

Coping with stress and anxiety



Coping with Stress and Anxiety

Why is it important to address the physical symptoms of stress and anxiety?

Stress and anxiety don't just live in the mind, they also show up in the body. When we feel anxious, the nervous system shifts into a threat response, often causing shallow breathing, muscle tension, and physical discomfort. These sensations can be exhausting and, over time, may increase feelings of panic or overwhelm.

Strong physical symptoms can also make anxiety feel more intense and harder to tolerate. When the body stays tense or overly activated, the brain receives the message that danger is still present, even if it isn't. Learning ways to calm the body helps interrupt this cycle, making anxiety feel more manageable and reducing the urge to escape or avoid situations.

By using strategies that target the body directly, we can help the nervous system settle, which in turn makes it easier to think clearly, stay present, and cope more effectively.

Step 1

KNOW YOUR OPTIONS

Not all coping strategies are the same.
Find the right fit for you.

When it comes to coping, there are many options:



Diaphragmatic breathing: Slow, deep breathing that expands the abdomen rather than the chest.

Why it works: Deep breathing signals safety to the nervous system, slowing the heart rate and reducing the physical sensations of anxiety.



Progressive muscle relaxation: Gently tensing and then relaxing different muscle groups in the body.

Why it works: Releasing muscle tension helps reduce physical stress and teaches the body the difference between tension and relaxation.



5-4-3-2-1 grounding: Using your senses to notice what is around you.

Why it works: Grounding shifts attention away from anxious thoughts and back into the present moment, helping the nervous system settle.

Step 2



FIND YOUR DIRECTION

1

Ask yourself:

- “Am I breathing quickly or holding my breath?”
- “Do I feel short of breath, lightheaded, or panicky?”

If so, try **diaphragmatic breathing** (page 5)

2

Ask yourself:

- “Do my shoulders, jaw, or hands feel tight?”
- “Am I clenching or holding tension without realizing it?”

If so, try **progressive muscle relaxation** (page 6)

3

Ask yourself:

- “Am I stuck in my head or spiralling?”
- “Do I feel disconnected, unreal, or not fully present?”

If so, try **5-4-3-2-1 grounding** (page 7)

Step 3

TAKE ACTION

Creating a Calm Environment (When Possible)

If you have the option, setting up a calm and comfortable environment can make coping strategies easier to practice.

- Choose a quiet or low-distraction space, if available
- Sit or stand in a comfortable position with your feet supported
- Loosen tight clothing and unclench your jaw or shoulders if you notice tension
- Reduce stimulation where possible (e.g., dim lights, lower noise, silence notifications)
- Give yourself a few uninterrupted minutes to focus on your body

These small adjustments can help you feel calmer and more settled.

If you can't change the environment, that's okay.

These tools are designed to work anywhere. You don't need a calm room, special equipment, or extra time. The tools are simple, quick, and discreet. Others usually won't notice you using them.

Even in stressful situations, these tools can:

- Lower the intensity of physical anxiety
- Help your body feel more stable
- Make difficult moments easier to get through

You're not trying to eliminate stress entirely, you are simply supporting your body enough to cope until the moment passes.

Diaphragmatic Breathing

1-Minute Diaphragmatic Breathing

1. Get into position: Sit or stand comfortably. Let your shoulders drop.
2. Place your hands: Put one hand on your chest and one on your abdomen (optional).
3. Breathe in through your nose: Feel your abdomen gently rise (your chest stays mostly still).
4. Pause: Take a small, comfortable pause.
5. Breathe out slowly: Exhale through your lips (like blowing through a straw). Feel your abdomen fall.
6. Repeat for 1 minute: Keep the breath slow and steady. If you lose count, just return to a slow inhale and a longer exhale.



Tip

Helpful reminder: Aim for a longer exhale than inhale.

Ready for more? Click [here](#) to practice this strategy for 10 minutes

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Progressive Muscle Relaxation (2–3 Minutes)

1. Get comfortable: If possible, sit or lie down. Let your body be supported
2. Take one slow breath: In through your nose, out through your mouth
3. Face and jaw:
 - Gently scrunch your face and clench your jaw
 - Hold for 5 seconds
 - Release, letting your jaw soften and tongue rest for 10 seconds
4. Shoulders and neck:
 - Lift your shoulders up toward your ears
 - Hold for 5 seconds
 - Drop them down and let them relax for 10 seconds
5. Hands and arms:
 - Gently clench your fists and tense your arms
 - Hold for 5 seconds
 - Release and notice the feeling of letting go for 10 seconds
6. Chest and stomach:
 - Tighten your stomach muscles
 - Hold for 5 seconds
 - Release and let your belly soften for 10 seconds
7. Legs and feet:
 - Press your feet into the floor and tense your legs
 - Hold for 5 seconds
 - Release and notice the relaxation for 10 seconds
8. Finish: Take one slow breath and notice any areas that feel a little looser or calmer.



Tip

Helpful reminder:
Tension should be gentle, not painful. If any area feels uncomfortable, skip it. Relaxing even 1 or 2 muscle groups can help your body settle.

Ready for more? Click [here](#) to practice this strategy for 6-7 minutes

5-4-3-2-1 Grounding

5-4-3-2-1 Grounding Using Colours (1-2 Minutes)

Pause and look around: Take a slow breath and gently notice your surroundings.

5 colours:

- Find 5 different colours you can see
- Say each colour quietly in your mind
- Try not to repeat any colours

4 colours:

- Find 4 new colours you haven't named yet
- Take your time and keep your eyes moving

3 colours:

- Find 3 different colours
- Notice where you see them (near or far)

2 colours:

- Find 2 colours
- Let your breathing stay slow and steady

1 colour:

- Find 1 final colour
- Take one slow breath and notice your body in the space



Tip

Helpful reminder: If you get stuck, you can use shades of a colour (light blue, dark blue) or look for small details. The goal is to gently bring your attention back to the present moment.

Step 4

EXPLORE OTHER TOOLS

This is just the beginning...

If you are ready to try more, consider one of the following options. You can tap or click on each title to be guided through the exercise.

Dropping an Anchor: Focusing on your body and surroundings to steady yourself when emotions feel intense. It helps you feel more present and settled, even when strong thoughts or feelings are showing up.

Watching Your Thoughts: Noticing thoughts as they come and go, without trying to stop or change them. It creates distance from thoughts so they have less control over how you feel.

Mindfulness of the Breath: Gently paying attention to your breathing, just as it is, for a short period of time. Focusing on the breath helps settle the nervous system and brings attention back to the present moment.

Self-Compassion: Responding to yourself with kindness and understanding during difficult moments. Treating yourself gently reduces self-criticism and helps your body and mind feel safer and more supported.

Step 5

GET IMMEDIATE SUPPORT



If you're struggling, you're not alone. **Help is available.** The free services below can boost your support network and provide immediate assistance when you need it most.

For youth (up to age 18):

- Compass (in person) - available in Sudbury, ON*
- OneStopTalk.ca (virtual)*
- Kids Help Phone (virtual)*

For teens and adults:

- BounceBackOntario.ca (online & telephone coaching; 15 years+)*
- Ontario Structured Psychotherapy Program (in person; 18 years+)
- Togetherall.com (virtual; 16 years+)

* Services available in multiple languages

For urgent support, call or text 988. Support is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

notes

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