

Coping with Anxiety/Stress: Tips to Calm the Nervous System

What happens? The nervous system goes on alert as a reaction to perceived threat or excessive/chronic stress. This can trigger a cascade of stress hormones that produce physiological changes such as heart pounding, quickening of breath, tensing of muscles, etc. This combination of reactions to stress is known as the “fight-or-flight” response and it has evolved as a survival mechanism. Unfortunately, the body can also overreact and become activated to stressors that are not life-threatening, such as work/exam pressure, family difficulties, traffic jams etc. However, while such life stressors are not life-threatening, the body reacts as though they are. Over time, this can cause anxiety, fear and/or depression.

There is a need to dampen down your reactions if this happens in order to avoid the nervous system becoming activated to the extent that it takes you outside your “Window of Tolerance” (in which feelings and reactions are tolerable, we can think and feel simultaneously, our reactions adapt to fit the situation). Should we be taken outside our Window of Tolerance, it can lead to **hyperarousal** (emotional overwhelm, panic, hypervigilance, defensiveness, feeling unsafe, reactive, angry, racing thoughts) or **hypoarousal** (numb, “dead”, passive, no feelings, no energy, can’t think, disconnected, shut down, “not there”, ashamed, can’t say No).

There are 4 basic steps which can help calm our nervous system. They are as follows:

- Slow breathing
- Still body
- Safe thoughts
- Stable energy

Slow breathing is one of the most effective ways of lowering adrenalin.

- Breath in CALM
- Breath out FEAR

Still your body and stay where you are. Staying still gives empowerment. Tension leaves the body when you allow it to go slack and loose. Relax. Close your eyes and go absolutely still.

Safe thoughts - Try to stay with what is happening in the present moment. Be present in the now. Replace negative thoughts with positive thoughts.

Stable energy - Ground and centre yourself by placing your feet firmly on the ground and imagining strong roots growing out of your feet, going deep, deep down into the ground. Feel them anchoring you. Feel your feet solid on the ground, and feel yourself becoming grounded. Tell yourself you can handle this. Tell yourself “I can be calm”, “I can be peaceful”, “I can be at ease”. Listen to calming music.

