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5 ways to stop an anxiety spiral

Anxiety can make you feel out of control of your thoughts. Try these strategies that can help keep moments of anxiety from becoming spirals.

By [Mayo Clinic Staff](#)

Anxious moments happen to everyone. But they don't have to take over. Having strategies to calm yourself down and re-center can make all the difference, whether you're dealing with an anxiety disorder or an extra-stressful time in life.

Need some help finding ways to bring your anxiety level down? Dayna Y. Jondal, M.A., NBC-HWC, a resiliency specialist at Mayo Clinic Healthy Living Program, has strategies that can work. Experiment with some of these strategies and find out which ones work best for you.

The first step: Recognize how your mind and body react when you're feeling anxious.

"Anxiety is a reaction designed to protect you from threats. It can make you more alert and focused. But when you're anxious, decisions will often be limited to 'fight-flight-freeze' reactions. Your vision narrows and you lose access to the more creative parts of your brain. In addition, your breathing might become shallow," says Jondal.

What can you do when you start to feel anxious? Jondal has a few suggestions based on research to calm anxiety and on her experience working as a resiliency specialist.

- Breathe from your belly.** "When you're anxious, you'll tend to breathe in a shallow way, in your chest instead of your belly." Jondal recommends placing one hand on your heart and the other on your belly, noticing the rise and fall of each. If you're feeling the breath more in your chest, try to direct your breathing downward, filling up your belly and then letting it fall again.

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2. **Move your body.** Exercise can lower anxiety in the moment. And in the long term, exercise has a positive impact on mood. And any kind of movement can help. "When you're in fight-or-flight mode, moving your body can make a big difference. Simple movement like walking or doing deep knee bends, or any form of exercise that's comfortable for you. It can help flush stress chemicals out of your body."
3. **Turn up the music.** Research shows that even a short session of focusing on calming music can lower anxiety and improve your mood. Build yourself a calm playlist. Then, when anxiety pops up, try five minutes of sitting still or walking while listening.
4. **Remind yourself: This is temporary.** Fighting the way you feel when you're anxious can actually create more anxiety. "Try to witness how you're feeling without judgment, and remind yourself these feelings won't last forever. You're riding the wave," says Jondal. Knowing your symptoms of anxiety can make them less threatening. Plus, you'll remember all of the times you've survived feeling anxious before.
5. **Be self-compassionate.** If your response when you get anxious is "Why can't I get over this?" try being kinder to yourself. "Remember, you are not your thoughts. Think of your thoughts as distress signals from your brain. We all have negative thoughts sometimes. But these thoughts don't have to lead to action, or define who you are. Be compassionate. Tell yourself the thing that you wish someone would say to you in that moment," says Jondal.

Finding what strategies work for you in anxious moments can take time and experimentation. So jump in and try new things. You'll learn about yourself in the process.

What to do when the moment of anxiety ends

Learning to calm your anxiety in the moment is crucial. But making those anxiety spirals less frequent means you need to work on it in the moments when you're not feeling anxious. That's when your brain can be more creative and open to change, because it's not in fight-or-flight mode.

For those times, Jondal has more advice:

- **Keep track of what triggers you.** If you're anxious often, it can be helpful to keep a journal and look for patterns. "Looking at the possible root causes can help you resolve chronic feelings of anxiety. Are you triggered by particular places, people or situations? Your body might be sending you a message about some aspect of your life that's out of balance," says Jondal.
- **Keep track of what works for you.** "Everyone is unique. Take time to identify what makes you feel safe, and proactively bring more of this into your life. Your unique solutions will always trump generic advice about how to deal with anxiety."
- **Don't be afraid to seek help.** "Therapy and coaching can really help with the mindset that supports an empowering and optimistic view of who you are and what life can look like for you."

Not sure whether you have an anxiety disorder, or are just anxious? Over one-third of U.S. adults deal with an anxiety disorder at some point in their lives. And they're even more common in women and people with chronic pain or other health conditions.

If you feel excessively worried most days for at least 6 months, or anxiety is interfering significantly with your life, it's something to bring up at your next appointment with a licensed health care provider. You can get information from your doctor on therapy, medication or other strategies that can help to manage your anxiety level.



Dec. 12, 2019

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