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Ways to

Find Calm

in a Frantic World



Experience Life

Be Ridiculous

To calm yourself quickly, psychiatrist Henry Emmons, MD, suggests, tell your autonomic nervous system that it's OK to stand down. One cue that works surprisingly well is silliness. If you're anxious before an important call, have a one-song dance party. Make faces in the mirror. Translate the day's headlines into pig Latin.

Slow Your Breath

Rapid, shallow breathing is a common feature of anxiety, but Storoni points out that deliberately slowing the breath down — to six or seven breaths a minute — and inhaling twice the usual volume of air can lower sympathetic nervous system activity by as much as one-third.

Sniff a Lemon

One study found that when subjects sniffed lemons at 30-second intervals for 15 minutes, they measurably reduced their heart rates and blood pressure and increased feelings of calm.

Focus on a Game

In her book, *Stress-Proof: The Scientific Solution to Protect Your Brain and Body*, Mithu Storoni, MD, PhD, recommends redirecting a racing mind by playing games, especially ones that require some concentration. Play Tetris on your phone or a round of 20 Questions with a friend.

Listen to Your Environment

One way to tune out the noise in your mind is to tune in to the sounds around you: the chirping birds outside your window, a humming air conditioner, a horn beeping down the street, the sound of a copy machine. "Allow your ears to simply receive whatever sounds arise," recommends Nancy Colier, author of *The Power of Off: The Mindful Way to Stay Sane in a Virtual World*. If the sounds annoy you (like a neighbor's television), try listening without attaching any meaning to the noise.



Carry a Talisman

Objects have the power we assign them, says life coach and author Jen Sincero. Pick an item that has some meaning and carry it with you. It might be a stone from a beach you love, a button from your grandpa's old coat, even a Lego from one of your kids. Pull it out whenever you need a reminder that there's more to life than whatever concern is dominating the moment.



Take a Play Break

If you can step away from a tense moment long enough to throw a Frisbee or pet your dog, you're on your way to calming down. Play can trigger positive neurochemicals — serotonin, oxytocin, dopamine, and endorphins — that increase well-being. Storoni notes that light exercise can lower cortisol levels.

Drink a Glass of Water

Simply slowing down to have a glass of water can be calming; it also supports stress recovery. Staying well-hydrated may reduce your HPA-axis response to stress, Storoni counsels.

Get Tech Support

Install an app like Calm, Headspace, Buddhify, or Sattva on your smartphone. Each one has simple meditations that help you start breathing again — and then, breathe deeper. Some also have reminders that nudge you to take regular breaks throughout the day.

Listen to Music

If you need to get out of your head, put on some tunes you love and listen actively, with your eyes closed. Calming music especially can have a direct effect on the autonomic system. This may be why music is now being used therapeutically in emergency rooms, as well as in pain-management and stress-reduction programs.



Sing

Produce your own instant music therapy by belting out a song or two (singing loudly with the radio absolutely counts). A 2013 McGill University meta-study showed that singing can measurably improve immunity, decrease stress, and raise oxytocin levels, which help promote social bonding.

Monotask

If you're feeling anxious about having too much to do, approach each task in a conscious way, suggests Alex Soojung-Kim Pang, author of *The Distraction Addiction*. "I'm going to answer emails for 10 minutes," for example, or, "I'm taking 10 minutes to clear off my desk." Even if you can't complete them on the first try, it can be calming to get a start on lingering tasks — which is often the hardest part.



Eat Some Protein

Low blood sugar is a frequent trigger for emotional upset. If you haven't had any protein in the last few hours, eat a handful of nuts or a hard-boiled egg.

Name the Feeling

If you're spinning out, slow down and name the feeling: "OK, so this is anxiety." "This is fear." "This is anger." Simply applying language to emotions brings the neocortex, the reasoning part of the brain, back online. This helps put the brakes on a reactive response.



Enjoy Some Greenery

Take a walk in the woods, if possible. Research on "forest bathing," a practice that originated in Japan, has revealed that spending time among trees and plants can measurably lower cortisol, blood pressure, and pulse rate. Gardening is also a calming activity that gets you outdoors.



Try Alternate-Nostril Breathing

Deep breathing is useful for slowing down the sympathetic nervous system, says Emmons, and alternate-nostril breathing can be especially relaxing. First, exhale completely, and then inhale deeply. On your next exhale, place an index finger against your right nostril to close it off. Inhale through the left nostril, and then close the left nostril as you release the right nostril. Exhale completely through the right nostril, and then inhale through that side. At the top of the inhale, close off the right nostril, release the left, and exhale. Repeat for 15 rounds.



Pet an Animal

Find the nearest domesticated mammal and give it a friendly scratch behind the ears. Studies show that petting dogs can lower your blood pressure, and having a pet of your own can be a reliable source of unconditional love that keeps stress in check over time.



Reconsider Caffeine

Some people are more sensitive to caffeine than others. (There's even a gene mutation associated with slower caffeine metabolism.) Ask yourself if your current panic attack could be coffee induced. If so, try drinking calming chamomile tea instead.

Make a Request

If you're worried, try articulating what you want instead of what you don't want, says Sincero. She suggests being wildly specific, like, "I want to have enough time tonight for a luxurious bath while listening to the deep tracks on my old Eric Clapton albums." Whether it happens or not, at least some parts of your brain will respond to the request itself as if it's already occurring. She adds that you may be surprised at how often you get exactly what you ask for.

Write About What Matters

If you can take a few minutes for a writing practice, try this: Stanford researcher and best-selling author Kelly McGonigal, PhD, asks her students to write for 10 minutes about their top value, such as being a good friend or working for social justice. "The main exercise is to [understand] why these things are important to you," she says. This can change how you relate to the stress you're feeling.

Consume News Wisely

Be mindful of how much news you consume and the effect it has on you. Priming the brain with negative images can gear it toward threats, according to Loretta Graziano Breuning, PhD, author of *Habits of a Happy Brain*, and this can spur a state of perpetual anxious watchfulness. Set a media limit (no more than an hour a day) and be selective about your sources. Avoid sensationalist news outlets, which often use scary drama to hook news consumers and keep them hooked.

Taste Your Food

When you notice you're wound up and scarfing down a meal, pause for a moment. Take a deep breath and try tuning in to whatever you're eating. Chew much slower than you would normally and really experience that sensation. Taste it completely and pay attention to the texture and smells. Bonus: This kind of conscious chewing aids digestion.

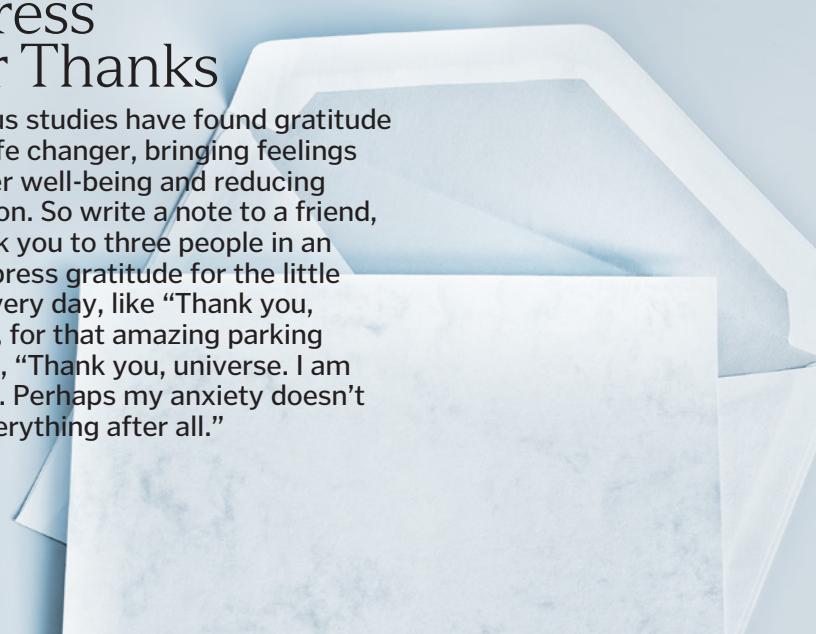


Use a Mantra

Originally used as a word or a sound designed to deepen a meditation practice, "mantra" has evolved to mean "a statement that's repeated frequently." Breuning notes that this kind of repetition has cognitive benefits, allowing you to develop new neural pathways based on what you're saying. An especially useful mantra during anxiety can be the simple "I am safe."

Express Your Thanks

Numerous studies have found gratitude to be a life changer, bringing feelings of greater well-being and reducing depression. So write a note to a friend, say thank you to three people in an hour, express gratitude for the little things every day, like "Thank you, universe, for that amazing parking spot." Or, "Thank you, universe. I am still alive. Perhaps my anxiety doesn't know everything after all."



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