

Anxiety

Understanding and working with your nervous system

Anxiety is your brain's threat-detection system — a protective response that evolved to keep you safe. When anxiety feels overwhelming, it is not a sign that something is wrong with you; it signals that your alarm system is working overtime. With the right tools, you can recalibrate it.

What's Happening in Your Body

When your brain perceives threat, real or imagined, it triggers the fight-or-flight response, flooding your body with adrenaline and cortisol. Your heart rate rises, breathing quickens, muscles tense, and thinking narrows. This cascade is powerful, but it is temporary. Panic attacks typically peak within 10 minutes and resolve within 15–45 minutes. Your body cannot sustain that level of activation indefinitely.

Remember

You have a 100% track record of getting through every difficult feeling you have ever experienced. That is evidence, not just reassurance.

Core Principles

Avoidance feeds anxiety. Every time you avoid a feared situation, your brain receives confirmation that it was truly dangerous. Gradual exposure is the antidote.

Thoughts are not facts. Racing thoughts like "I'll never get better" are fear-driven stories, not truths. You can notice them without believing them.

Discomfort is survivable. Sitting with anxiety, rather than fighting it, teaches your brain that uncomfortable feelings are tolerable. Their intensity decreases.

Readiness is not required. Courage is choosing to act even when you're afraid, not when there is an absence of fear.

Evidence-Based Tools

01 Box Breathing (4-4-4-4)

Activates the parasympathetic nervous system within minutes. Inhale through your nose for 4 counts, hold 4 counts, exhale through your mouth for 4 counts, hold 4 counts. Repeat 4–6 cycles. Place one hand on your belly to support mind-body connection for belly-breathing, not just chest. Practice daily so it becomes automatic when you need it most.

02 Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)

Systematically tense each muscle group for 5 seconds, then release for 10–15 seconds. Start at your feet and move upward: calves, thighs, abdomen, hands, arms, shoulders, face. Daily practice (10–20 minutes) has demonstrated significant reductions in anxiety and panic frequency.

03 Thought Checking (Cognitive Reframing)

Catch: Write the thought exactly as it appears.

Check: What is the evidence for and against this thought? Have I felt this way before and eventually felt differently?

Change: Replace with something balanced and realistic → not falsely positive, but grounded. Example: "I've felt stuck before, and I've also made real progress. Healing takes time."

04 Mindful Emotion Observation

Close your eyes. Breathe slowly. Name the feeling ("fear," "tightness in my chest"). Instead of fighting it, observe it. Where is it? What does it feel like? Is it heavy, warm, moving? Remind yourself: "This is temporary. I do not need to do anything with this right now." Stay with it for as long as you can — even one minute builds tolerance over time.

05 Graded Exposure Ladder

Choose one feared area. List situations from least to most anxiety-provoking. Begin with the least challenging step and remain in the situation until anxiety naturally decreases — do not leave at peak anxiety. Repeat until the step feels manageable, then advance. There is no rush. The goal is not fearlessness, but rather proof that you can handle discomfort.

Daily Practice Recommendations

- Box breathing or PMR: 5–10 minutes each morning
- Thought log: Write one anxious thought and challenge it daily
- Emotion observation: Sit with one difficult feeling without avoidance
- Exposure: Take one small step on your ladder each week
- Wins log: Record every time you did something despite fear

Helpful Resources

- MindShift CBT app (free)
- Anxiety Canada: anxietycanada.com
- Headspace or Calm: guided meditation and breathing