

# Tips for Managing and Overcoming Anxiety

From The Jed Foundation website ([www.jedfoundation.org](http://www.jedfoundation.org))

Anxiety is a feeling of intense worry or uneasiness that we experience when we're facing a stressful or uncertain situation. Feeling some anxiety in a stressful situation is normal – but when it is not resolved successfully or when it is part of a more challenging mental disorder, it can interfere with school, work, relationships, and our health and wellbeing in general. High levels of anxiety can impact both our mental and physical health, and lead to high blood pressure, a weaker immune system, trouble focusing or sleeping, increased use of drugs and alcohol, and [more](#).

While understanding and addressing the source of anxiety can be challenging, especially if there is a genetic or early childhood connection, there are things within our control that help. There are ways to manage anxiety that lead to both feeling calmer in the moment and to managing it in the long term. While these techniques can really help and are often a central part of therapeutic approaches to managing anxiety, persistent and/or severe anxiety is likely to need clinical attention.

## Tips for Managing Anxiety in the Moment

When something triggers anxiety, it is common to feel an outsized and agitated emotional response or even a physical reaction, like shortness of breath or a rise in body temperature. While these experiences can feel quite overwhelming in the moment, it can be really helpful to remind yourself that it will pass and to have a few calm-inducing techniques to lean on as you move toward equilibrium.

When the emotional and/or physical response is front and center, it is not terribly helpful to spend mental effort trying to figure out what caused it or how to solve the underlying issue, assuming you find one. It's generally better to let the initial reaction run its course while you use centering techniques to ground and calm yourself. You can figure out how to proceed once you are in a calmer state of mind. It is much easier to do this, however, if you have strategies that you know work for you. Try finding a few to practice when you are not highly anxious so that if you ever become really agitated you have some quick and ready ideas for self-soothing. Here are some techniques to practice or use while you're feeling anxious:

## Focus on Your Breathing

Whenever you're feeling overwhelmed or anxious, step aside and take a slow, full, deep breath. Bring as much of your attention as you can to the sound and feel of your breath going in and out of your body. It can help to pay attention to what it feels and/or sounds like to have the breath slowly enter and exit. Metering the inhales and exhales (e.g inhale 1-2-3-4, hold 2, exhale 1-2-3-4) can help pace your breath

and give your mind something to focus on. If that is really easy, consider inhaling to the count of 6 or even 8, holding for the half of the count, and then exhaling for the same count as you used inhaling).

Slowing your breathing helps to regulate and relax the parasympathetic nervous system and helps induce a sense of calm and safety. The great thing about breathing exercises is that you can practice anytime, anywhere – in a meeting, in a conversation where you are working on deep listening or during a walk. Taking a few minutes to do a breathing exercise can help relax your mind and body, and help you more automatically use this technique when you need it to cope with stress and anxiety.

Similarly, when you are feeling calm and safe, at rest, or engaged in a pleasant social exchange, your breathing slows and deepens. You are under the influence of the parasympathetic nervous system, which produces a relaxing effect.

## **Move Your Body**

When you're stuck in the moment feeling anxiety or stress, it can be hard to think clearly. Moving your body helps get you out of feeling stuck, because it can help you reduce stress and improve your perspective on the situation. Even just five minutes of light exercise, like stretching or taking a brisk walk around the block, can help. Combine this with the breathing exercise above for an even more powerful effect.

## **Clear Your Mind Through Meditation**

In moments of anxiety and uncertainty, your mind can become cluttered with all sorts of negative thoughts. Practicing a simple meditation exercise can help quiet those thoughts, think more clearly, and focus on the present moment. Meditation comes in many forms – silent sitting with a clear mind to something more active, like mantra recitation (mantras are a word or phrase you repeat during meditation to focus your awareness) or walking meditation where you focus your attention on the movement of your body and breath as you move through space. When you step away and take a few minutes to meditate, you can return to your day with a clearer head and a more positive perspective on your situation.

## **Connect with Someone You Trust**

There will be moments when you just need to talk to a friend. When you are feeling overwhelmed, hearing a supportive voice or seeing a friendly face who you can be open and honest with can help you feel better. This can be especially powerful if you feel comfortable sharing a little about what is causing your anxiety. If that feels more agitating, it can be as helpful to take your mind off what is agitating you and using the energy to help or do something fun with someone you like.

## Tips for Figuring Out What's Causing Anxiety

Sometimes it can be hard to figure out what's triggering your anxious response, or what's at the root of your anxious feelings. In other cases, it's possible to lean into your feelings and get a better sense of what's behind them. It can be really helpful to journal what is coming up since it is rare to not have the first set of feelings or statements give way to others that you did not see until you started writing them down. Sharing with others can also lead to deeper insight since just saying it out loud – whether using your pen, a keyboard, or your voice – helps to surface challenging feelings, experiences and associations that may otherwise remain below the surface.

Having a better understanding of what is below the surface is useful because the insights can help you identify and address underlying causes. For example, if you have a fear of uncertainty, you can work on accepting situations you can't change. If a problem at work or in your relationship is causing you stress, you can work on managing those issues. While anxiety is sometimes not clearly linked to external stressors, it can really help to better understand the patterns and feelings associated with it. Here are a few techniques to try:

### Write Your Story

Journaling is a powerful and personal way to connect with and reflect on your challenging emotions. If you're just getting started with journaling, here are a few tips:

- Consistency is key. Try to write regularly. To get started, write for at least five minutes each evening about your day. You might be surprised at how much you have to say once you get going!
- Write down any moments or feelings that stand out. What were the highs and lows of your day? As you continue to write, see if you can spot any common patterns, themes or triggers on days when you feel more anxious.
- Write a short list of things you're [grateful](#) for.
- Gratitude, even for the simple things, is a powerful way to shift your perspective away from your stress and towards the positive things in your life.

### Learning to Accept What You're Resisting

When you're experiencing difficult feelings, it can be your first instinct to resist, reject, or avoid them. Instead, it's more helpful to lean into why you might be resisting or avoiding whatever is causing you stress. This is a way of "saying yes to your no" and can be quite helpful in getting a sense of what it feels like to simply accept without having to actually change or do anything other than open to where you are in the moment.

For example, say your ex is dating someone new and their relationship is all over social media. Despite the fact that it is history, it is not uncommon to have unresolved feelings and anxiety come up in situations like this. The most realistic and healthy response, if it feels accessible, is to simply allow the

feelings to come up but without latching onto the worries or negative thoughts that show up, even if some part of you believes what the thoughts or worries tell you. It is also helpful to take care of yourself by limiting exposure to the trigger while you are still tender. In the short term, can you find a way to avoid seeing the posts that trigger your hurt feelings? In the longer term, you will need to find a way to accept the breakup and move on.

It is important to note that as tempting as it can be to avoid feelings altogether, not coping with difficult feelings does not make them go away – they will keep bothering you, and may get harder to manage as time goes on. If you need support accepting your difficult feelings, consider making an appointment with a mental health professional who is trained to help you allow and be with your feelings in a healthy way.

## When There Is No Clear Cause

In some cases – like with [anxiety disorders](#) – there may not be a direct link between the anxiety you feel and the situation you're in. If you are experiencing a level of anxiety that is interfering with your wellbeing and your quality of life, it's important to reach out for support in coping with your anxiety.

## Tips for Coping with Anxiety in the Long Term

Managing anxiety in the moment can help you calm down in a stressful situation, and figuring out your triggers can help you better manage stressors. Here are some practices that are proven to help prevent and reduce anxiety in the long term:

### Prioritize and Organize

Most of us are familiar with this cycle: you have too much to do so you get anxious and panicked, the anxiety makes it almost impossible to get anything done. You get further behind important deadlines, and it escalates from there. If you feel this way frequently, it may be time to try the following:

- Revisit overall workload or commitments. What can you change to help lighten your load, or to give yourself more time to recharge between commitments? What can you ask for help with?
- Make a to-do list by importance to organizing tasks. Focus on one task at a time so your to-do list feels more manageable.
- Embrace the power of saying “no” when you don't have the bandwidth to take on another professional or personal obligation.

Reducing stress through prioritizing and organizing your tasks and commitments is important, because you can only take care of others if you are taking care of yourself.

## Find Things You're Grateful For

It's easy to get so caught up in the difficult or negative stuff and lose sight of all the good things in your life. Taking a few minutes to notice what you're grateful for can drastically change your outlook and your mood. Try incorporating these gratitude exercises into your daily routine:

- Including a gratitude list in your journal entry each day.
- Use sticky notes to capture things you appreciate. Hang them up in a location where you frequently find yourself stressed out – for example, your desk at work, your bathroom mirror, or your car dashboard. Whenever you are feeling negative or overwhelmed, read your posts and add a new one.
- Check out more of our tips on how to create your own [gratitude practices](#) to help improve your outlook.

## Take Care of Yourself with Diet and Exercise

Your mental health is impacted by many factors, including how you take care of your body. Here are some ways you can improve your mental health through diet and exercise:

- Look for connections between things you are consuming – for example, caffeine and other stimulants, or alcohol and other depressants – and your anxiety levels. Avoid foods or beverages that worsen your anxiety.
- Try to get in 30 minutes of physical activity three to five times a week.

## Reach Out for Support

If these approaches aren't working for you, or you find you need additional support in coping with anxiety, reach out for help. A trained mental health professional can help you manage your anxiety and can also treat anxiety disorders.

If you or someone you know needs mental health support to cope with anxiety and you're not sure where to start, text "START" to 741-741 or call 1-800-273-TALK (8255).

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