

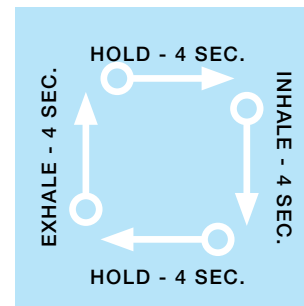
Tolerating Distress When Anxious

We've all been there before—your heart is racing ahead of that meeting with your boss, your favorite sports team is in a tight game with their opponent, or you're awaiting potentially difficult medical news at the doctor's office. Anxiety is common and can help motivate us to take action. It can tell us what's important to us and appropriately identify threats in our environment.

In some instances, anxiety is not helpful. It can impair our ability to carry out our roles as a parent, spouse, friend, or employee. When this happens, it's best to work actively on trying to reduce our anxiety in healthy ways. If we find this difficult to accomplish, it can be beneficial to meet with a trained professional to find the causes of anxiety and develop a treatment plan to help. This is particularly advisable if the level of distress or dysfunction created by our anxiety becomes significant. Professional help can entail meeting with a psychiatrist to discuss psychotropic medication or meeting with a therapist to learn psychological skills.

While not an exhaustive list, what follows are strategies you can expect to discuss when meeting with a therapist. You can also practice these on your own. Give them a shot!

Box Breathing



This technique is useful in regulating our breathing when anxiety sets in. As illustrated in the diagram, you simply *inhale* for 4 seconds, *hold* for 4 seconds, *exhale* for 4 seconds, and wait for 4 seconds

before you inhale again. Try doing this cycle 10-15 times and see if your anxiety decreases.

STOP Skill

When an emotion hits, our response can feel automatic. The STOP skill helps people pause their response and make an informed decision.

S – STOP! Freeze! Take a breath and don't let your emotions take over.

T – Take a step back. You can do this mentally or literally take a step backward to illustrate the point: You are removing yourself from the situation to think more clearly.

O – Notice what is happening to your body both *inside* (e.g., thoughts, feelings) and *outside* (e.g., what you are saying/doing).

P – Proceed mindfully. You have now given yourself an awareness of how you want to act in this moment. This will help you reach your goal rather than be controlled by emotions.

Self-Soothing

This skill relies on our ability to tune in to our five senses to help distract and calm our nerves before taking action. Which of these is your normal “go-to”?

Vision – Look at the stars, look at nature around you, look at pictures in a book or online, watch a sunrise/sunset, people-watch in a crowded area.

Hearing – Listen to your favorite music, pay attention to the sounds around you, hum or whistle your favorite song, pay attention to birds chirping or leaves swaying.

Smell – Use your favorite shampoo, soap, or lotion; smell flowers; smell essential oils or air fresheners in your house; open a package of coffee grounds and smell the flavors.

Taste – Eat your favorite food, chew on a piece of gum, drink your favorite beverage.

Touch – Pet your dog/cat, feel your hand lotion as you put it on, hug someone, sit under a blanket, run your hand along smooth leather or wood.

Half-Smiling and Willing Hands

The following techniques help trick your brain into doing what you want (in this case, feeling less anxious/worried). Try these tips to help reduce your level of anxiety:

- 1** For *Half-Smiling*, relax your face from the top of your head to the bottom of your jaw. If this is hard to envision, try tightening up your facial muscles and then relaxing them to feel the effect.
- 2** Let both corners of your mouth go up slightly. Remember, this is not an exaggerated smile, regular smile, or even a smirk. People might not even be aware you are *Half-Smiling* when you do it. Lift up the corners of your mouth just enough for your brain to notice.
- 3** Try to adopt a relaxed facial expression. A good indicator is when your forehead feels less tense and “drops.”
- 4** For *Willing Hands*, sit or lie down in a comfortable position. With your hands unclenched, turn them outward, thumbs to the side and fingers relaxed.
- 5** Once you have positioned yourself for the *Willing Hands* and *Half-Smiling* skills, take 10-15 deep breaths.

REMEMBER: Our behavior *communicates* to our brain how to respond. If we do this skill well enough, we can convince our brain to feel less anxious.

