

Calm cards



Calm Cards

was created by young people on a leadership project at Potential Plus UK. We are young people who are neurodivergent with high learning potential. We know what it is like to be misunderstood and to feel judged and isolated and we know how hard it can be to find appropriate support to manage anxiety, which lots of us experience.

We worked together to think about our experiences of anxiety and the tools and techniques we find helpful. We developed our “calm cards” to share the tools we use with other young people, and with people who support them.

Thankyou to National Lottery Community Fund Awards for All who supported us with our programme.

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal response to potentially dangerous situations. Everyone experiences anxiety in one way or another. We need it to survive. It is our useful friend (mostly!)

When we sense danger, part of our brain (the amygdala) responds, getting us ready to fight, run away, freeze, or hide. It does this super fast. That's exactly what we need if we are confronted by a serious danger like a bear coming to eat us! We need to react fast and instinctively. There is nothing physically wrong with you when you experience anxiety symptoms like your heart racing or feeling sweaty, or feeling frozen and unable to move or speak. All of these are your amygdala getting you ready to manage a danger.

Meanwhile another part of our brain, (the prefrontal cortex) tries to check the facts and assess the threat level, before reducing the level of alarm if the amygdala is over reacting. The prefrontal cortex is the part of the brain involved in high level cognitive processes such as planning, decision making, thinking through consequences, regulating emotions. It works relatively slower and more carefully than the amygdala.

Usually the two parts communicate well and between them they work out what to do in the face of a threat. But sometimes the communication between these two parts of the brain gets out of balance.

The problem with anxiety comes when:

- our anxiety friend gets overexcited about things that are not really a danger - the amygdala decides there is a life threatening threat when really we just have to walk into a busy room or do an exam

OR

- we get "stuck" in anxiety mode all the time, feeling constantly under threat or finding it difficult to recover from emotionally charged events

Why some people experience problematic anxiety

There are some factors that sometimes lead to problematic anxiety. For example:

- Experiencing traumatic and overwhelming events
- Repeated exposure to frightening or stressful information
- Experiencing discrimination or bullying (particularly when systemic and persistent)
- Experiencing lack of control, powerlessness
- Being under constant stress
- Genetic or physical differences in the way your brain works - which can make you more sensitive to anxiety triggers or less able to emotionally regulate.

Any of these can influence the communication between your amygdala and prefrontal cortex.

Why lots of neurodivergent people with high learning potential experience problematic anxiety

We made this pack because we noticed that many of our neurodivergent peers with high learning potential experience problematic anxiety. We thought about why that is.

These are some of the factors we noticed:

- we make connections and are interested in societal events when we are very young
- many of us have a heightened sense of justice and are upset by world events other young people might not even notice
- if we have highly imaginative thinking it is hard not to think about "what ifs"
- many of us have emotional, sensory and psychomotor "intensities" or "sensitivities"
- any of these make it more likely to get stuck thinking about worrying things: tendency to ruminate, hyperfocus, have intense and perseverant interests, or focus on detail.
- boredom and lack of challenge leave us time to get stuck in looping negative thoughts
- constant stress of being in environments that are not suited to our needs, with lack of adjustments for sensory, social and communication, attention or memory differences
- high rates of bullying and discrimination
- differences in our "executive functioning" (planning and organisation skills)
- other neurological differences which can involve feeling out of control (eg epilepsy, tics, compulsions)

The good news is that brains are very flexible and there is a lot you can do to improve the way you manage anxiety!

What you can do about it

Don't

- Don't feel ashamed...we ALL have an anxiety friend who likes to behave like a monster sometimes
- Don't think those monster behaviours will just stop if you ignore them
- Don't believe the monster brain tricks..... it is usually untrue that there is an emergency!
- Don't encourage your anxiety monster by avoiding all risks, challenges, discomforts or (manageable) stressors
- Don't believe you have to manage this alone

Do

- Do use this pack to build up a toolkit of techniques for managing your anxiety better
- Do practice your strategies so you get confident and prove to yourself that you can stop your anxiety friend getting dysregulated
- Do ask for adjustments to eliminate or reduce unmanageable stressors
- Do find support to feel positive about yourself, and allies to help you when you are dysregulated

Ten Terrific Techniques for your anxiety toolkit



1. Understanding your anxiety better

2. Using self calming tools to stay regulated

3. Structuring your days around what will keep you calm and stimulated

4. Sifting thoughts: working out what needs attention and what can be ignored

5. Connecting with trusted people and getting support

6. Distracting yourself from anxiety and refocusing

7. Moving your body!

8. Challenging negative thoughts

9. Breaking things down into smaller problems or mini goals

10. Building resilience through experimentation and risk taking

Understanding Your Anxiety

Technique 1 involves getting to know your anxiety better:

- what it feels like when your anxiety is in “monster” mode
- what pushes it to that point
- what helps keep it calm

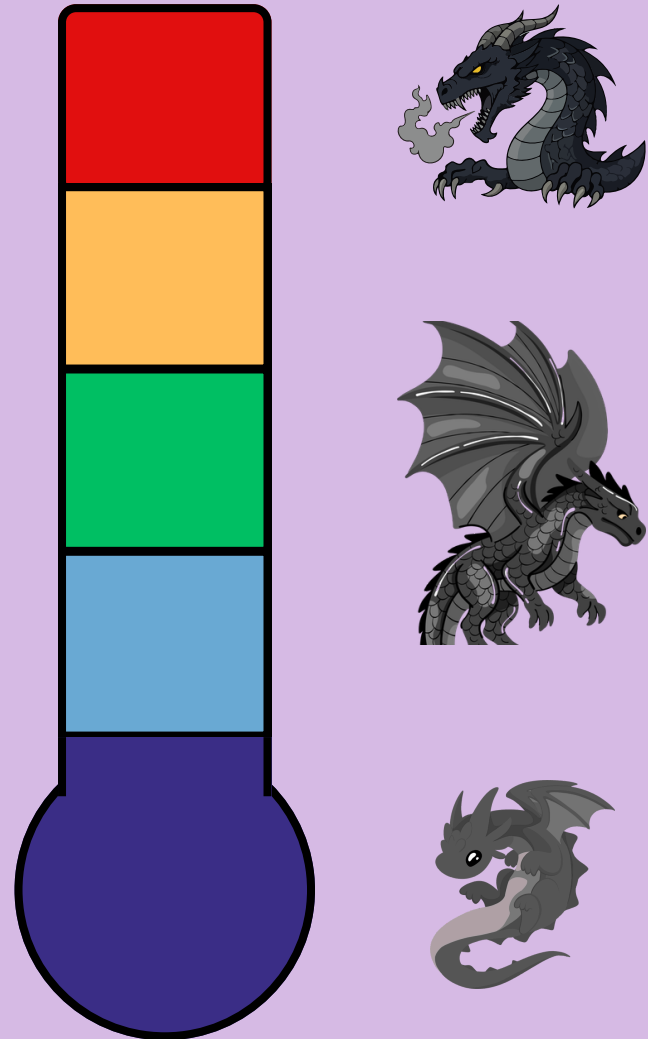
Make an 'Anxiety Friend'

- Personify your anxiety with a name, appearance, or both
- Write notes, draw, make a model or imagine the characteristics of your anxiety:
 - What does your anxiety look like when it is calm, friendly and ready for action?
 - What does it look like when it is upset or overactive and in "monster" mode
- In later techniques you can think about your anxiety friend in its different friend or monster modes so you can more easily work out what is happening, and find ways to get your anxiety back into "friend" mode



Making an Anxiety Thermometer

- Create your own thermometer drawing or diagram which shows your behaviours and feelings when your anxiety is in its different modes:
 - Fight/flight monster mode (top)
 - Comfort zone - friendly mode (middle)
 - Freeze/fawn monster mode (bottom)
- This will help you identify when you are feeling anxious or getting close to anxiety responses



Keep a reflection diary



Keep a reflection diary for two weeks to notice what provokes anxiety responses. At the end of each day think about where you were in the thermometer during the day. What was happening to cause your different anxiety "temperatures"?

Think about your emotions a bit more. When you are in rage are you really angry, or are you in "fight"? When you are procrastinating are you really not wanting to do something or are you in "flight" or "fawn"?

If you find it hard to recognise when you are anxious try watching a movie that you know has points of threat. Notice and note down what your body physically feels like at those points of threat

Notice when you seem to have got focused on something that later feels really irrational "I simply cannot go out in those shoes!" What was going on before and around this point. What were you REALLY worried about or avoiding?

Sensory Note Taking



Some of us are very sensitive to sensory stimulation. Sometimes we are tipped into anxiety because we are physically uncomfortable or stressed. We are a bit like a sponge. We can absorb a certain amount of discomfort but then our “sensory sponge” gets full and we are tipped into anxiety responses.

Try this activity to get a bit more aware of what makes you uncomfortable:

- Think about different sensory experiences (one sense at a time).
- Try lots of different stimuli and keep notes of your responses. How does each stimuli make you feel? What physical responses happen in your body as you try different stimuli? Are some senses more sensitive than others?

Try this will all five key senses: touch, taste, sight, sound, smell. But also think about balance, your response to different temperatures, and how you feel when there is pressure on your body or you are in confined versus open spaces.

Journey Map

Touchpoints	PE Class	Chemistry class	Break times	Exams	Events (sports day/discos etc)
What I am expected to do	Get changed in changing rooms. Physical activity with lots of unpredictable movement	Participate in class discussions. Do my own projects	Eat in a really noisy space. Queue with people pushing. Try to interact with other kids	Concentrate and answer set questions for 1hrs	Participate in large group activities
How I feel					
Pain Points	literally makes me cry/painful, overloading. Teacher says I am overreacting	Doing experiments-I get really worried the equipment might blow up	I get so stressed I have a meltdown and feel ashamed. I miss lunch and am hungry and angry. i am left out and feel lonely	I get distracted and run out of time.	I feel sick and ill and often don't end up going. Or I feel lonely and useless
Gain Points	When we do sports like table tennis that are just with one person and noone bashes in to me	Love it. The teacher gives me different research projects. I have a sixth former buddy	When I am allowed to eat with my friend in the secretary's office. It is lovely	I like the structure. I know exactly what is expected of me	None. They are truly awful. I feel ashamed for weeks after
Solutions	Getting changed at home. Only doing 1:1 sports. Teacher doing some training about sensory needs	Debriefs after experiments to help me reflect on how well they went. Keeping records of what I enjoyed to prove the "risk" was worth it-and that nothing bad happened	Formalise the arrangement to eat in a quiet space. Set up a board game lunch group so I have something I like to do with small groups of people. Set up a break time buddy so I have someone to talk to	Negotiate for extra time or taking exams in a quieter space.	Negotiate to miss them until I can work on smaller goals like being comfortable in break times first. Then build up to going with a buddy I trust

Use a journey map to think deeply about situations that make you worry. This example is about someone's experience of school. They thought about different parts of their school day. They thought about what was expected of them, how each part made them feel and why. Thinking deeply like this means you can play solutions that really might work

Learn about adjustments you can ask for

Challenging anxiety and learning how to stay regulated is great, but sometimes things that push you into anxiety mode are just too stressful to manage. You have a right to ask for reasonable adjustments to reduce stressors that are unmanageable. Here are some common adjustments HLP and neurodivergent people ask for:

- Sensory adjustments (eg using noise cancelling headphones)
- Adjustments for attention differences (eg extra time or breaks in exams)
- Assistive tech and computer programmes for “executive function” differences or processing and attention differences
- Practical support from a teaching assistant, personal assistant or buddy
- Flexibility in timetabling and expectations
- Social action opportunities to channel concerns about justice and worrying world events
- Appropriate challenge so that you can stay mentally busy and stimulated
- Opportunities to take risks and make mistakes

Using Self-Calming Tools

Technique 2 involves learning tools which help you stay calm and regulated to prevent spikes in anxiety.

Everyone's experience is different, so try out lots of different techniques!

Experiment with sensory release tools

Use the sensory note taking activity (technique 1) to work out what fills your sensory "sponge" and then experiment with what releases it. Try these:

- Music, shouting, singing
- Darkness and silence
- Physical exercise, swinging, spinning, rocking, skipping, dancing
- Being alone
- Weighted blanket, particular textures, firm hugs
- Fidget toys, stress balls, blu tac etc

Once you work out what helps sooth you, factor some of these activities into each day, and definitely after sensory stressful events



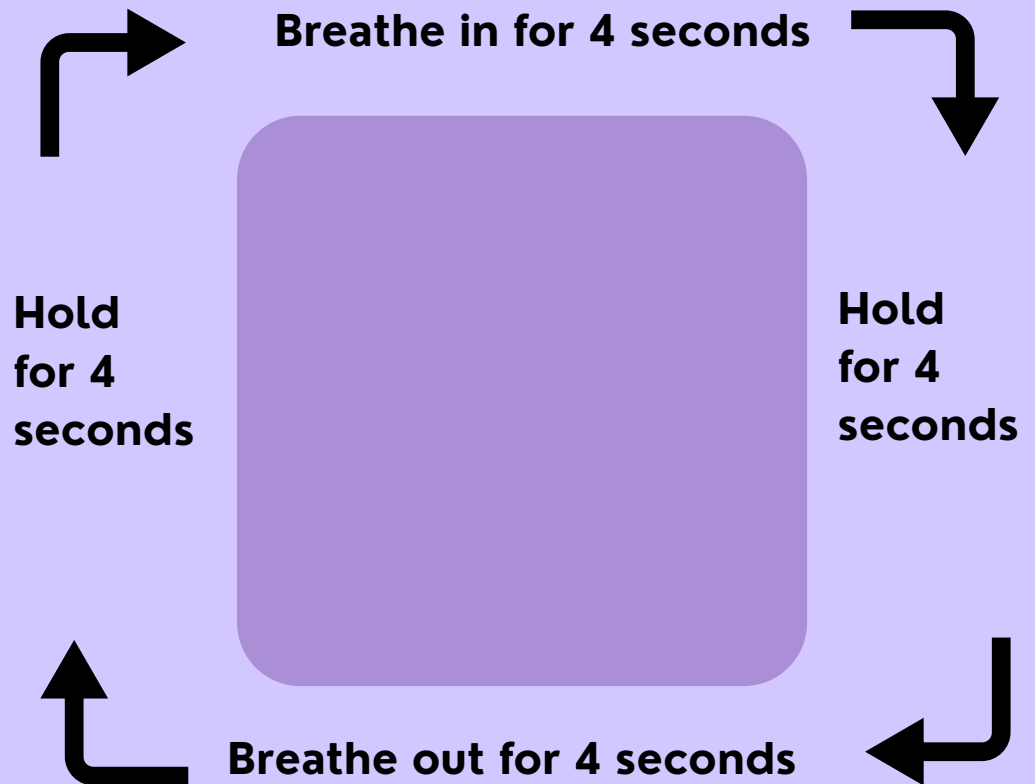
Try breathing techniques

Regulated breathing can help reduce stress and calm you down

Here is one to try.

You can find lots of others on the internet. Different people find different breathing techniques helpful

Square Breathing



Visualisation



Imagine a place you know - somewhere you find calm and peaceful. Focus on your memories of the place: the sounds, smells, sights and events that you enjoy there

Sit quietly thinking about your memories. Close your eyes if you want to but only if that makes you feel more comfortable

Think about how the place makes your body feel. Think about the most comfortable parts of your body when you are in that place. Enjoy the memories of the sensations in your body

Structuring your days around things that keep you calm and stimulated

Technique 3 involves thinking about structure in your day. Having structure and balance in your days makes a big difference to your mental health.

People often talk about getting enough sleep, healthy food and enough water. These are all essential, even when it is annoying to be reminded!

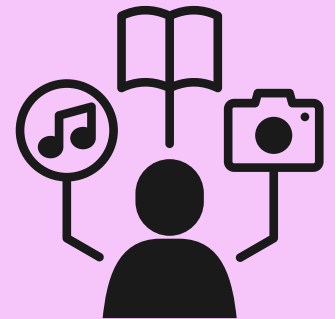
But there are other things you can structure into your day as well, which will help prevent anxiety.....

Planning balance into your days

If you are a deep thinker, or someone with very strong areas of interest, or often bored and under challenged, you probably sometimes find yourselves spiralling into problematic thinking or getting fixed into one activity and thought pattern.

Try planning each day to be more balanced. Include at least a bit of ALL of these, even if they don't sound very appealing!

- Sleep, regular healthy food, and lots of water
- Physical exercise
- Cognitive challenge: something you find genuinely difficult to do or hard to understand (even if that makes you feel a bit uncomfortable)
- Creative or imaginative activity
- Social activity (in a form you enjoy)
- Vocational activity: something towards your long-term ambitions



Make a pie chart plan

Try spending 10 minutes at the start of each day making a pie chart of how much time you will spend on different activities (use the categories on the previous slide to plan in balanced activities).

After a couple of weeks look back and notice which categories were easier to fill and which you didn't do much of.

Challenge yourself to get a bit more balanced over time.



Sifting thoughts

When we are anxious we can sometimes get stuck thinking about all the many things that are worrying us. That is overwhelming.

Technique 4 introduces tools for sifting your thoughts to work out what needs attention and what can be ignored.

Worry Tree

Try a worry tree to think through which worries need your attention now, which can wait, and where you need help.

Notice the worry. Does it seem important?

Is it hypothetical or a practical worry?

Hypothetical

Is it highly likely to happen?

No



Use other tools to distract, refocus attention and self calm

Yes



Does it need immediate attention?

Yes



Take action.
Ask a trusted person for help if you need it

Yes



Use other problem solving tools to make a plan of action.
What, when, how?

No

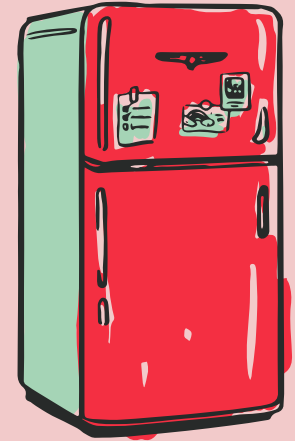


No



Use other tools to distract, refocus attention and self calm

The fridge!



Feeling overwhelmed with lots of ideas crowding your head: things to do, things to worry about?

- try creating a "fridge". This could be a model fridge or a notes page on your computer called "fridge"
- As you have ideas, write them down and store them in your fridge
- Once a week (and not more often!) go back and look at them and discard the ones that no longer seem important. Schedule in time to think about or do the things that still seem important
- You will be surprised by how many of your ideas no longer seem worrying or urgent once you have left them cooling off for a while

Does it really matter test

Use your critical thinking skills.

Have some key questions ready to ask yourself when a worry starts looping in your head. This can help your brain switch out of anxiety mode. Here are a couple of questions to try...but you can make up your own too:

- Will this issue have any impact on my future self or the future world in 5 years time?
- What societal idea or structure planted this thought in me? Do I even respect that societal structure?



Risk assessment



Use a risk assessment to think through which of your concerns need your attention:

List the things you are worried about

For each worry think:

- How likely is it to happen? Score it 1-5
- If it did happen how serious would the impact be? Score it 1-5

Multiply the scores together

- Scores 1-3 are green and very low risk. Use other tools to distract and refocus
- Scores 4-8 are yellow. Schedule an action at a reasonable time
- Scores 10-16 are orange. They need attention soon to reduce the likelihood of them happening, or their impact if they do happen
- Scores 20 plus are red. They need attention now and you should ask for help from a trusted person if you are not sure what to do to reduce the risk

Connecting with trusted people and getting support

Don't think you have to manage anxiety alone. Everybody needs help sometimes. It's an important and positive thing to ask for help when we need it.

Technique 5 gives you some tips on how to build up support networks which will help you avoid anxiety spikes, or deal with them when they happen

Connecting with other people who share your experiences

Other high learning potential or neurodivergent young people are likely to share some of your experiences. Connecting with people with shared experiences can help you feel more positive about yourself, you can support each other by sharing ideas and solutions for issues you are experiencing



- connect with other young people through Potential Plus UK
- remember that if you are neurodivergent your parents or wider families members might well be too. They might have some interesting experiences and ideas to share
- ask your school if they can help you set up a neurodiversity pride group

Socialising in a way you enjoy

Connecting and collaborating with other people is a very helpful way of reducing anxiety or distracting yourself from worries. Remember technique 3, a balanced day includes some social activity. You don't have to socialise in stereotypical ways like parties or chatting with friends. It's just about making human connection - find something that works for you.

Socialising can include:

- making a connection with someone who shares a special interest - talking or working together on your interest
- playing board games, card games
- doing collaborative activities of any kind
- eating a meal with other people
- online chats or gaming that involves collaboration (although try to find opportunities for face to face interaction as well)



Telling your trusted people what helps

Find trusted adults to talk to. This could be your parents, someone at school, an adult you know through one of your out of school activities. Having even just one person you can talk to about things that are worrying you can really help.



- Tell your trusted people what behaviours might indicate you are anxious. Tell them about your "thermometer" and what they can do to help remind you when your anxiety monster is playing tricks on you
- Ask them to learn some of your anxiety techniques so they can guide you to use them to get back into your comfort zone
- Ask for their help to negotiate adjustments at school
- Ask them to help you make action plans for worries that feel overwhelming

Team of two!



Sometimes getting things done when you are anxious is hard. It can help to team up with someone for mutual support. But sometimes it's annoying or even more anxiety provoking if the support offered doesn't suit us. Use this tool to get clear with each other about what will help

Step 1. Each person says:

- 1) How they think they can help the other person
- 2) How they think the other person can help them

Remember to pick requests that are clear and doable!

Step 2. Talk about each other's requests. Decide what you can agree to:

- a) The request is easy to agree to. I will do as you ask
- b) I could do that if you could help me with this issue of mine...
- c) I can't agree to that, but this is my reason

Record what you agreed so everyone is clear

Distracting yourself and refocusing

Anxiety can fill our thoughts and make it difficult to focus on anything else. Our anxiety “monster” can convince us that we must stay alert to our worries and not get on with anything else. It’s a lie!

And for some of us with high learning potential, anxiety creeps in whenever we are bored and under stimulated - which can be a lot of the time!

Technique 6 is about finding ways to distract ourselves from our anxious thoughts and refocus on more productive thoughts and actions.

Cognitive Challenge

Remember technique 3: a balanced day should include cognitive challenge

- If you don't get that from your school or college day ask your trusted adults to help you advocate for more challenge. Boredom is not something you should have to endure all the time and it feeds anxiety
- Remember you can find challenge in other places too. Challenge yourself to do something difficult or confusing to exercise your brain, even if that feels a bit weird because you aren't used to it

Ideas for cognitive challenges include:

- Trying extension questions in school assignments
- Working through puzzle books
- Learning a language or musical instrument
- Solving a computer coding challenge
- Playing difficult board games
- Doing online courses in areas of interest
- Linking up with subject experts in your areas of interest



Creative Activity

Remember technique 3 - a balanced day should include some creative activity. Creative activity isn't just about arts and crafts, there are lots of other options for being creative and using your imagination!

Ideas for creative activities include:

- Drawing, painting, collage, or other types of art
- Woodwork, pottery or other types of craft
- Inventing and building structures and machines
- Song writing or improvising on an instrument
- Creative writing - stories, poems, etc
- Photography
- Designing a new computer app or system
- Designing online worlds
- Redesigning your bedroom
- Designing a new way to solve a problem in your everyday life



Getting out in nature



Many people find connecting with nature a very good distraction from anxious thoughts. But some of us don't find a walk in the park very interesting. And sometimes anxiety can make us feel worried about being in natural spaces, or feel like just staying at home.

If you need a boost or a focus to get you out the house, try some of these:

- Go for a walk in a wooded area and see how many different birds or trees you can photograph. You can look them up at home and see what you can identify
- Try a nature scavenger hunt - put together a list of things to try and find on a walk
- Make a nature journal: take a journal and pencils with you to notice and draw what you see
- Find a community garden to visit regularly
- Go for a cycle ride in a green space

Move your body!

Regular exercise can help you stay emotionally regulated. Remember a balanced day will always include some physical exercise.

And physical movement can also be a great thing to manage points when you are stuck in anxiety responses

Technique 7 gives you some ideas for brining physical exercise into your day

Exercise

Exercise takes different forms for different people. Experiment with lots of different types of exercise until you find something that makes you feel good. Do some research about exercise or sport clubs in your area to get ideas



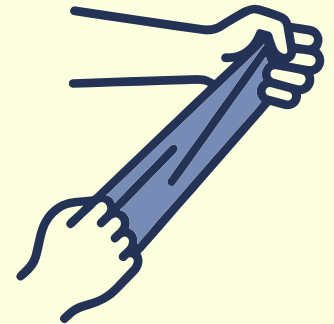
Ideas for exercise activities include:

- Tai Chi, yoga, pilates
- Dancing
- Running, walking, skipping
- Swimming
- Team games like football, netball, cricket
- Tennis or badminton
- Gymnastics or trampolining
- Going to the gym
- Climbing
- Rollerskating or ice skating

Physical ways to get out of "freeze"

If you find it hard to get started or sometimes get stuck in avoiding tasks, try these before you start:

- Doing star jumps, running on the spot, skipping, dancing
- Playing energetic card games like "speed"
- Clasping your fingers together and pulling your hands away from each other, or pulling on a stretch band



If you find it hard to keep going on tasks or find your mind wandering into worrying thoughts, try these:

- Use a standing desk, or a wobble cushion on your chair
- Use fidget toys or play with blu tac
- Play loud music and dance while working - really - this works great for some people even if your teachers tell you it won't!
- Skipping while repeating positive statements

Challenging Negative Thoughts

Our anxiety “monster” can fill us with negative ideas about ourselves that damage our self esteem, or with looping thoughts that keep us feeling worried or miserable.

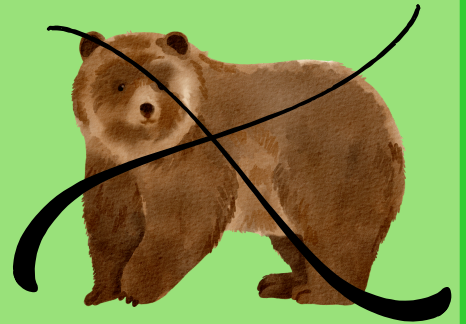
Technique 8 introduces tools to challenge negative thinking.

Talk back to your anxiety "monster"

Sometimes your anxiety "monster" will persuade you that a worry you have is an emergency.

Have mantras ready to repeat back to your brain:

"there is no emergency, there is no bear, there is no fire"



If you are looped into a particular negative thought pattern reflect on who is talking: is this the thinking part of your brain talking or your anxiety "monster"? Talk back - say out loud "you don't have me fooled, I know this is a brain trick!"

Try humour - ask your brain - "well what's the worst that's going to happen?" and have ready some foolish responses to suggest "my teacher is going to run screaming down the street with a donut on her head if I do that".

Keep a pride and positivity journal

At the end of each day stop and reflect on:

I felt proud of myself today when I.....

The best three things about today were.....

The best attribute I showed today was.....

I am looking forward to.....



Concentrate on pride for things that you find challenging. For example don't bother recording if you got a 9 on an exam if that is what you always get without really making a effort. Concentrate in pride for taking a new risk, or trying something you were worried about, or achieving something that no one else really notices, or challenging a negative thought.

Read back through your journal every few weeks and notice positive patterns or progress you have made

Positive self talk



Have positive phrases ready to repeat in your mind when you are thinking negatively. This tool seems ridiculously simple, but it actually works for lots of people. It can help to neutralise negative thoughts if you keep practising it!

Here are some examples:

- "everything is terrible" **becomes** "I am rightfully sad, but I know that this feeling will pass"
- "I'm such a idiot I always muck up" **becomes** "It was painful to fail, but I have evidence that I sometimes get things right"
- "I can't do this, I'm useless" **becomes** "I can do this. I have evidence because I've done it before"
- "Everyone knows what an imposter I am" **becomes** "I have lots to offer such as....(list)"
- "I feel completely alone and miserable at this party" **becomes** "I might feel alone at the moment but I know there are people who care about me elsewhere"

What would a friend say?

Examine the negative thought about yourself.
Ask yourself:



- Would a friend say or think this about me?
- Would I say or think this about a friend?
- What would a friend say about me instead?
- What would I say to a friend if they thought this about themselves?

Breaking things down into smaller problems and mini goals

When we are worried about a problem it can sometimes feel unsolveable or too overwhelming or terrifying to even try.

And for many of us who are neurodivergent or with high learning potential there can be other things getting in the way of us tackling goals or problem solving, such as attention or executive function differences.

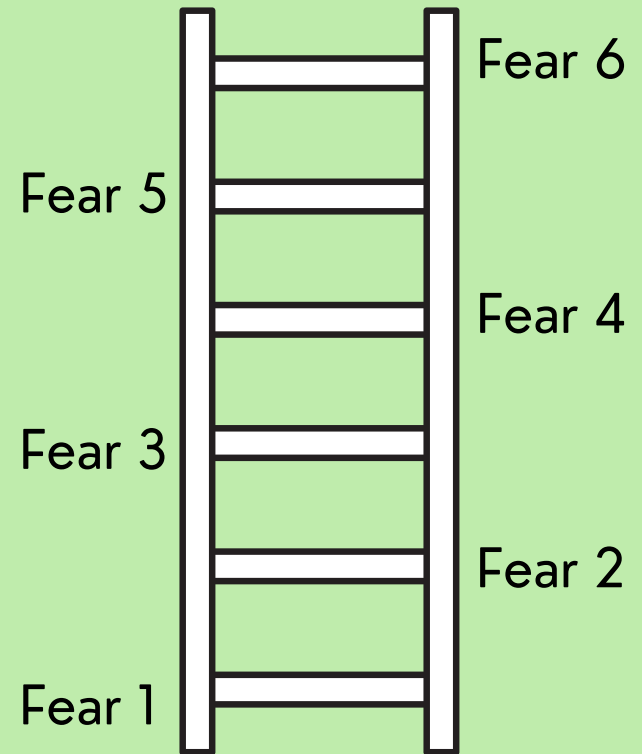
Technique 9 introduces tools to break problems or goals down into more manageable chunks

Anxiety ladders

Rank the fears, compulsions or things you are avoiding in order of how scary they are or how difficult you think they would be to address.

Start with the lowest level fear so you can build on your successes. Only move on to the next one when the first level fear feels very manageable.

Don't expect progress to be straightforward. You might think you have cracked a fear and then find it hard again later, particularly at times of stress. That's OK, just drop back down again to a lower level and build your confidence up again gradually



Visual journey map

- Think about the big goal you are trying to achieve. Draw it on a large piece of paper
- Draw a windy road towards that goal
- Think about smaller steps you can take towards your goal. Draw them on your road, a bit like bus stops or pit stops. For each “bus stop” think how long it will take to get there, what barriers might get in your way or slow you down, what resources or support would help you get past those barriers



Find templates for journey mapping on Canva (lots are free to use)

[Search roadmap templates – Canva](#)

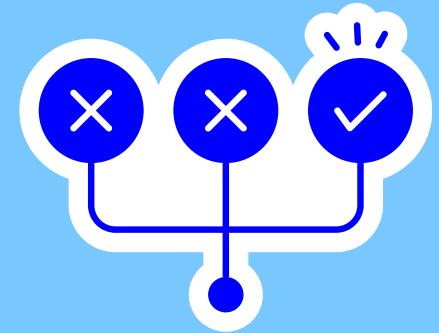
Building resilience through experimentation and risk taking

Sometimes anxiety can stop us trying new things and convince us that we won't be able to achieve our goals, so we don't even start, or we give up as soon as something goes wrong. We can get more resilient by practising experimentation and risk taking.

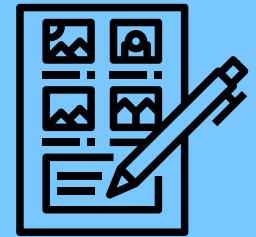
Technique 10 introduces some tools for this. It's not about taking risks for the sake of it. And it's not about ignoring your anxiety. Be honest about your fears and experiment with taking small risks to build your confidence.

Choosing manageable risks to experiment with, and embrace mistakes

- Use the risk assessment tool from technique 4 or the risk ladder tool from technique 9 to choose some small risks to try first
- Use the journey mapping tool from technique 9 to plan small experimental steps towards a big goal
- Reflect on what happens with your experiments. Recognise that mistakes will happen - think about what you learn from things going wrong. And try another approach



Story strips and role play



Draw a story strip of the situation you are feeling anxious about

- Imagine all the things that will happen if the situation goes well. Draw them like a comic.
- Make sure you draw right through to the successful completion of the situation. Think about how you will feel at that moment of success and make sure you include a picture showing that feeling!
- When you think of things that might go wrong, just let them pass and don't include them in the drawing

Role play the comic with a friend to practice how you want it to go. Before the real event, every time you feel worried, refocus on the imagined feeling of victory.

In real life it might not go exactly to plan, but you will be less anxious if you are anticipating success, and so less likely to get tripped up by your anxiety "monster"