

STRESS MANAGEMENT

Education, Techniques, and Coping Skills



THE STRESS RESPONSE

When having heightened feelings of stress or anxiety, you may notice that your mind is racing, your breathing has quickened, your heart is pumping fast, and your muscles feel tense. These are examples of stress responses, which are natural responses to stress or danger and are a part of the fight-flight-freeze response. You've likely heard of the fight-or-flight response before, though you may not be familiar with the "freeze" response. These three responses trigger when your brain determines there is some danger you must navigate, and ideally, each response occurs in situations when that response would best manage that particular type of danger. How one needs to respond to the danger may also change as the situation progresses.

- The "fight" response triggers when your subconscious has determined that the best way to handle a situation is through physical force. For example, if attacked by a wild animal or pinned under fallen machinery/debris, a natural response would be to fight with everything you've got to break free.
- The "flight" response triggers when your subconscious determines you are unlikely to win in a physical altercation, and it is best to flee. For example, if you were in a building that is on fire or were to see a shark while swimming, a natural response would be to flee to a safe location.
- The "freeze" response is less well known but just as useful. This response triggers when your subconscious determines that the best way to handle a dangerous situation is to stop moving and stay quiet. For example, if the danger hasn't noticed you yet (think: bear in the woods or your boss in a bad mood yelling at anyone who catches their attention), sometimes doing nothing and remaining unnoticed is the best course of action.

RECOGNIZING STRESS

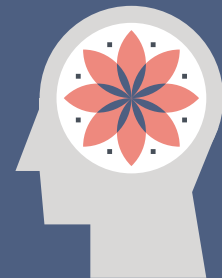
Being able to recognize when you are having a stress response as well as responding in a healthy way to bring your stress response down are two important pieces to feeling more in control and relaxed. You can know that you are experiencing a stress response if you experience some or all of the following symptoms:

- difficulty breathing or quickened breathing
- heart pumping quickly or chest pain
- muscles feeling tense or restless
- sweating
- change in temperature in your extremities
- racing thoughts
- having "tunnel vision" / difficulty noticing what's around you
- feeling tingly or lightheaded
- feeling nauseous

Your brain activates multiple areas of your body whenever it perceives something as a threat. These are all symptoms of your body preparing for the worst and is trying to get you to safety. Your breath quickens to be sure you have enough oxygen if you need to run. Your heart pumps quicker so you can respond faster. Your muscles are tensed and ready to spring into action if needed. You sweat to prevent overheating and blood moves from your hands and feet to the rest of your muscles to help facilitate being ready to move, resulting in cold hands and feet. Your mind races through ways to manage the situation. You focus in on what is perceived as the threat. And ultimately the whole experience can feel odd and unsettling.

STRESS MANAGEMENT

Relaxation Techniques



RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

When your brain sees there is no longer a need for the stress response, the brain then activates a relaxation response. This starts slowing down one's breath and restoring normal functioning to the rest of your body. When the stress response is activating inappropriately, however, we can use relaxation techniques to trigger our relaxation response to alleviate the discomfort and bring our anxiety and stress levels to a manageable level. Knowing the symptoms of your stress response starting helps you know when to use these relaxation techniques more quickly.

5-6-7 Deep Breathing. The first technique that may be helpful is to deliberately slow down your breath. This is certainly easier said than done when feeling overwhelmed or anxious, but having a set technique you use and that you've practiced may help bring you back to your normal functioning.

- First, set yourself in a comfortable position, preferably laying back or sitting back, with your back straight in order to allow airflow to move through your abdomen and chest unhindered.
- Secondly, breathe in for 5 seconds. Count those seconds slowly in your head. Note: A good breath will involve your abdomen slowly expanding as your diaphragm fills with air.
- Hold your breath for 6 seconds, continuing to count in your head.
- And lastly, breathe out for 7 seconds. The idea is to take the entire 7 seconds breathing out, not breathing out and still having seconds left or still having air in your lungs by the end of 7 seconds.

Repeat for a few minutes or until adequately relaxed. Counting out the seconds is an important part of this technique. It serves the purpose of controlling how long you are breathing in and out for, and it also helps focus your mind on something neutral and not distressing. Additionally, the seconds suggested here are merely suggestions! If you feel discomfort or lightheaded, you may want to shorten the number of seconds to a more comfortable time for you. Similarly, if it feels natural to lengthen it, go ahead!

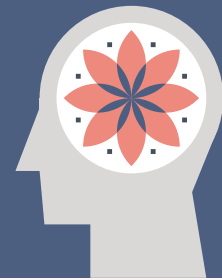
ONLINE RESOURCES AND APPS

PLEASE NOTE: This list of collected resources is based on the curators' clinical work and should not be considered specifically endorsed or exhaustive. The reader should feel encouraged to use their own judgement concerning applicability and appropriateness of a website or app based on their access to means, spiritual or religious preferences, or moral/ethical concerns.

- [Mayo Clinic Relaxation Techniques](#)
- [Calm Website & App](#)
- [Kelly McGonigal TED Talk](#)
- [The Fight or Flight Response](#)
- [Stress Management SAMHSA](#)
- [Progressive Muscle Relaxation](#)
- [Guided Meditations](#)
- [How to Deep Breathe](#)
- [Stress Reduction](#)
- [Childhood Anxiety](#)
- [Stress Relief](#)
- [Happify App](#)
- [Online Therapy](#)
- [Stress Brain-Body TED Talk](#)
- [Elizabeth Gilbert TED Talk: COVID](#)

STRESS MANAGEMENT

Grounding Techniques



GROUNDING TECHNIQUES

Grounding is a term used to describe techniques that ground you in the present. These techniques aim to bring your mind and body into focus on what is going on around and within you in the “here-and-now”—in the present moment. When we are feeling anxious and stressed, we will often find ourselves worrying about the future or focusing on past traumatic events. You may find your mind flooded with “what-if” questions and thinking about all the possible ways things will play out—or specifically how things will play out wrong.

5-4-3-2-1 Grounding Technique. This technique gets us in touch with our five senses to help bring our mind and our body back to the here and-now. That way we can focus more on our present self and tasks rather than worrying about the future or feeling stuck thinking about past trauma.

- Start by closing your eyes and taking a deep breath.
- Now open your eyes and list 5 things you see (inside the room or outside a window).
- Next list 4 things you can feel (feeling the clothes on your body, your feet on the floor, etc).
- List 3 things you can hear (the air conditioner, traffic outside, your own breath, etc)
- 2 things you smell. You may want to carry something fragrant with you to help with this or have something that is a calming smell to you wherever you practice this.
- 1 thing you taste. If you can't taste anything, try drinking something or having a small snack and really focusing on the taste.
- End with another deep breath.

Do this technique thoughtfully. Describe each thing you list and really focus on how you are experiencing it through the sense you're currently listing. Saying these things out loud can be extra helpful in the grounding experience but if you are in public, it may feel more comfortable to list things in your head instead.

Counting. Count backwards by 7s from 100. The amount of concentration needed to complete this task should be enough to break your brain out of the panic cycle.

Pick a Color. Choose a color and notice how many shades of that color are in your immediate environment.

Energy Focus. Choose a small object like a rock or coin to keep with you in a pocket. During stressful moments hold the object in one hand and describe as many features of that object as you can as you breathe in and out slowly.

Thoughts like Clouds. If you already have a relationship with your aware-self, you can access the part of you that can observe your spiraling thoughts and has no judgement about it. As you observe your thoughts, imagine that they are like clouds, sometimes stormy, sometimes light, sometimes like wisps. As you connect with how the thoughts can change and shift, imagine that you are simply there to observe them in the same way you observe the changing sky.

Changing Handedness. A quick and easy process to bring you into present focus is to attempt something moderately complex like teeth-brushing or writing with your non-dominant hand.

Reading License Plates. Most license plates do not make any etymological sense and so they can be used as a way to distract the anxious brain into present focus.

This resource was created by Lydia Cole, M.S., LCSW & Kristen Carlosh, M.A., LPC-MHSP using information from Anxiety B.C., Healthline, and numerous listed websites. **PLEASE NOTE:** If you are experiencing a mental health emergency or crisis, the authors encourage you to contact 911 or [The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) at 800-273-8255 immediately. Let us help you.