

Anxiety toolkit: three ways to calm your mind and body before an important meeting

Anxiety can feel like a storm cloud swirling around you, clouding your mind with what ifs, self-doubt or worst-case scenarios and making your body feel jittery, tense or unsettled. The level of distraction can be so high that it is really hard to concentrate or bring your best self forward. Clearly this is not helpful before an important meeting.

Fortunately, it is possible to rise above anxiety by deliberately clearing your mind and calming your body so that you can perform at your best. Here is how you can go about it quickly and on-the-spot, with tips revolving around three keywords: strength, clarity and calm.

Try each out as you go along to discover what works best for you.

Strength

With anxiety there is a tendency to feel unsafe or uncertain, which can lead to experiencing yourself as weak or ineffectual. Creating a sense of strength,

even if it is by *faking it till you make it*, can be an instant remedy. It can help to focus your mind and sharpen your resolve to do something about your situation. This is most useful for those with a quieter, more introverted personality, where a boost to confidence might be a vital first step. If confidence comes easily to you, you can skip forwards to clarity and calm.

Here is how you get strength with a simple postural adjustment:

Tip 1: Sit or stand tall.

More than half of what we communicate to others as well as to ourselves, is non-verbal, such as tone of voice and body language. Try this out. Slouch and look down. Now try to feel happy and confident. Then rise up to your full height and hold your head up high. Now try to feel sad.

How did that go?

This huge impact of body over mind is part of our primitive hardwiring for self-preservation and being able to quickly discern friend from foe. Think of an elephant fanning out its ears when threatened to convey 'I am big and strong, don't mess with me' versus a little mouse freezing or hiding in long grass when feeling threatened. As humans, it is when we make ourselves small that our minds tend to roam into worries and ruminations. This is as opposed to the elephant that, if pushed too far, would stampede to actively scare the threat away. In human terms this can equate to being assertive or even aggressive and taking decisive action, which leaves no time to dwell on thoughts and concerns. As humans, even when we deliberately play with making ourselves big or small, it can trick our brains into believing that we are more or less confident than we might believe ourselves to be. This is backed by research, such as the work of social psychologist, Dr Amy Cuddy, showing that when a person stands in a 'power pose' for a minute or two, such as with chest open, head held high and, if the situation allows, placing hands on hips too (like Superman or Wonder Woman), it facilitates a measurable shift into feeling more confident. So next time you feel anxious, sit or stand tall, and take a good deep breath to open your chest area, for a quick confidence boost. This can help you rise above anxiety and find courage to choose how best to respond.

Clarity

Tip 2: Come to your senses.

Only in your mind can you dwell on the past or worry about the future, which is what anxiety is made of. Coming into the present moment can open your mind to think more clearly and can help to keep anxiety at bay. A quick path to this clarity (that can take less than a minute) is to draw on your senses. In this case you are invited to draw on three of your senses, namely sight, sound and physical sensation.

The '333' technique:

Sight: Look at 3 objects (one at a time) in your environment.

Sound: Listen out for three sounds (one at a time), perhaps near and far.

Physical sensation: Move or stretch out three body parts (one at a time). Along with encouraging 'here and now' awareness through your body, it can also encourage you to loosen up tense areas, releasing the physical grip of anxiety with soothing, calming effect on body and mind.

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Calm

Now it is time to instil calm in both body and mind, also for keeping anxiety at bay. Sometimes you need to go through the steps of strength and clarity before your body or mind will allow you to relax and let go. Or you might find this technique works well on its own.

Here is how you can go about it:

Tip 3: Take 3-5 slow breaths.

Breathe in slowly for a mental count of 3-5 seconds. Then breathe out for the same amount of time, either blowing air gently out your mouth (for stress

relief) or breathing out through your nose (for deeper calm). The slower you breathe, the deeper the relaxation and slowing down to 5 seconds per in and out breath respectively can be difficult to achieve at first. Know that it does get easier with practice.

For added soothing and to encourage belly and chest breathing, place one hand on your chest and one on your belly while carrying out the breathing practice. For added stress relief, with each in-breath imagine sipping fresh air and vitality into your body to nourish you from head to toe. With each out-breath imagine blowing your troubles away.

Noa Belling is a bestselling author, mind-body psychotherapist, corporate consultant and author of new book *Stress Less: Managing Anxiety in a Modern World*, published by *Rockpool Publishing*.

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Article by NOA BELLING