



# 19 Techniques to Calm a Highly Sensitive Nervous System

By [Benjamin Fishel](#)

**“You can’t calm the storm, so stop trying. What you can do is calm yourself. The storm will pass.” ~Timber Hawkeye**

The sun is setting, the cold wind is gently blowing in my face. I’m sitting on a rock that’s about ten feet tall, overlooking the Peruvian city of Cuzco. I can hear dogs barking, groups of teenagers laughing, the low hum of traffic and the music blaring from cars in the distance. As it goes dark, the lights of thousands of houses begin to flicker on like fireflies.

I should be enjoying this picturesque scene, but I’m not. My mind is racing too fast for me to make sense of anything that I’m thinking.

The only thing I’m able to fixate on is the intense ball of worry that sits in the top of my chest. Every thought introduces a new problem and a restless attempt to solve it. But the thoughts themselves aren’t that important. They’re really just a manifestation of a physical tension that I’ve been holding onto for far too long.

This was my life with relentless [anxiety](#).

For years I didn’t understand why I would get anxious, nor did I have the capacity to relax my body when the physical symptoms came to visit. Was I just born with a sensitive nervous system? Had life experiences conditioned me to be that way? Was it both? Ultimately, it didn’t matter. Anxiety was there and it was making itself heard, loud and clear.

Fortunately, I learned, slowly but surely, in both my work with others and my own personal experience, that anxiety could be tamed and reversed. But it was only after I was able to bring greater awareness to my body and progressively convince my nervous system that I was safe, and it was okay to be calm, that I was able to make any lasting change.

Calming your body and mind doesn’t happen overnight. It takes practice, but it’s a real possibility.

Here are nineteen ways to calm a highly sensitive nervous system.

## **1. Focus on the calmest part of your body.**

Instead of sitting directly with uncomfortable feelings, sensations, and tensions, we can place our attention on wherever in our body we [find a sense of calm](#). By doing that we can familiarise ourselves with relaxation and sit with it until it deepens. For example, your legs may be twitching, but perhaps you feel stillness at the back of your neck. Draw your attention there.

## **2. Set boundaries and manage your energy wisely.**

If you're [dealing with anxiety](#), then you're burning more energy than you usually would. And when your energy is low, it's more difficult to regulate your feelings. That's why it's important to manage your energy wisely and not be afraid to set boundaries and say no to things that you don't feel are in your best interest.

## **3. Self-soothe through affirmations.**

Affirmations are only useful if they're having a helpful impact on your state of being. Repeating positive phrases that you don't truly believe in can actually have the opposite effect. So instead, choose an affirmation that feels true to you, such as "I am strong enough to survive this panic." And try experimenting with how you talk to yourself—the tone of voice, pace, care behind the words—instead of just on the words you are saying. A slow, calm, and reassuring internal voice can be a great tool to calm the body.

## **4. Journal from the perspective of your stress.**

Sometimes your anxious thoughts just need to be respected and expressed coherently by getting them out of your head and down on a piece of paper. Writing from the perspective of [stress](#), exploring what's fuelling it and what it wants us to know, also helps us take a step back from our worries.

## **5. Journal from the perspective of your calm.**

When you've written down your stressful thoughts, you can dialogue (and reason) with it from the perspective of a calmer and wiser voice.

## **6. Try Taoist Inner Smile Meditation.**

This meditation is one where you feel a smiling energy in your body. Most people find this easiest to do by visualising a smile or bringing a slight smile to their face. The effect of the inner smile meditation is cumulative, and it can be an effective way to signal to your brain that you're not under any threat.

## **7. Finish the sentence "My nervous system wants to..."**

This is another journal exercise that helps connect your thoughts to your feelings so you can take a step back from our thoughts. You may discover that your nervous system wants you to take a break, rest, or get some fresh air.

## **8. Create compassionate imagery.**

Like the inner smile meditation, compassionate imagery is a way to tell your brain that you're safe and it's okay to relax. You might want to visualize a person or a place, either real or fictitious, where you'd feel the most calm, safe, and connected.

## **9. Increase bodily awareness.**

Anxiety can feel like it comes out of nowhere, but that's rarely the case. By increasing bodily awareness, either through [meditation](#), yoga, or just regularly checking in with how you're feeling, you can catch the early signs of tension in your body before they get too difficult to manage.

## **10. Slow down to six breaths a minute.**

Studies have shown that six breaths a minute seems to be the number at which we get the most benefits in terms of relaxation. As most of us breathe a lot quicker than this, any attempt to reduce the rate at which we breathe—with a focus on extending the exhalation—is a useful practice.

## **11. Play around with your body language.**

How we position our bodies and physically move through the world has a big impact on our emotional state. Bringing more awareness to how you're holding your body from moment to moment—how you sit, stand, communicate, etc.—can help you to address habits of tension.

## **12. Establish a mindful movement practice.**

It can be hard to remember to be aware of our bodies, which is why a daily or weekly embodiment practice is useful. You might want to try yoga, qigong or tai chi, the Feldenkrais method or the Alexander Technique, or any other practice. Just try to find something you enjoy and that works for you.

## **13. Dance.**

Dancing is a great way to reduce stress and increase your bodily awareness. If you don't like the idea of a formal practice, then this might be for you. And the good thing is you don't need to get any special training or even leave your house—you can just blast your favorite song and get moving.

## **14. Visualize a future calm self.**

Our minds are largely predictive machines, so when we expect to be anxious, that's what will happen. We can begin to disrupt this cycle by visualizing a future state of calm, which sets a more useful expectation.

### **15. Imagine your mind in slow motion.**

This is just another trick to break out of unhelpful patterns. An anxious mind will move rapidly, whereas a mind that is intentionally moving slowly will start to move us out of a state of anxiety.

### **16. Laugh (even if it's forced).**

[Laughter](#) is another great way to take our body out of a state of stress. In fact, the reason we laugh might be an evolutionary signal that everything is okay and that a perceived threat has been averted. It doesn't matter if it feels forced, your brain will still get the message and you might even find that you end up really laughing anyway.

### **17. Try chanting or singing meditation.**

Both chanting and singing slow your breathing down and stimulate the vagus nerve, which is another quick way to transition from a state of fight-or-flight to rest-and-digest.

### **18. Hum.**

Some people don't like to chant or sing, but luckily humming does pretty much the same thing.

### **19. Visualize healthy and rewarding social situations.**

A lot of bodily tension comes from an unconscious perceived threat in the world—particularly the social world. By visualizing healthy relationships and positive social situations, either real or imagined, we are convincing the social part of our brain that we're connected and safe.

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If my experience with anxiety and my work as a therapist has taught me anything, it's that there is no best way to manage our nervous systems. There is only the way that works for you. By permitting yourself to experiment and play around with different techniques, you'll be better positioned to uncover the most effective way to calm your highly sensitized nervous system.

Let us know in the comments which techniques have worked for you and if there are any that we might have missed!