention to the sounds your mind may have tuned out, such as a ticking clock, or distant traffic.



What are 2 things you can smell? Try to notice smells around you, such as an air freshener or freshly mowed grass. You could also look for an object that has a scent, for example, an unlit candle.



What is 1 thing you can taste? It would be useful to carry chewing gum, sweets or a small snack for this one. Put one in your mouth and focus your attention closely to the flavours you can taste.

Mental Exercises:

The following exercises can be used to take your mind off uncomfortable thoughts and feelings. They are discreet and easy to use at nearly any time or place. Experiment to see which one (or two) work best for you.

1. Name all the objects you can see.
2. Describe the steps in performing an activity you know how to do well. For example, how to kick a football into a goal or how to cook your favourite meal.
3. Count backwards from 100. Alternatively, you can count backwards from 100 in counts of 7.
4. Spell your full name and the full names of 3 other people, backwards.
5. Name all of your friends and/or family members, their ages and their favourite activities.
6. Read something backwards letter by letter. Practice this for at least a few minutes.
7. Think of an object and draw it in your mind or in the air with your finger.

For further information, please visit:

<https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/looking-after-yourself/take-time-out/>

<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/relaxation/relaxation-tips/>