

## **Coping strategies for Stress and Anxiety**

Strategies that work for one person, may not work for another and what works for you in one situation may not work in another, but it is good to have some to try out and find out what works for you. Here are some suggestions.

### **Distract yourself**

Some people find it helpful to distract themselves when they are feeling anxious. You could do this by saying a calming phrase to yourself such as “I will stay calm and relaxed” or by doing mental arithmetic or saying the alphabet backwards or reciting all of the actors who played Dr Who.

You may also find it helpful to have a ‘comfort object’ in your pocket that you can play with such as a squishy stress ball or crocodile clip.

If you find certain types of sensory input comforting, you can use this to self-soothe if your anxiety feels overwhelming. For example, you could brush your hair, chew gum, suck on a hard sweet, listen to music (but not too loudly or you’ll damage your hearing) or use noise-cancelling headphones.



### **Autogenic relaxation**

Autogenic relaxation is a visualisation technique in which you are guided to gradually relax each part of your body. This can help you feel calmer

and more relaxed, especially if you do it regularly. While this technique might not be suitable if you are out and about, practising it at home or in a quiet and safe space can be beneficial to your mood and anxiety levels.

Here is a script that you can use to gradually guide you through an autogenic relaxation.

You can do the relaxation with your eyes open and read the script as you go along, or you can record it on to your phone or mp3 player and carry out the relaxation with your eyes closed. You can also find YouTube videos that will guide you. Remember to breathe deeply and slowly and take as long as you need on each step of the relaxation.

**Script:**

- Begin by breathing deeply, drawing air in... deep into your lungs... and releasing the breath slowly....
- Take a deep breath in
- Hold it for 3 seconds
- Exhale slowly
- Breathe in deeply
- Pause for 3 seconds.
- Exhale slowly
- Continue taking slow, regular breaths.
- Now turn your attention to your right hand. Feel the skin on the palm of your right hand becoming warm and relaxed. Feel the

warmth in each finger....and on your palm....spreading to the back of your hand.... to your wrist.

- Feel your right arm becoming warm.....
- Your right arm is starting to feel very heavy.... very heavy, and very relaxed.
- Your right arm is warm, heavy, and relaxed.
- Now focus on your left hand. Picture placing your left hand into soothing, warm water. Feel the warmth relaxing your hand completely. Allow your wrist to enter the warm, calming water..... and relax. Your arm is becoming heavy. Allow your left arm to sink into the warm water. Your left arm feels warm, heavy, and relaxed.
- Now turn your attention to your legs. Feel your legs becoming warm. Feel the warmth spreading all the way from your feet.... to your ankles.... lower legs....knees....and hips. Feel your legs becoming heavy.... very heavy, and very relaxed.
- Your legs are warm....heavy.....and relaxed.
- Imagine a warm breeze blowing across your face.... feel your face and head relaxing.... your eyelids are very heavy.
- Picture the sun shining down on you....warming the front of your body..... allow your chest and stomach to relax in this warmth.... feel the sun shining....warming your skin....relaxing your body.... as your body is filled with heavy, warm, pleasant relaxation.
- Now imagine sitting with your back to a pleasant campfire. Feel the warmth of the fire on your back. Feel your back warming and relaxing..... the warmth spreads all the way from your neck...to your shoulders.....your upper back....middle and lower back..... feel your body relaxing as it becomes warm and calm.

- Feel the heaviness in your entire body.... your body is warm....heavy.... and relaxed.
- Enjoy this calm, relaxed feeling.
- Notice your smooth, even breathing....relaxed and deep....drawing you even deeper into relaxation....
- Your body feels very heavy....warm....and relaxed....
- Enjoy the autogenic relaxation for a few more moments.
- Now slowly begin to bring your attention back to the present. Notice the room around you....notice the surface that you are lying or sitting on.... hear the sounds in your environment.
- Gently start to reawaken your body.... wiggle your fingers and toes....move your arms and legs a little.... stretch if you like.
- When you are ready, become fully alert.

## **Progressive muscle relaxation**

This is a technique that helps reduce anxiety by slowly tensing and relaxing each muscle group. One method of progressive muscle relaxation is to start by tensing and relaxing the muscles in your toes and progressively working your way up to your neck and head. You can also start with your head and neck and work down to your toes. Tense your muscles for at least five seconds and then relax for 30 seconds, and repeat. These can also be found on YouTube.

Here is an example guide for a progressive muscle relaxation. Remember to relax each group of muscles for at least 30 seconds.

**Step 1.** Assume a comfortable position. You may lie down; loosen any tight clothing, close your eyes and be quiet.

**Step 2.** Assume a passive attitude. Focus on yourself and on achieving relaxation in specific body muscles. Tune out all other thoughts.

**Step 3.** Tense and relax each muscle group as follows:

- Forehead - Wrinkle your forehead, try to make your eyebrows touch your hairline for five seconds. Relax
- Eyes and nose - Close your eyes as tightly as you can for five seconds. Relax.
- Lips, cheeks and jaw - Draw the centres of your mouth back and grimace for five seconds. Relax. Feel the warmth and calmness in your face.
- Hands - Extend your arms in front of you. Clench your fists tightly for five seconds. Relax. Feel the warmth and calmness in your hands.
- Forearms - Extend your arms out against an invisible wall and push forward with your hands for five seconds. Relax.
- Upper arms - Bend your elbows. Tense your biceps for five seconds. Relax. Feel the tension leave your arms.
- Shoulders - Shrug your shoulders up to your ears for five seconds. Relax.
- Back - Arch your back off the floor for five seconds. Relax. Feel the anxiety and tension disappearing.
- Stomach - Tighten your stomach muscles for five seconds. Relax.
- Hips and buttocks - Tighten your hip and buttock muscles for five seconds. Relax.
- Thighs - Tighten your thigh muscles by pressing your legs together as tightly as you can for five seconds. Relax.

Image 1 courtesy of Ambro at [FreeDigitalPhotos.net](http://FreeDigitalPhotos.net)

Image 2 courtesy of stockimages at [FreeDigitalPhotos.net](http://FreeDigitalPhotos.net)

- Feet - Bend your ankles toward your body as far as you can for five seconds. Relax.
- Toes - Curl your toes as tightly as you can for five seconds. Relax.

**Step 4.** Focus on any muscles which may still be tense. If any muscle remains tense, tighten and relax that specific muscle three or four times.

**Step 5.** Fix the feeling of relaxation in your mind. Resolve to repeat the process again.

As with autogenic relaxation, you may find that you feel little change at first, but over time, if you practice the activity regularly, it should help you feel calmer.

While Progressive Muscle and Autogenic relaxation are useful techniques when you are at home or in a quiet and safe space, they may not be appropriate or practical when you are in a situation that makes you anxious, such as in a crowded shopping centre.

## **Controlled Breathing**

If you are in a situation where you are feeling anxious or panicked, an easy and effective technique is to practice controlled breathing.

**1.** Start by noticing your breathing. Is it fast or slow? Deep or shallow?

Just tune in to how you are breathing in this moment.

**2.** Breathe in slowly through your nose, allowing your stomach and chest to gently swell.

**3.** Let each breath follow naturally. When the in breath has ended let the out breath happen when it is ready. Exhale slowly and gently.

It can be helpful to imagine letting go of any anxieties you have with each out breath. Imagine the worries dissolving or floating away. As you breathe in imagine a sense of health and well-being filling your lungs and stomach, and then your whole body.

**4.** Once you have got used to the rhythm of your breathing, try to keep your attention on the physical experience of the in and out breath. If you find your mind wanders and / or you start to feel anxious, gently bring your attention back to your breathing.

Carry on practicing your controlled breathing for the desired amount of time.



You can use the controlled breathing technique regularly at home as a general relaxation technique, or you can use it when you are in specific situations where your anxiety is overwhelming you, or you can do both.