

Putting It In Action

5 Techniques For Reducing Anxiety and Managing Stress

For many of us, the COVID-19 pandemic has upended normal routines and added new responsibilities, pressures, and concerns to our lives. And for many of us, our levels of stress and anxiety have gone up. Way up.

Most of us know a lot about self-care tools that can help manage stress and anxiety. For example, we probably all know that deep breathing can be an effective way to reduce anxiety, but how many of us have actually *done* a breathing exercise during the last month? We might know that gratitude is good for us, but how many of us have a regular and intentional gratitude practice?

This tip sheet provides guidance on how to practice five effective techniques for reducing anxiety and managing stress. We will explore:

- ✓ Using breath to create calm
- ✓ Using affirmations as rudders and propellers
- ✓ Using movement to resolve tension and rebalance
- ✓ Using boundaries to turn stress off at the source
- ✓ Using gratitude to reorient our perspective

These five techniques are the tip of the iceberg—there are many, *many* other techniques we could try. But these five are a great place to start, and I encourage you to choose of these techniques and try it out every day for a week. Then you can decide whether you like it and whether it's helping you.

The important point is to pick one thing and start there. Small steps take us places over time, and regularly trying one new practice for a couple of minutes a day will help move you towards health and happiness.

1. Using breath to create calm

Breathing is information. As physician Rangan Chaterjee puts it in his excellent book *The Stress Solution*: “The more stressed you feel, the faster you breathe, and your brain will notice this and read it as a signal that things are not going well. That fast, shallow breathing which happens when you're stressed is effectively telling your brain you're running from a lion.”

The reverse of this is also true. If you breathe deeply and slowly you're sending your brain a signal that you're in a safe place and calm. As a result, your brain will flip the switches to dial down your stress responses. You will start to feel less stressed.

If all you do for one minute is slow and deepen your breathing and aim for six slow breaths (one breath is in and out) it will reduce the stress state and stimulate the thrive state. You can use a timer to time yourself (aiming for one breath cycle per ten seconds). If you're new to this, you may find it easier to

start with eight breaths in a minute. There are also plenty of guided breathing videos on YouTube which can help provide visual cues. Here is a link to one: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5DqTuWve9t8>.

2. Using affirmations as rudders and propellers

An affirmation is a short, positive, powerful statement of intent which you repeat regularly. To be maximally effective it should be succinct, positive and framed in the present tense “I am”.

Repeating affirmations regularly can help speak to our subconscious and tell it what we want. It also speaks to our conscious mind, which often needs reminding with regards to our priorities! Sending these sorts of clear messages essentially helps “program” our minds with the code we want it to be using to operate.

We have all experienced how worry and anxiety can carve well-worn channels in our mind which then serve to carry a stream of negative thoughts. Affirmations are a way of feeding our brain more positive information, pointing us in the direction we want to go and essentially carving our different channels. Affirmations can act like rudders and propellers—guiding the currents in our minds and moving us in the direction we want to head.

To make an affirmation, think of a positive and helpful message you want to send yourself right now. If you’re struggling to come up with something, think of what you would consider to be your negative qualities and flip them on their heads. For example, this week I have been repeating the affirmation, “I am a calm and patient mother.”

3. Using movement to resolve tension and rebalance

We all know that exercise is good for us. In addition to helping keep our muscles in good working order, exercise helps manage stress, raise mood, and fight anxiety and depression. Here are a few of the things that exercise and movement can do for us:

- ✓ Uses up the stress chemicals we release when we’re stressed and helps us “reset” to a calm state
- ✓ Forces us to breathe more deeply
- ✓ Helps the body practice moving more fluidly in and out of the stress state
- ✓ Keeps our muscles strong and flexible which protects us from injury and pain
- ✓ Gives our minds a rest

One of the best things you can do for yourself is build movement into your day. Whether it’s a walk, an exercise class, a team sport game, or a yoga/Pilates video online... all of these things will have huge spill-over benefits on your levels of stress and anxiety.

But if you’re really short on time and need a quick pick-me-up, something as simple as lying down on the floor and putting your legs up the wall for at least two minutes can help give you a reset and an energy boost. Try it and see.

4. Using boundaries to turn stress off at the source

We all experience different types of stressful events in life, and it can be helpful to make the distinction between macro stress and micro stress.

Macro stress is caused by big events that happen intermittently—things like accidents and bereavements. Micro stress are little hits of stress that, in isolation, we can generally handle effectively. Micro stress is generally associated with things like deadlines, disappointments, competing priorities, drinking too much wine, etc.

It is the accumulation of micro stress doses that most frequently puts us at (and over) our coping threshold. As such, it makes sense to think carefully about where and how we can prevent some of those micro stress doses.

One huge source of micro stress doses? Our phones.

Our phones are wonderful devices, but they risk drowning our thoughts in news articles, status updates, messages, etc. Being chronically connected takes a lot of energy! And whenever they “ding” with an incoming alert it demands our attention. We either pick up our phones straight away and check what’s come in, or we spend energy ignoring the alert.

Just as our bodies need the right type of food, our minds need stillness and rest. Our phones make that much harder. One way we can dial down the impact of our phones on our life, attention, and energy levels is to reduce the phone’s ability to “reach us” when we’re not using it.

Start here: Carefully consider *exactly which* apps and services *really need* to have audible or vibrate alerts on. Then turn off everything else.

5. Using gratitude to reorient our perspective

We humans are often programmed to pay attention to threats. This makes sense. If we are quick to sense threat and pay attention to it we’re better able to take action to protect ourselves. But in our modern world, what this orientation often means is we spend a lot of time focusing on and thinking about distressing incidents and encounters.

One thing that will help almost everyone is to spend time and energy coaching our brain to get better at paying attention to things that are *good* and *positive* (in addition to threats and things that distress us). Gratitude is one powerful practice that can help us in this department. A daily gratitude practice can have profound flow-on effects, including triggering a wide variety of positive emotions and reducing the activation of the stress response centers.

There are many gratitude practices you could try. Here's just one: Get comfortable (you may want to close their eyes). Now spend a couple of minutes trying this practice outlined by Dr. Chaterjee:

- ✓ Think of a person you feel grateful towards that day, and focus on feeling grateful for them and wishing them well.
- ✓ Do the same towards a pleasure you experienced that day. Whether it was a lovely cup of tea or a precious new memory you made with one of your children, bring it back to life in your mind and focus on feeling grateful for that experience.
- ✓ Think about something that popped up in the day that held some promise for the future. It could be something you hope will happen at work, a date for lockdown to end, or a new book you heard about that you want to read. Imagine that promise playing out in the future and focus on feeling grateful for the anticipation and hope that it's brought.

Remember, stress management practices don't have to be incredibly time-consuming and overwhelming. The key is just to start. Pick something, do it regularly for a week, then decide if you like it, whether it's helping, and whether you want to keep it up or not. Then pick something else and try that. All of these things will build upon each other for positive progress.

**Which one of these 5 practices (or something else)
will you try every day for the next week?**