

# Exercises for Leading Through Anxiety

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# Move Through Anxiety and Get Work Done

## Practice putting your worries aside and getting back to work

1. Pick a task on your to-do list that you just don't want to do. (You know there's at least one!)
2. Imagine how you will feel after the task is done: Will you be less anxious? Relieved?
3. Make it into a statement: "I don't want to \_\_\_\_\_. But if I make progress on it, then \_\_\_\_\_."
4. Give this a try with each task you're avoiding today.

This exercise, created by the time management coach Elizabeth Grace Saunders, can help you move forward by looking beyond the task itself and to the results. A personally meaningful reason to just get the task done could include simply lifting a load off of your shoulders so it's no longer looming over you: "I don't want to write my boss back. But if I do, this feeling of dread will go away."

## Belly Breathing

1. Sit at your workstation, be it an office desk or a kitchen table. It should be somewhere that you can sit tall without slouching.
2. Begin by thinking about the soles of your feet. Plug them into the floor, hip width apart. Place your thighs at 90 degrees and feel your feet in line with your legs. Picture energy moving up through your feet and spine to the crown of your head.
3. Keep your gaze angled slightly upward to open your chest, lungs, and heart.
4. Now breathe. Inhale and exhale a few times. On the inhale, imagine starting at your feet and continuing through your tailbone, noticing your breath going all the way up your spine to the top of your head as your belly fills with air. Pause for a moment. On the exhale, bring your breath back down through your tailbone to your feet. Observe your shoulders softening during the exhale.
5. If your breath still feels shallow, remain seated, put your hands over your sternum, and continue to breathe as you feel your ribs expand and contract two or three times.

Breathing is an essential tool for managing your anxiety, especially when panic strikes. Your breath sends a message to your brain to calm down, allowing your brain to send a message back to your body that alleviates many of the physical symptoms of anxiety, such as increased heart rate and high blood pressure.

Good breathing starts with good posture. Have you been hunched over at your desk or huddled over your laptop on the couch while working from home? Curling up is an instinctive protective reaction to stress, but it restricts your lungs and diaphragm and makes it hard to breathe sufficiently.

# Be Real (but Not Too Real)

**Practice navigating the balance between being honest about your anxieties with those you lead and scaring or unmooring them**

1. Consider what you'd want to tell your colleagues or those who report directly to you about what you're feeling. You may want to say something as simple as "I'm feeling anxious in these times. How about you all?" Think about the specific language you want to use to express yourself.
2. Now choose a peer whom you trust. Ask them to spend a few minutes today to help you role-play a conversation.
3. Test out the language on your peer and ask them to respond as if they're on your team.
4. Consider what you might do differently when speaking to your actual team.

**Sources and further reading:**

- Amy J.C. Cuddy, Matthew Kohut, and John Neffinger, "[Connect, Then Lead](#)"
- Carolyn Glass, psychotherapist (exercise source)
- Daniel Goleman, Richard E. Boyatzis, and Annie McKee, "[Primal Leadership: The Hidden Driver of Great Performance](#)"
- Herminia Ibarra, "[The Authenticity Paradox](#)"
- Ali Schultz, "[Murmuration](#)"

The balance between authenticity and revealing too much is one of the hardest things for a leader to learn — which is why role-playing with a peer is so valuable. There's no right approach; some leaders feel comfortable being an open book, while others would rather walk on nails than confess uncertainty.

Research by the social psychologists Amy Cuddy, Matthew Kohut, and John Neffinger has shown that the emotional connection created through empathy and shared humanity is one of the best ways to establish trust. And given the current coronavirus situation, you may feel so uncomfortable and distracted by outside forces that it may just feel right to talk about it. At the same time, anxiety is contagious, and leaders set the emotional tone of the room. (The psychologist and writer Daniel Goleman and others call this "mood contagion.") An on-camera meltdown during a video conference will hurt, not help. Maintain boundaries and keep things professional in front of your staff rather than processing your emotions in front of them

# The Possible Versus the Probable

Today you'll practice pulling yourself back from a spiral of what-ifs

1. Consider a big fear you've grappled with. It may be one you're experiencing right now or one you've struggled to contain in the past.
2. Describe the worst possible outcome out loud to yourself: "I am worried that my boss isn't going to be impressed by this presentation and I'll be first in line for layoffs and I'm going to lose my job and won't be able to afford groceries." After you've done this, click 'Continue' to go to the next step.
3. Now differentiate what's possible from what's probable: "It is possible that I may lose my job as a result of this presentation. But it's not probable that this presentation will have that big of an impact, or that my job and savings will all disappear." You may be able to do this on your own, but consider asking a trusted peer for advice. That person may reassure you that your high performance over the past year is going to have more of an impact on your job than one presentation.
4. When your mind returns to the catastrophic thought ("I'm going to lose my job") remind yourself of what's more likely ("This presentation won't determine whether I'm going to be laid off").

**Sources and further reading:**

- Jerry Colonna, CEO, [Reboot.io](#) (exercise source)
- Morra Aarons-Mele, with Jerry Colonna, "Managing the Stress and Uncertainty of Coronavirus," [The Anxious Achiever](#) podcast
- David A. Clark and Aaron T. Beck, [The Anxiety and Worry Workbook: The Cognitive Behavioral Solution](#)

# Know Your Triggers

## Practice identifying your emotional reactions — and what sets them off

1. Three times during the course of the day, stop to examine how you're feeling. (Start now, and we'll remind you a few more times.)
2. Each time, begin by naming your emotions. What specific feelings are you experiencing now? (There is a categorized list of examples below.)
3. Think about what triggered those feelings. Can you name specific people or situations that brought them on? Does knowing your trigger help you think differently about how you feel?

Many of us think we know what makes us anxious, but often the things that trigger our anxiety can be surprisingly small and specific. It could be an email from a client you haven't gotten back to, a message from your boss, a news notification, or a colleague who coughs too close to you.

Knowing what your triggers are can improve your ability to handle your anxieties. Research shows that this, in turn, can lead to higher job satisfaction and stronger job performance.

# Common Reactions to Anxiety

## Trying to worry the fear away

If I constantly imagine the worst-case scenario, I'm protecting myself from it really happening.

## Overwork

If I work all day and all night, I'm sure I'll feel better. Or: I'm going to go for a four-mile run even though my knee hurts; that will make me feel more in control.

## Perfectionism

If I constantly imagine the worst-case scenario, I'm protecting myself from it really happening.

## Avoidance

I'm not going to think about that at all.

## Automatic anxious thought

I don't deserve to lead this team or get paid my salary. They've finally figured it out and want to replace me with someone more qualified.

## Catastrophizing

My manager wants to speak to me tomorrow. I'm definitely getting fired. Everyone has their go-to coping mechanisms; recognizing the unhealthy ones can help us identify the cause behind them in the moment.

For example, if you learned from the first exercise that your boss's 9 AM emails are a trigger, consider how you tend to respond. Do you shut your laptop and go get a cup of coffee? Do you write back snippily? Do you drop everything you had planned for the first part of your workday and spend half an hour writing an exhaustive reply?

### Sources and further reading:

- [Alice Boyes, psychologist](#) (exercise source)
- David A. Clark and Aaron T. Beck, [The Anxiety and Worry Workbook](#): The Cognitive Behavioral Solution and other resources from [the Beck Institute](#) (exercise source)
- Carolyn Glass, psychotherapist (exercise source)
- Joaquín Selva, "[5 Worksheets for Challenging Negative Automatic Thoughts](#)" (PDF)
- Scott Stossel, [My Age of Anxiety](#): Fear, Hope, Dread, and the Search for Peace of Mind
- Matthew Tull, "[Cognitive-Behavioral Coping Strate](#)

## Globalizing

If this bad thing is happening, then everything in my life is going to become bad.

## Overeating

Food comforts me immediately.

## Undereating

If I deny myself food, I'll feel more in control.

## Harmful self-soothing

In order to ease my anxiety, I am finding myself compulsively gambling, spending money I don't have, or abusing alcohol or drugs.

## Giving in to feeling helpless and out of control

I'm so anxious about this situation, and I have no idea what to do. I'm just going to let someone else deal with it, because I can't.

Your goal should be to move from unconsciously feeling anxiety and reacting on autopilot, to understanding your triggers and managing how you respond. If you recognize that your boss's early-morning email set you off — and that you typically react with one or two (possibly unhealthy or counterproductive) coping mechanisms — you are more likely to be able to read it without responding hastily or out of fear, and without letting it control your mood and your day.

# A List of Emotions

Go beyond the obvious to identify exactly what you're feeling



## Angry

Grumpy  
Frustrated  
Annoyed  
Defensive  
Spiteful  
Impatient  
Disgusted  
Offended  
Irritated



## Happy

Thankful  
Trusting  
Comfortable  
Content  
Excited  
Relaxed  
Relieved  
Elated  
Confident



## Anxious

Afraid  
Stressed  
Vulnerable  
Confused  
Bewildered  
Skeptical  
Worried  
Cautious  
Nervous  
HURT  
Jealous  
Betrayed  
Isolated  
Shocked  
Deprived  
Victimized  
Aggrieved  
Tormented  
Abandoned



## Sad

Disappointed  
Mournful  
Regretful  
Depressed  
Paralyzed  
Pessimistic  
Tearful  
Dismayed  
Disillusioned



## Embarrassed

Isolated  
Self-conscious  
Lonely  
Inferior  
Guilty  
Ashamed  
Repugnant  
Pathetic  
Confused

### Sources and further reading:

- Susan David, "[3 Ways to Better Understand Your Emotions](#)" (exercise source)
- Carolyn Glass, psychotherapist (exercise source)
- GinaMarie Guarino, [Identifying Triggers for Anxiety Worksheet](#)
- Ernest H. O'Boyle Jr. et al., "[The Relation Between Emotional Intelligence and Job Performance: A Meta-Analysis](#)"
- Azadeh Rezvani et al., "[Manager E](#)"



## Check Your Reactions

**When you understand what circumstances trigger your emotional reactions, next you'll practice being aware of the reactions themselves.**

1. Think of a time when you felt anxious. This could be a situation in the past that sticks with you, something you identified during yesterday's exercise — or right now!
2. How did you react to that anxiety? Consider the common unhealthy reactions listed below Step 4. Do any of them sound familiar?
3. Think about the effect your reaction had on you. Did it alleviate your anxiety? Did it exacerbate it? Did it do nothing?
4. Repeat this exercise throughout the day as you experience anxious moments. Do you see any patterns in your reactions? Are there themes, such as a fear of loss or a fear of being "found out" or shamed?

# Small, Meaningful Actions

**Practice giving yourself some momentum on getting productive, instead of getting trapped in inertia or thinking negative thoughts**

1. Identify a reasonably complex task you need to accomplish today.
2. Identify a task that's smaller but related in some way.
3. Give yourself some time to tackle that smaller task. Set a timer, if you like.

When you feel anxious, it can be easy to turn a seemingly straightforward task into an overwhelming thought exercise. For example, if you run a small business, just looking at a month's worth of figures can spiral into visions of your business tanking and you losing your home. How are you supposed to run a cash flow projection with these worries looming over you?

If being mired in anxiety has you avoiding your work, it's important to do something. You want to feel effective, quickly. That will feed into your ability to keep working by building momentum and motivation for the bigger tasks ahead.

To stop your mental spiral, perform a smaller but relevant action to break the rumination. If running a cash flow projection terrifies you, organize some receipts or clean up some file folders until the panic subsides. These tasks may seem minor, but making even a small amount of progress will ease anxiety and give your brain the nudge it needs to refocus and get back to productive work.

## **Sources and further reading:**

- Jonathan Baxter, [licensed mental health counselor](#) (exercise source)
- Seth J. Gillihan, "[Why It's Easy to Procrastinate — and 7 Ways to Break the Habit](#)"
- Victoria Maxwell, "[Part 1: Research Shows Tiny Actions Can Help Conquer Anxiety](#)"
- Beata Souders, "[100+ Happiness Activities, Exercises, and Tools for Groups and Adults](#)"