

Gentle Tools for Anxiety

A trauma-informed approach using parts work, body awareness, and nervous system care

Anxiety is not a flaw. It is your nervous system trying to protect you based on past experiences. These tools help bring safety, choice, and balance back online.

1. Getting Curious About Your Anxious “Part” (IFS-Informed)

What to try:

Instead of trying to get rid of anxiety, gently notice it as a *part* of you. You might silently ask:

- “What is this anxious part worried might happen?”
- “What does it want me to know or avoid right now?”

No fixing—just listening.

Why it works:

Internal Family Systems (IFS) understands anxiety as a *protective part* with positive intentions, not a problem to eliminate. When anxious parts feel heard rather than fought, they often soften. This creates access to your calm, compassionate core Self, which supports regulation and internal safety.

2. EMDR Resourcing: Building Inner Safety Before Working With Stress

What to try:

Bring to mind a calming or supportive image (a peaceful place, a protective figure, or a moment of strength). Notice sights, sounds, and sensations connected to it. Some people find gentle alternating taps (left/right) helpful.

Why it works:

In EMDR, resourcing strengthens emotional stability *before* addressing distress. These practices expand your “window of tolerance,” allowing your nervous system to settle instead of becoming overwhelmed. Bilateral stimulation helps the brain link feelings of safety with the present moment, reducing anxiety and emotional flooding [\[pittsburghcit.com\]](http://pittsburghcit.com), [\[scienceinsights.org\]](http://scienceinsights.org)

3. Tuning Into the Body (Somatic Awareness)

What to try:

Notice where anxiety shows up in your body (tight chest, restless legs, shallow breath). Stay curious rather than forcing change. You might ask:

- “Is this sensation increasing, decreasing, or staying the same?”

Why it works:

Anxiety often lives in the body before it becomes thoughts. Somatic approaches work directly with physical sensations, helping release stored stress responses and restore nervous system balance. Awareness alone can interrupt survival responses and promote regulation without reliving trauma details.

4. Grounding Through Sensory Safety (Trauma-Informed Grounding)

What to try:

Use your senses to orient to safety:

- Press your feet into the floor
- Name three things you can see and two you can feel
- Notice temperature or texture

Why it works:

Trauma can pull the nervous system into past danger. Sensory grounding brings the brain back into *now*, providing concrete evidence of safety. This calms survival responses and reduces panic, dissociation, or overwhelm.

5. Working With the Nervous System (Rather Than Against It)

What to try:

Track your state gently:

- Energized or anxious (fight/flight)?
- Heavy or shut down (freeze)?
- Calm and connected?

Choose small supportive actions—movement, warmth, rest—without forcing calm.

Why it works:

Trauma-informed care recognizes that reactions like anxiety or shutdown are adaptive.

Understanding nervous system states (including fight, flight, freeze) reduces shame and builds self-trust. Regulation happens through safety and choice, not control.

6. Containment: Setting Worries Down Temporarily (EMDR-Informed)

What to try:

Imagine placing worries or intense sensations into a container (box, jar, vault) that you can open later with support. Remind yourself: *"I don't have to deal with this right now."*

Why it works:

Containment protects against overwhelm by giving the nervous system permission to pause. Used in EMDR preparation, it prevents emotional flooding and supports daily functioning while respecting pacing and safety.

7. Choice-Based Coping (Trauma-Informed Principle)

What to try:

Ask yourself:

- "What feels most supportive right now?"
- "Do I want to stay with this, or shift my attention?"

Both choices are valid.

Why it works:

Trauma often involves loss of control. Trauma-informed strategies emphasize choice and empowerment, restoring a sense of agency and reducing stress responses. You are always allowed to slow down or stop.

8. Supportive Resources (Optional)

- **IFS-informed psychoeducation:** Understanding anxious protectors and Self-leadership
- **EMDR resourcing tools:** Safe place, nurturing figures, butterfly hug
- **Somatic practices:** body scans, gentle movement, pendulation

Why they work:

These approaches focus on regulation before exploration. By strengthening safety first, the nervous system becomes more flexible and resilient over time, reducing anxiety intensity and duration.

A Compassionate Reminder

Healing anxiety is not about eliminating reactions—it's about **building a trusting relationship with your nervous system**. Small, gentle practices done consistently are more effective than forcing calm.

If any of these resonate more with you than others, and you are interested in exploring them more fully with the support of your therapist. Mention it to them before your next session!