

PBS Helpline Resources

Managing anxiety

We know the situation with Covid-19 is provoking anxiety for a lot of people, particularly if you have additional needs or are caring for someone else who does. These hints and tips apply to Covid-19 or any other situation causing anxiety.

Anxiety can be crippling. It can freeze us. It taps into the oldest part of the brain, the survival brain, which is there to protect us. We can want to run (take flight), fight, or shut down and freeze. This overrides any logic – so trying to rationalise to someone who feels really anxious may not help!

If we try to power through, and get someone to keep going through something that makes them really anxious, then it confirms in their mind that “yes this is really scary” – so the anxiety can get worse every time.

3 top tips

1. Start small with whatever you're doing that might make you or someone else anxious, keep it achievable, and stop before you or they get anxious. That way, we gradually build confidence that we or they are safe and in control.
2. Think about what's going to make the effort worthwhile for the person. What do they enjoy, what do they like? We can build this in to the activity.
3. Anxiety management strategies. Find things that the person finds calming and help them learn them as tools to manage when they do feel anxious (with your support). It's best to practice these when we feel calm and ok, so they're familiar and easy to access as we get more anxious.

Techniques for managing anxiety 1: breathing

Each of us have different things that we find calming and that we find stressful. We can't assume that the breath is a safe place for everybody, but if it works for you it's fantastic. If you might use this with a member of your family or someone you're caring for, it's good for you to do it too so that you can feel how it works, and can practice it together.

There are many different breathing techniques; this is just one of them. In this technique, we make the out breath slightly longer. The out breath is associated with relaxation and letting go.

As we get anxious the breath can seem to come faster and tighter, it can involve a lot of tension up around the chest and shoulders. This is a way of letting go of some of that tension using the breath, which is constantly available, to help.

It's best to practice this when you feel calm and ok first, so that it becomes familiar. Then you can build up to using it when you feel tense.

Stage 1

- Start by bringing some attention to your breathing. Notice how long the breaths are now – not trying to change anything, just allowing the breath to move. If it helps, try placing a hand on the stomach. If we're anxious the breath comes up high in the chest, but a natural relaxed breath moves right down to the stomach
- Start counting the breath – for example, in (1, 2) out (1, 2) – just counting the natural length of the breath. (the count can be silent in your head, or you might count out loud to support someone)
- Gradually lengthen the outbreath so it's twice as long as the in-breath – for example, in (1, 2) out (1, 2, 3, 4)

These techniques send a message to your parasympathetic nervous system that you are safe.

Stage 2

- Bring to mind an occasion where you felt just a little bit anxious. Notice what happens to your breath as you feel the anxiety. Notice where you feel the breath.
- Notice how long the breaths are now – not trying to change anything, just allowing the breath to move. If it helps, try placing a hand on the stomach
- Start counting the breath – for example, in (1, 2) out (1, 2) – just counting the natural length of the breath. (the count can be silent in your head, or you might count out loud to support someone)
- Gradually lengthen the outbreath so it's twice as long as the in-breath – for example, in (1, 2) out (1, 2, 3, 4)

Always start with the natural length of the breath. If we try to make it too long, that can feel more stressful! As it becomes familiar, you can begin to use it on the spot, in real time.

Techniques for managing anxiety 2: soles of the feet

Here is another technique that might work for you. If you might use this with a member of your family or someone you're caring for, it's good for you to do it too so that you can feel how it works, and can practice it together.

Starting at a time when you are already calm and feel ok:

Stage 1

- Find somewhere to sit for a couple of minutes, and make sure your feet are flat on the floor. Give yourself a moment to settle in
- Remember a time when you felt happy. Let the memory come back, remembering what you could see, hear, smell, how the body feels – let it come alive. Sit with the memory for a moment
- Gather up all your attention, and send it down into the soles of your feet. Notice where the foot is in contact with the floor, see what you can feel against your toes, notice what sensations (heat, cold, pressure, tingling, numbness) are there along the sole of the foot, the arch, the heel... Then after a moment, let go of any effort. Notice how you feel.

You will probably notice that there has been a shift, from where the attention was with the happy memory, to where the attention is now. That's a good place to start – it shows how possible it is to move the attention.

Stage 2

- As before, find somewhere to sit for a couple of minutes, and make sure your feet are flat on the floor. Give yourself a moment to settle in
- Remember a time when you felt a little bit annoyed, or anxious. Let the memory come back, remembering what you could see, hear, smell, how the body feels – let it come alive. Sit with the memory for a moment
- Gather up all your attention, and send it down into the soles of your feet. Notice where the foot is in contact with the floor, see what you can feel against your toes, notice what sensations (heat, cold, pressure, tingling, numbness) are there along the sole of the foot, the arch, the heel... Then after a moment, let go of any effort. Notice how you feel

That move of attention can create a shift in our experience, moving away from the anxiety to a more grounded experience. It's good to practice this regularly, and then if we do begin to get anxious we can use the technique in real time (or support someone else to use it).