

## Breathe, Redirect, Do: 3 Steps to Calming Anxiety

The pandemic is a time of great uncertainty and unanswerable questions, so it's only natural that any of us would be more susceptible to anxiety. Use the **Breathe, Redirect, Do** strategy at the first signs of anxiety to find relief.

### Signs of Anxiety and Panic:

Anxiety can be experienced as spiral of thoughts, feelings, actions, and images. In an anxious moment, you might have thoughts of uncontrollable fear or impending danger, threat, uncertainty, instability, or even guilt or shame. Fearful thoughts about what is happening, what will happen in the future, what others are thinking, and what all of this says about you can be accompanied by sensations like:

- racing or pounding heart
- difficulty breathing or hyperventilation
- trouble catching your breath
- nausea, vomiting, and abdominal discomfort
- dizziness or lightheadedness
- blurred vision
- sweating
- chills
- tingling in your hands or feet
- chest pain or pressure
- difficulty thinking or concentrating
- racing thoughts
- hot or cold flashes
- shaking or trembling
- nervousness or restlessness

Often, when we're anxious, our attention to these sensations can lead to heightened anxiety and more severe sensations. This can happen when the sensations are perceived as dangerous or embarrassing.

During a moment of more intense anxiety or panic, one can feel isolated, helpless, and out of control. Some people may fear they are dying.

### Tips on talking someone through anxiety.

**Stay Calm.** One of your most important jobs when helping someone with anxiety is staying calm yourself. Get down at eye level with the person you're speaking to and ask if it's alright to help. Don't take their reaction personally. Remember, they're having a really tough time at the moment.

**Ask About History.** Ask if the person you're helping has ever experienced anxiety or panic before. If so, they may have their own list of tried and true coping methods, but it can be hard to remember in the midst of a panic attack. Calmly help them think through the things that have helped them in the past or walk them through the Breathe, Redirect, Do steps in this article.

**Focus on Constructive Action.** Let them know that these are normal symptoms of panic and will subside, but try to stay away from repeating statements like, “don’t worry” or “everything’s fine.” Remember that to a person who’s experiencing panic, things most certainly do not feel fine. Instead, give the person you’re helping concrete steps to take, such as *take slow, deep breaths*, or name 5 things you can see right now. It can also be helpful to take those steps alongside them.



*Image by Max van den Oetelaar*

### **Breathe, Redirect, Do**

This simple **Breathe, Redirect, Do** strategy can help ground you when you’re feeling anxious. Try not to judge your success with this by how “normal” you feel. There’s often a period of discomfort after an intense bout of anxiety while your body metabolizes all the adrenaline it released. Instead, think of these as strategies for finding baby steps of relief. These strategies can be mixed and matched, so feel free to stack them up as you reach for progressive levels of soothing.

### **Breathe: Breathe the calm back in.**

One of the best things you can do to soothe anxiety is to practice slow, controlled breathing. Even just consciously engaging in normal breathing can help settle your nerves. Here are some tips, especially if you’re prone to hyperventilation when you’re anxious:

- Breathe in through your nose, out through your mouth.
- Longer exhale than inhale (a great exercise is 4-7-8 breath. Breathe for 4 counts in, hold your breath for 7, exhale for 8).
- Hold your breath before exhaling. Pause a bit before inhaling.
- Breathe down into your belly. Placing your hands behind your head in a relaxed posture and leaning back a bit as if you’re reclining beside a pool can help with this. Even better, close your eyes and imagine yourself on the beach as you practice this breathing.
- You can pair your breathing with soothing thoughts, words, or actions. Imagine blowing bubbles, pushing clouds through the sky, or count backwards from 300 with every breath.
- It's also enjoyable to breathe in time to soothing music.

**Redirect: Redirect your attention to the world around you and envision yourself feeling good.**

When we're anxious, we tend to get tunnel vision and hyper-focus on a scary thought, image, or physical sensation. Use your senses to redirect your attention back to the world around you. Take it a step further and use your mind to imagine yourself feeling good in a place you like to be.

**Easy grounding exercises to redirect your attention:**

- Choose your favorite color and count how many places you see it in your surroundings.
- Listen out as far as you can. Count as many sounds as you can identify.
- Alternate between rubbing your hands together and clenching and releasing your fists. The process of stimulating the nerves in your palms and tensing and releasing your muscles can give you a sensation of relief.
- Pat your legs and arms, give yourself a light hug.
- Count how many people around you are wearing a hat.
- Chew a piece of gum and focus on all the sensations involved.
- Look out to the horizon or as far as your environment allows. Let your eyes settle there and try to engage your peripheral vision. Experiment with how much you can see without moving your head.
- Practice 5-4-3-2-1: name 5 things you can see, 4 things you can hear, 3 things you can feel, 2 things you can smell, 1 thing you can taste.
- If available, wash your hands and splash cold water on your face.
- Talk to someone about a funny movie or a nice place to visit.
- Name all the things you know for sure, such as the date, your location, your name, address, family members' names, etc.

**Easy visualization and affirmation exercises:**

- Envision yourself feeling calm, happy, excited, confident or however you want to feel. Say these positive feelings words to yourself.
- Envision a soothing or safe space, engaging all of your senses. Make the mental imagery as vivid as you can. Name what you see, hear, smell, taste, or feel in this space.
- Look out at the road or sidewalk and envision yourself driving/walking to your favorite destination and feeling good. Involve as many sensations as you can.
- Fill in the blanks below to make positive, self-affirming statements like:
  - *I am the kind of person who...*
  - *I really appreciate...in my life*
  - *I know I'm strong because...*
  - *I know I'm brave because...*
  - *My...is my greatest strength*

### **Do: Give yourself a fun diversion.**

You can take redirection one step further by engaging your attention in a fun or distracting task.

- Play a fun game. Tic-tac-toe, I Spy, hangman, writing a short story from the next word you hear, dots and boxes, doodling, and closed eye doodling can be a fun, low tech diversion.
- Plan the recipe for your favorite meal. Make a list of all the steps involved in making it.
- List your top 10 favorite movies, travel destinations, bands, television shows, and more.
- Recite the lyrics to a favorite song.
- Make up a story about the next object or person you see.
- Play the web of gratitude game. Choose something in your surroundings that you appreciate and list all the people and steps involved in making it available to you.
- Mentally walk through everything along your drive home. Name the streets, businesses, and interesting places you'll pass on the way home.

### **Resources for Your Emotional Wellness**

- Campus Health's [Coping with COVID-19](#) Resource Library
- [Positive Psychology: A Topical Collection of 45 TED Talks](#) on Mappalicious
- [Anxiety and Depression Association of America](#)
- [Mental Health America](#)
- [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#)

### **Guided Meditations by [Stop, Breathe & Think App](#)**

- [Equanimity Meditation \(Find Calm\)](#)
- [Compassion Meditation \(Strengthen Happiness\)](#)
- [Forgiving Yourself Meditation \(Heal and Let Go\)](#)
- [Gratitude Meditation \(Strengthen Happiness\)](#)
- [Safe House Chill Pill for Calm](#)

### **Binaural Beats for Relaxation**

Binaural beats are a form of sound wave therapy in which the right and left ear receive different frequencies and the brain perceives one tone. Studies on binaural beats show that they can be effective at reducing anxiety, inducing a meditative state, enhancing relaxation, and improving attention. Find out more about binaural beats and research on health benefits: [Do Binaural Beats have Health Benefits?](#) on HealthLine and [What Are Binaural Beats, and How Do They Work?](#) on Medical News Today.

- [Binaural Meditation Music](#) YouTube channel
- [Brainwave Music](#) YouTube channel
- [Free Binaural Beats Streaming](#) by Gaia
- [Magnetic Minds](#) YouTube channel

View more Emotional Wellness tips and resources on the Pathways to Wellness [Emotional Wellness page](#).