

HANDS OVER HEART: Place one hand over your heart (heel of hand over heart, fingertips on collarbone). Place your other hand on top. Apply as much pressure with your hands as you want for as long as you want. Feel the pressure, combined with the warmth of your hands. This is a way to physically feel self-compassion whenever you need it.

Why it helps: Physical gestures like this activate the parasympathetic nervous system (this pumps the brakes on our fight or flight stress response). In this particular position your hands are applying soothing pressure to the polyvagal nerve. This nerve is activated in times of stress and anxiety. When you apply pressure, it helps to soothe the nerve and sends messages to your body and brain that you are safe and can relax. Physical gestures like this also help you to get out of your thoughts and drop down into your body.

SHAKE IT OFF: Shake your hands from the wrist, strongly. Then shake your lower arms from the elbow along with your wrists. Then shake arms from shoulder. Shake one foot from the ankle, then the other. Next shake leg from the knee, then other leg. Next from the hip, then other leg. Now shake your whole body, strongly, and in big movements. Do this until you want to stop. This can be done in a bathroom stall or other private space and can make a noticeable difference within just a minute of doing it.

Why it helps: Shaking out the body has been shown to help physically reset our nervous system. Additionally, big movements help to burn up cortisol that is released when under stress or feeling high amounts of anxiety. Finally, big and strong physical movements can release endorphins which helps our mood to shift. This practice can be energizing (try it instead of coffee!), so it's not recommended close to bedtime.

COUNTING YOUR BREATHS: Focus on your breathing. Just breathe normally. You don't have to change anything except to focus on your exhales. Count your exhalations, starting at 1 and ending at 10. When you reach 10, start over again at 1. Do as many cycles of 10 as you need. You can also try box breathing: inhaling for 4, holding for 4, exhaling for 4, holding for 4. Repeat as many times as you need.

Why it helps: When we focusing on our breath we step out of past and future worries and get rooted in the present moment. Counting is a function of our frontal lobe (the upstairs brain). When we count, we keep our frontal lobe engaged which helps us to move out of fight or flight. Our brain and body gets the message that we are safe.

“Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.” - Viktor E. Frankl

USE YOUR SENSES: Talking out loud, list 5 things you see, 4 things you hear, 3 things you touch, 2 things you smell, and 1 thing you taste.

Why it helps: Making lists (you can also try listing colors or all 50 states – anything emotionally neutral) engages the frontal lobe and causes our brain to move out of fight or flight. Turning our attention to our five senses helps us stay grounded in our bodies, in the present moment, and out of runaway thoughts.

BREATHING OUT MANTRAS: Close your eyes. Breathe normally. As you slowly exhale, silently say to yourself a short word such as “safe” or “peaceful” or a phrase such as “I am safe” or “I am okay.” If your mind wanders, gently remind yourself to think about your breathing and your chosen word or phrase. Let your breathing become slow and steady. Repeat for as long as you need.

Why it helps: Breathing brings much needed oxygen into our stressed bodies. The longer exhale slows our heart rate. The mantra keeps the frontal lobe engaged, helping to move out of fight or flight.

WEIGHT ON YOUR BELLY: Lie down and place an 8 to 10 pound bag of rice on your stomach. You can also try a weighted blanket. Rest in this position for as long as you like.

Why it helps: Applying gentle pressure on the skin can mimic safe human touch (like babies experience when being swaddled). This practice of weighted pressure will communicate to the mind, through the body, that we are safe. This can be very helpful for sleep issues as well.

LEGS UP THE WALL: Lie down and slide your legs up the wall (your body is in the shape of a capital “L”) or place your legs over the sofa cushions. Make sure there is something soft beneath your head and you feel warm and comfortable. Do this for 5-10 minutes.

Why it helps: Elevating the legs by extending them up the wall can help lower blood pressure and heart rate and interrupt a full blown panic attack, if caught on time. This is a great activity to do before bed to help encourage both the body and mind to rest, so give this a try if you have insomnia. This is also a good way to get some rest when you need a nap, but can’t take one.

Exercises inspired by:
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“When we self-regulate well, we are better able to control the trajectory of our emotional lives and resulting actions based on our values and sense of purpose.” — Amy Leigh Mercree