

Anxiety Self-Help Guide

It will take ~10 minutes to work through Section One

Anxiety: What is it?

If you're feeling on edge, high alert or jittery, you might have anxiety.

Other signs include:

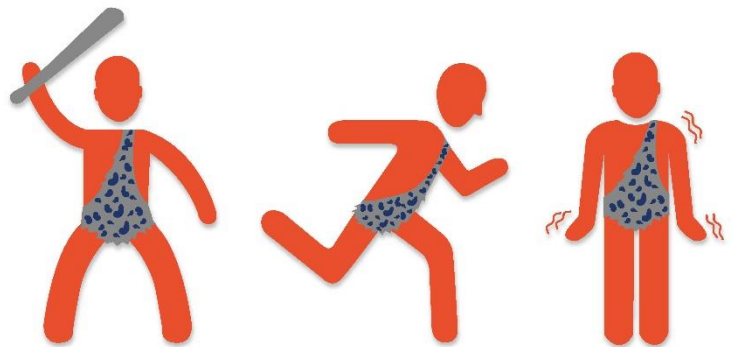
- Unwanted feelings of adrenaline
- Struggling to relax or feel calm
- Avoiding things because of how they make you feel

Our brains are designed to be constantly scanning our surroundings for signs of threat in order to keep us safe.

When something is recognised as a threat, the body and mind go into a state of high alert. This is often referred to as the fight, flight, freeze response.

When this response impacts significantly on someone's life, mental health professionals often refer to it as anxiety.

Fight, flight or freeze are normal responses in a situation where your body thinks it is in danger. It prepares every element of you to either run away or fight the danger. It is an evolutionary survival mechanism, think caveman confronted by a sabretooth tiger – he feels fear, his body becomes ready to react so that he can either fight the beast, run away or freeze.



Why might veterans struggle with anxiety?

It is natural for us to experience all sorts of emotions. They help us adapt to our environment and are important for our survival. Fear, for example, is important to prevent injury, whereas anger gives us the energy to respond to a threat or compete for limited resources.

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Military training prepares you for action – to be ‘switched on’, and to channel fear into action and to fight. On operations, to ‘switch off’ could have meant death or serious injury for you or your buddies. To be ‘sparking’, on edge and high alert, may well have saved lives. It is understandable therefore, that it would be difficult to turn the threat dial down after leaving the military, even though the threat level is no longer the same.

If your threat dial has remained high, you might be finding that your physical and mental health are suffering.

However, you have reached this page and shown that you are committed to changing things, which is the first step to turning that dial down.

Read on and try out the strategies and tips that will help you to retrain your threat response to be suitable for civilian life.



Section 2

How does anxiety affect you?

Anxiety is now always easy to spot.

Take a look through the following topics and see whether you notice any that might apply to you.

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How does ANXIETY affect you?



FEELING: When feeling under threat we draw on past dangerous or challenging experiences to help predict the future. We attend to everything that may be dangerous because the brain is wired to believe that if we think about the worst case, plan for the best, prepare for the worst, we can be ready for it and defend ourselves or find solutions.

- You may struggle to concentrate on tasks or remember things
- You may notice you predict the worst-case scenario
- You might worry about the future, things that you have done or are going to do

DOING: What your body says

Fight flight or freeze can have a profound impact on how you feel. Your body and emotions are connected, noticing the impact is not always easy.

- You might be feeling nervous, frightened, hot and sweaty.
- You might get short of breath, shaky or feel uneasy
- You might feel jumpy and easily startled

THINKING: In a situation where your fight, flight or freeze kicks in, the urge to run away or leave might be too strong. Leaving gives relief in the moment, but the problem here is that your world shrinks as you start to avoid everything that makes you feel this way.

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- You might be avoiding places and people
- You might over-react to loud noises such as fireworks or a car backfiring
- You might find that leaving difficult situations gives you instant relief
- You might get angry very quickly and have a very short fuse

Section 3

What can you do about it?

Veterans are incredibly positive in the belief that if they stick to their drills and training the 6 Ps, then they'll succeed. Try out the following skills and drills and stick with them until you find one that works for you.

We recommend you try the strategies for a couple of weeks, at least, before you are really going to know if they help or not.

The recommend strategies include:

1. Listen to your body: The feeling part
2. Get your thinking straight: The thinking part
3. Get Active: The doing part

To begin, read the rest of this section 'What your body needs' and, once you've given yourself time to trial this method, move on to Section Four: Get your thinking straight

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1. Listen to your body: The feeling part

Take back control of your threat dial

An effective way to dial down your threat response is to regulate your breathing.

Breathe in slowly and gently through your nose for a count of four, hold for a moment then breath out through your mouth for a longer breath of six or seven.

It can be helpful to imagine blowing out a candle from a distance or inflating a balloon in your belly.





Keep doing this for at least two minutes, the more you practice this, the more helpful it will be. We recommend at least twice daily practice.

Breathing Exercise: https://youtu.be/_MKAqyxjaLw


Self-soothe using different senses

As a baby, we are soothed not by words but by the warmth and pressure of cuddles from a caregiver, the tactile feeling of a familiar toy or blanket, gentle rocking, or sucking on a bottle or dummy. As adults those same sensory experiences can still help to soothe us when we're anxious.

Here are a few adult appropriate suggestions:

	<p>Lighting a candle or smell a calming scent. You can carry small smelling containers with you in your pocket</p>
	<p>Firmly rubbing your forearms, thighs or shoulders to create deep pressure</p>
	<p>Gently rubbing the back of your neck or forehead</p>
	<p>Listening to soothing music</p>

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	<p>Sucking a boiled sweet, a mint, or a straw in a water bottle</p>
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Increase endorphins, oxytocin and serotonin levels

Endorphins, oxytocin and serotonin all help to soothe and regulate.

The more connected we feel to others (as well as pets, wildlife and nature) the more oxytocin is produced and the calmer we feel. The easiest way to get your daily dose of oxytocin is to cuddle loved ones, hold hands, and being tactile with friends and family. Serotonin is the body's natural mood stabiliser. We can boost serotonin and endorphin levels through meditation, jogging and other light cardio exercise, getting outdoors and laughing.

Get the basics right

Getting the basics right and looking after our bodies can reduce the feeling of threat.

	<p>Reduce alcohol and coffee intake</p>
	<p>Drink plenty of water</p>
	<p>Improve your sleep routine</p>
	<p>Exercise regularly</p>
	<p>Make time for relaxation</p>

Remember, not every idea will work for everyone, they are designed to give you a place to start and help you find what works for you. So do try each method individually and give yourself time to adjust and practice before moving on to the next one.

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2. Get your thinking straight: The thinking part

Looking at the world with a balanced view

Mastering our anxiety involves being able to challenge our immediate thoughts about any given situation, because the way we think about things can have a big impact on the way we feel about them. It means looking at ourselves, others and the world with a balanced view and not in an unfairly negative or positive light.

THE STOPP TECHNIQUE

Stop!

Just pause for a moment.



Take a breath

Notice your breathing as you breathe in and out.

Observe

- What thoughts are going through your mind right now?
- Where is your focus of attention?
- What are you reacting to?
- What sensations do you notice in your body?

Pull back – put in some Perspective

- What's the bigger picture?
- Take the helicopter view
- What is another way of looking at this situation?

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- What advice would you give a friend?
- What would a trusted friend say to you right now?
- Is this thought, fact or opinion?
- What is a more reasonable explanation?
- How important is this? How important will it be in six months time?
- *It will pass*

Practise what works – Proceed

- What is the best thing to do right now?
- What is best for you, for others, and for the situation?
- What can you do that fits with your values?
- Do what will be effective and appropriate.

Remember, not every idea will work for everyone, they are designed to give you a place to start and help you find what works for you. So do try each method individually and give yourself time to adjust and practice before moving on to the next one.

3. Get Active: The doing part

Make a list of situations, places or things you avoid. List them in order of anxiety they create. Starting with those which cause you least anxiety, begin to repeatedly face that situation. Use the techniques above to manage anxiety and push through the desire to escape. Eventually you will notice that your anxiety begins to calm.

It is important to stay in the situation long enough for your anxiety to significantly reduce, and to repeat the exercise regularly. Once you can face the same situation without experiencing much anxiety, you are ready to move on to the next step in your list.

Remember to use the breathing exercises and STOPP technique to help you out.

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Section 3

Creative Strategies

Art making, looking at art, creative writing and listening to music can all support us to relax.

If you are feeling anxious giving yourself some time to be creative can allow you the opportunity to focus on the 'here and now'. Making or looking at imagery can help calm our body down.

Follow the link to the Combat Stress 'Creative Blog' for further ideas and themes to inspire you:
<https://www.combatstress.org.uk/blog/get-creative-workout>

Remember, not every idea will work for everyone, they are designed to give you a place to start and help you find what works for you. So do try each method individually and give yourself time to adjust and practice before moving on to the next one.

Section 4

HOW HAVE YOUR FEELINGS CHANGED?

Have you noticed any changes in your mood?

- Are you noticing any differences?
- Has anything shifted?
- What helped?



Has your threat dial changed?

Go back to your threat dial again now you're finishing this resource and see how it may have changed.

Have you noticed it is sitting more centrally, or even dialled down?

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Don't forget to keep checking back in with your threat dial and ensure you're still applying everything you've learnt to keep your anxiety in check.

WHAT TO DO NEXT?

Before moving on to your next resource, it's important you take time to reflect on what you've learnt here and take time to implement your new methods. Give yourself time to adjust to your 'new normal' before moving on.

What to do if I'm still feeling anxious?

It might take some time to start reaping the rewards of your efforts. As with any new skill, keep at it and you will find it easier to use these skills when you need them. While these resources aim to give you some tools to manage your difficulties in-the-moment, for many of you this will only be the beginning. With this in mind, Combat Stress also provides specialist treatment programmes to help you tackle the past and take on the future. If you would like to know more, you will find the details of our 24-hour helpline below.

Is there someone I can contact if I need more help or information?

If you're a veteran and need to talk to someone, or you're a family member/carer worried about the mental health of a loved one who has served, please call our Helpline.

The Combat Stress 24-hour Helpline provides free confidential advice and support to veterans and their families. Don't struggle in silence. Call 0800 138 1619

Are there any other resources that may help me?

NHS Northumberland, Tyne and Wear online self-help materials:

www.cntw.nhs.uk/home/accessible-information/easy-read/self-help-guides/

Moodjuice - www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk/

Urgent help

If you require more urgent help, either yourself or a member of your family feel unsafe, please contact your GP or telephone 111.

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