

Self-Soothing & Affect Regulation Skills

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INTRODUCTION

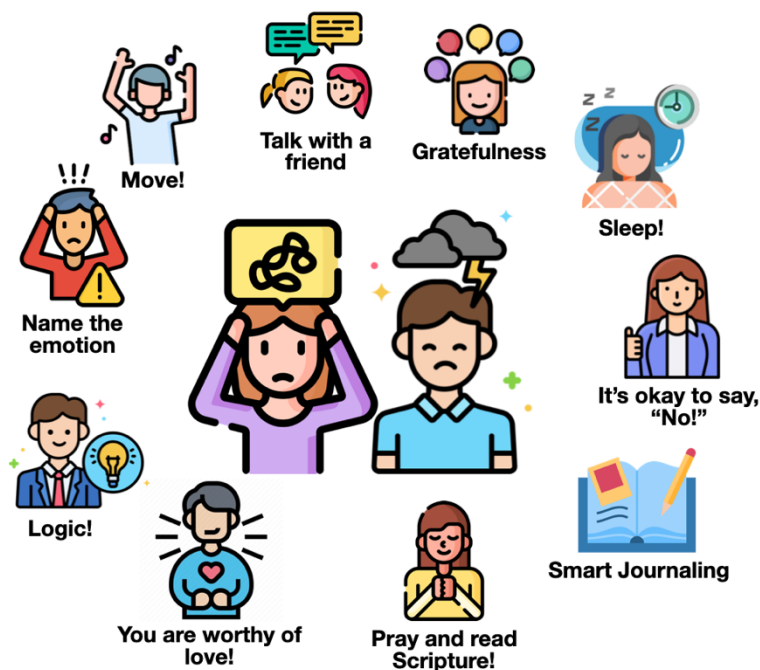
Anxiety and panic can be emotionally and physically exhausting. Some anxiety is driven by rational situations and the realities of day-to-day living. For example, taking a major test or applying for a job. However, in some cases, anxiety presents without a rational basis, and it can be overwhelming. Panic attacks are one of the most intense and disrupting sensations that we can experience. From a racing heartbeat, excessive sweating, and difficulty breathing, a panic attack can result in a serious loss of function. The following guide to self-soothing and affect (emotional) regulation can help us deal with anxiety in healthy and productive ways without turning to medications that may be unnecessary.

SAFETY CHECK & SEEKING SAFETY

The first priority in confronting a crisis or when you are experiencing a good old-fashioned meltdown is to seek safety. Go to a physically safe space or go to a safe relationship. Get to safety. Sometimes this means leaving the house (with the kids) if you live in a home with domestic violence. Sometimes it means calling 911 for local law enforcement and other first-responders to help.

BREATHE¹

Classic 4-4-4 breathing. This technique is done by breathing in through your nose as though you are smelling a flower (4 seconds), holding your breath briefly (4 seconds), and then exhaling through the mouth as though you are blowing out a candle (4 seconds). Another technique is called the 4-7-8 breathing pattern. 4-7-8 breathing was even more effective at reducing anxiety than standard deep breathing exercises, especial for bariatric surgery patients.² How to practice the 4-7-8 breathing pattern:



¹ Here are three additional ways to practice breathing techniques to gain self-control and affect regulation: First, diaphragmatic breathing, also known as belly breathing, involves breathing deeply into your diaphragm rather than shallowly into your chest, source: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31436595/>. Second, cyclic breathing. Cyclic breathing (also called “cyclic sighing”) **emphasizes a double inhale followed by a prolonged exhale, which can create a powerful calming effect on your nervous system.** Source: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9873947/>. Third, mindful breathing. Mindful breathing combines controlled breathing with focused attention on the present moment and bodily sensations, source: <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0164822>. This is very helpful when combined with meditating on Scripture.

² <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36480101/>

1. Sit comfortably with your back straight.
2. Place the tip of your tongue against the ridge behind your upper front teeth.
3. Exhale completely through your mouth, making a whoosh sound.³
4. Close your mouth and inhale quietly through your nose for a mental count of four.
5. Hold your breath for a count of seven.
6. Exhale completely through your mouth for a count of eight, making the whoosh sound again.
7. Repeat the cycle three to four times.

MOVE YOUR BODY

Moving refers to physical movement such as walking, running, weightlifting, or engaging in a hobby that requires moving like planting flowers, walking, or riding a bike, etc. Physical motion initiates a neurochemical reaction that reduces cortisol and processes adrenaline. This functions like a neurochemical reset.

GROUNDING: 5-4-3-2-1

Using the 5-4-3-2-1 grounding exercise,⁴ you will purposefully take in the reality of your surroundings using each of your senses. Strive to notice small details that your mind would usually tune out, such as distant sounds, smells, or the texture of an ordinary object. This is one of the simple ways our minds can exercise authority over our brains. By observing and describing the immediate world around you, you stop fixating on unhealthy and damaging things. It's like giving your mind a rest. Practice *observe and describe grounding* by:

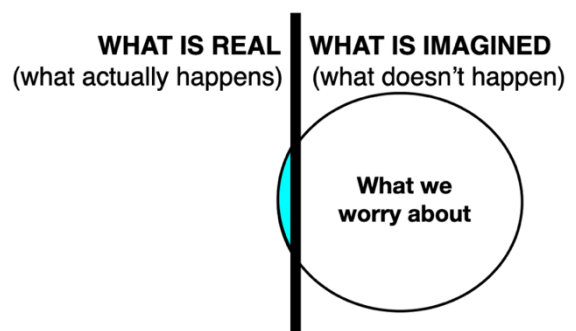
1. Using your **EYES** look and describe 5 things.
2. Using your **HANDS** touch and describe 4 things.
3. Using your **EARS** listen and describe 3 things.
4. Using your **NOSE** smell and describe 2 things.
5. Using your **TASTE** eat and describe 1 thing.

DURING EXTREME DYSREGULATION ENGAGE A SENSORY JUMP START

Engage in physical exercise such as walking, weightlifting, pushups, planks, running, etc. Try placing your hands under alternating cold and warm running water, or apply a cold compress to your face or arms. These intense temperature sensations help activate your nervous system and shift your focus away from distressing or traumatic thoughts. Another effective option is taking a cold shower, which can trigger the mammalian dive reflex—a calming physiological response that helps regulate your body and mind in moments when you are completely overwhelmed.

NAME THE FEELINGS & NAME THE STRESSORS

When you think about it, what stresses us out can usually be named. For example, I am stressed and upset because I was passed over for a promotion. That's the name...“no promotion.” In fact, this one has a name and maybe a face! You name it and then you see your bosses' face. The process of naming (rationally identifying why we feel what we feel) engages our prefrontal cortex which helps us think more logically and rationally about our problems and stresses. Sometimes naming it, tames it. But not always! Sometimes life is overwhelming and really hard.



REGULATE YOUR PERCEPTIONS WITH LOGIC!

The Roman philosopher Seneca the Younger said, *we suffer more often in imagination than in reality.*⁵ Thinking rationally or logically about ourselves, our problems, and our relationships is both wise and healthy.

³ <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10622034/>

⁴ Change up the number of times you engage a specific sense. For example, smell several things and taste as many as you need, etc., to help reset your mind from what is at the roots of your anxiety.

⁵ Seneca the Younger (Lucius Annaeus Seneca, c. 4 B.C.–A.D. 65) was a Roman philosopher and Stoic moralist. This quote is from Seneca's Epistles XIII (13) in *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium*, c. AD 65. The context: “There are more things, Lucilius, likely to frighten us than there

Anxiety is often based on what is imaged or feared. When we worry about what *might happen*, we limit healthy response to what is *actually happening*. Here is a way to gain a more rational approach to our worries:

Write out the **worst-case scenario** – what’s the *worst thing* that *might* happen?

Write out the **best-case scenario** – what is the *best thing* that *might* happen?

Write out the **probable or rational** scenario – what is the most *likely thing* to *actually* happen?

Now, write out the rational reasons why each scenario might or might not happen. In other words, what are the odds that the worst, best, or most probable scenario might happen? By handwriting this, we are engaging both the feeling and logic sides of our brains to solve, manage, or regulate our problems and our emotional and practical responses to them. This is healthy! Once we have a more rational understanding of what we are feeling and experiencing, we are better equipped to make decisions and engage in behaviors that are healthy.

It’s impossible to know or predict what will happen in the immediate future. This is why faith, trust, and healthy relationships are so important in our daily lives.⁶

REALIZE YOU HAVE THE ABILITY FOCUS ON SPECIFIC IDEAS, FEELINGS, AND FACTS

There is a compelling connection between biblical truth and neuroscience, particularly when we reflect on passages such as Psalm 121:1-2;⁷ Romans 12:1-2;⁸ 1 Corinthians 2:14-16;⁹ 2 Corinthians 10:5;¹⁰ Philippians 4:8;¹¹ and Colossians 3:1-2.¹² These scriptures affirm that we have the power to direct our thoughts and choose where to focus our *minds*. Neuroscientists like Antonio Damasio¹³ and Louis Cozolino¹⁴ have explored this cognitive—and spiritual—capacity, highlighting the fact that our minds have authority over our brains. In biblical terms, our *spirit* has the ability to override the impulses of the brain and body. We truly can control our focus and control our thoughts. To deny this is to reject the God-given potential we each have for personal growth and spiritual maturity. Here are some ways we can exercise our cognitive ability to use *our minds over our brains*:

1. Focus on *truth* and not on *lies*.
2. Focus on what is real and not *necessarily* what is perceived, imagined, or on feelings. Remember the differences between worst-case, best-case, and most probable-case scenarios!
3. Focus on the *here and now* and not *necessarily* on the past nor the future.
4. Realize that emotions are not the problem! *Relationships, our decisions, and physical objects* are the real problem. Emotions are neurotransmitters that are telling us something or alerting us to an aversion or attraction signal. Keep your *emotions* in equilibrium with *facts, truth, and what is real*.

are to crush us; we suffer more often in imagination than in reality. Some things torment us more than they ought; some torment us before they ought; and some torment us when they ought not to torment us at all. We are in the habit of exaggerating, or imagining, or anticipating, sorrow. The wise man does not put himself under the control of Fortune; he allows her no entry into his mind. For Fortune can take away riches, but not courage; she can take away honors, but not integrity; she can take away the power to command, but not the power to decide rightly.”

⁶ James 1:1-8; 1 Peter 1:3-9.

⁷ Psalm 121:1-2, “I will raise my eyes to the mountains; from where will my help come? 2 My help *comes* from the LORD, Who made heaven and earth.

⁸ Romans 12:1-2, “Therefore I urge you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. 2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.”

⁹ 1 Corinthians 2:14-16, “14 But a natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. 15 But the one who is spiritual discerns all things, yet he himself is discerned by no one. 16 For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, THAT HE WILL INSTRUCT HIM? But we have the mind of Christ.”

¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 10:5, “We are destroying arguments and all arrogance raised against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ,”

¹¹ Philippians 4:8, “Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”

¹² Colossians 3:1-2, “1 Therefore, if you have been raised with Christ, keep seeking the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

2 Set your minds on the things that are above, not on the things that are on earth.”

¹³ Cf., <http://www.psy.vanderbilt.edu/courses/psy115a/DamasioEssay/Damasio%27sTheory.html>

¹⁴ Cf., <https://www.drloucozolino.com/neuroscience/the-brain-and-mindfulness>

5. Focus on your responsibilities and act on them in a healthy and disciplined manner. By implication, do not burden yourself trying to control the responsibilities of others. In other words, stay on point with your tasks and not on theirs.

START CONTROLLING WHAT IS CONTROLLABLE

This simply means if you feel out of control it is likely that there are some parts of your life that are truly out of control. Just like there is a difference between having a bad day and a bad moment, so there is a difference between my entire life being out of control and my inability to control my boss or spouse. So, how do you start controlling what is controllable? Start by making your bed or doing the dishes. As my old psychiatry professor told us, “organize your sock drawer!” Gaining order in small ways helps us move toward more rational and logical order, behaviors, beliefs, and feelings in other areas.

LEAN IN & LEARN FROM YOUR ANXIETY

Instead of repressing or avoiding your feelings, lean into them and learn why you have them. One way to do this is to do *smart journaling* of your answers to the following questions:

1. What are you specifically feeling?
2. What facts or memories are related to this feeling?
3. What healthy action and belief is the feeling signaling in you?
4. Will this matter after a good night's sleep? Will this matter a year from now? See the bigger picture.
5. What healthy behaviors could you do to be wise, self-protecting, and kind to yourself?

ENGAGE YOUR FAITH & BE FAITHFUL AT A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH¹⁵

Prayer, reading Scripture, memorizing Scripture, meditation, worship, and community groups, etc. For example, meditate on Psalm 94:19, “When my anxious thoughts multiply within me, Your comfort delights my soul.” Journal what you are learning about faith.¹⁶

KNOW WHEN TO FAST FROM SPECIFIC WORDS, THINGS, PEOPLE, AND PLACES

Make a list of words, things, people, or places that are triggering or incendiary for you. Fast (refuse to speak, touch, relate with or go to this place) or protect yourself for what is harmful.

THE CALL TO COURAGE & PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

One of the most important aspects of therapy in healing and growing through anxiety is learning to courageously face whatever is driving it. In many ways, anxiety arises from being confronted with our lack of control. Life is full of situations and circumstances that are completely beyond our control, and often, anxiety stems from our struggle with this reality. Take time to reflect on what lies beneath your anxiety. Make a list of the specific things that trigger it, and bring this list to your therapist. Together, explore how you can respond to these challenges in healthier, more meaningful ways.¹⁷

PRACTICE HEALTHY BOUNDARIES

Many of my clients notice a significant reduction in anxiety once they learn to define and maintain healthy boundaries—with themselves and with others. Start by making a list of the people who frustrate or disappoint you. Reflect on and write down why they have this effect on you. This process can help you begin identifying where boundaries are needed. From there, begin the work of defining and enforcing healthy boundaries with those individuals. Keep in mind: boundaries are about honoring both the healthy “YES” and the healthy “NO.” A lot of the anxiety we carry stems from avoidant patterns in our relationships—feeling taken advantage of, neglected, or overwhelmed. This work takes courage, but it’s an important step toward emotional freedom.

¹⁵ Hebrews 10:19-25.

¹⁶ Reading recommendation: *Gentle and Lowly* by Dane Ortlund.

¹⁷ Reading recommendation: the book *The Courage to Be Disliked* by Ichiro Kishimi and Fumitake Koga.

INTENTIONAL APPRECIATION

Take some time to make a list of what feels good and healthy in your life. As you do, reflect specifically on *why* you recognize feelings of gratefulness for these things—whether it's something about yourself, another person, an idea, or an experience. From both a spiritual and neuroscience perspective, it's important to remember this powerful truth: you can't experience genuine gratitude and anger at the same time. Gratitude has the ability to shift your mindset and calm your nervous system. Let this practice be a way of grounding yourself in what's working—and why it matters.

SMART JOURNALING

Journal about specific things that are good and healthy in your life. Or journal about the facts and the feelings associated with an idea, problem, or relationship that is upsetting to you. This is a good time to practice naming what you are feeling, i.e., what the actual emotion is and the situation or person at the center of the emotion. Consider writing your own “psalm” similar to Psalm 42; 43; 56; 57; or 73.

WALKING OUTDOORS

Focus on a full sensory experience when walking outside. See material above at Grounding 5-4-3-2-1.

CALL OR SCHEDULE TIME WITH SOMEONE WHO CARES FOR YOU

CALL OR SCHEDULE TIME WITH YOUR COUNSELOR-THERAPIST

ENGAGE IN MISSION/CHARITABLE CONTRIBUTION/COMPASSION WORK

For example, volunteer at an area non-profit.

ENGAGE IN A HOBBY OR FAVORITE ACTIVITY

ENGAGE IN PHYSICAL EXERCISE AND HEALTHY EATING (NO ALCOHOL!)

Grace always,

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