

What is anxiety and how can we recognize when we're feeling anxious

Anxiety is our human response to a real or imagined threat, which affects how we feel, how we think, how we behave and how our bodies feel. Anxiety is not a sign of anything being wrong with you or of being weak. It's a sign that your strong, healthy brain is doing exactly what it's meant to do to protect you from danger. It's just that it's gone a little overboard, which has set off a chain reaction of nasty feelings in your body and a colourful array of doom and gloom thoughts, which has made you avoid things and lose touch with things that bring you pleasure.

Adrenaline and our bodies

There are very real reasons why your body feels the way it does when you're anxious. When there's nothing to fight or run away from, there's nothing to burn up the fight-flight-freeze fuel – adrenaline – that's rushing through your body. Adrenaline is a stress hormone whose job it is to get you up and moving, often for positive reasons, like excitement, meeting a deadline or running a race. This big boost of energy helps us to do our best. But adrenaline also rushes into our bodies when we're feeling anxious, worried or threatened, when there's no deadline to meet or race to run, so there's nowhere for it to go.

Here are some of the things you might feel when adrenaline builds up and why you might feel them when you're anxious:

Shallow and fast breath

Dizzy head

Hijacked brain

Body sweats

Heart beats faster

Jelly arms and legs

Need to pee . . . again

Sore tummy

Relaxation and stress-reduction techniques

In taking action to work through some of your anxiety, try out some of these tried-and-tested techniques and see which works best. The aim is to release built-up tension and adrenaline through physical activity – relaxation, play and physical touch – which will help to ground you, shift your fearful thoughts and improve your sense of control.

- *Dragon Fire Breath* – Link your fingers under your chin, inhale a big dragon breath through your nose and lift your elbows up to frame your face. Exhale, lifting your head up and opening your mouth wide to make a 'Hah' sound towards the sky like a dragon blowing fire. Lower the elbows back down to meet at the bottom by the end of the 'Hah' sound. This is a good energising technique which will help build your confidence.

- *Shaking on Purpose*— Jump up and down, scream or make noises and make your whole body shake. Try it with a grown up or a friend. Because being in ‘fight-flight-freeze’ mode blocks your natural expression of fear, ‘Shaking on Purpose’ helps you to let some of your feelings out in a safe way.
- *The 5-4-3-2-1 Game*— This is a great technique for anchoring you to the here and now, using your senses during panicky moments. Best practised when calm.
 1. Describe five things you see in the room.
 2. Name four things you can feel, e.g. ‘my feet on the floor’ or ‘the air in my nose’.
 3. Name three things you hear, e.g. ‘traffic outside’.
 4. Name two things you can smell, or two smells you like.
 5. Name one good thing about yourself.
- *Figure-8 Breathing* – Children often use this exercise on their own, quietly and privately wherever they are (even in class!). Imagine your index finger as a pencil drawing a figure 8 on your skin or using your big toe to draw a figure 8 on the ground. As you are drawing the first half of the figure 8, breathe in for three. When you get to the middle, hold your finger still for one. Then, for the second half of the figure 8, breathe out for three. When you get to the middle, hold for one again. Repeat three or four times.
- *Butterfly Hug*— Cross your arms in front of you and pat your shoulders, alternating right- and left-handed pats. Alternate gentle squeezes of each shoulder. Add on by visualising a safe place or silently repeating a word or phrase that represents security (e.g. ‘I’m safe’). Alternating between left and right reduces anxiety as it activates both sides of the brain. Comforting touch also releases oxytocin, which helps your body to calm down.
- *Heartbeat Exercise* – The key to using exercise to relieve anxiety is to work the body hard using rhythmic activity like running or jumping jacks. Time yourself doing jumping jacks for 30 seconds, then lie down and place your hand on your heart, relax, breathe deeply and feel your heartbeat slowing down.
- *Sensory Activity* – Engaging your senses is a great way to release anxious tension. When you feel anxious, do something as simple as pour liquid between containers over and over again. Have a try at making ‘Slime’ or ‘Glitter Jars’, or create a “soothing box” of toys (e.g. squishies, kaleidoscope, shaker) to help calm you down.