

# How to Reduce Anxiety and Calm Down Quickly

## A Practical Guide

### Top Tips to Boost Resilience During the COVID 19 Pandemic

In these unprecedented times, as if your life wasn't already difficult enough, now you are told you must stay at home, isolate yourself, 'Keep calm and carry on'. But how? It's a serious business with lives and livelihoods at risk.

It can be hard not to feel overwhelmed but there is light at the end of this tunnel. You can take steps to reduce your stress and anxiety and lift your mood. One of the most important ways to build to resilience and restore balance during tough times is to **manage your strong emotions**. Emotions become more manageable when we learn how to **calm down, deeply relax** and consequently **think more clearly**. It is impossible to be anxious and relaxed at the same time. Dealing with unproductive, self-defeating stress and anxiety will lift your spirit. A few minutes' calm is a wonderful gift to give yourself. Calming down will bring back perspective and the spare capacity you need to 'keep calm and carry on'.

There is so much sound advice to draw on, from the highly respected research of world leading scientists to the wise counsel of eminent psychologists. I've gathered together, from a variety of sources, the best tips I know that work. And to begin, I've added something handed down to me from my Scottish grandma, who at the very least survived two world wars, Spanish flu, the depression, a large and blended family and several rough Atlantic crossings. In a nutshell, when life becomes unmanageable, when the going gets tough, and confusion reigns, and you really don't know what to do next, first make a pot of tea and then, before all else, **be practical**.

So here goes. This is a list of practical and useful tips to help you ease your way through your COVID 19 quarantine. Number one is a '**must do every day** powerful breathing technique. Use it at least four times a day. Use it more often if you are feeling upset, panicky, angry or tearful. After that, every day, **choose a few** tips that resonate with you, and work them.

1. **Breathe to calm down deeply**. First sit comfortably, in bed or on a chair, eyes closed if you can, shoulders down and then simply make each out breath last longer than the in breath. Like a long sigh. People who are highly stressed sigh a lot. Sighing sends a message to your brain saying, 'you can calm down now. You can calm down quickly'.

Gently breathe in to the count of three (not a big breath) and then gently breathe out to the count of five or six or seven or for as long as you can. Concentrate on the counting. Repeat for a few minutes knowing that you will relax more with each breath. And then, notice how you feel.

2. **Make a new routine and stick to it.** Write a simple plan that includes a time to go to sleep and a time to wake up. Shower, brush your teeth, moisturise and dress well in bright, comfortable clothes. Amazingly (or not) clothes can affect your own and other people's moods. Put on some make up and earrings if that's your thing. Make time for some work and make time for some self-care. Do at least two chores you don't want to do.
3. **Ideally get outside and move for at least 30 minutes each day.** Fresh air and movement can really lift your spirits. If you are concerned about social contact, go out early or later in the evening. If you are 'high risk' or living with someone who is high risk, then open the windows and pick up a free movement class on YouTube. If you can, take in views of running water and blue skies. These have been shown to lift low mood. If you can't get out or the sky is grey, then change the view on your screen saver to big blue skies and sunny seaside spaces because that works too.
4. **Connect with others.** Reach out daily for at least thirty minutes. Skype, Zoom, Face Time, text, phone. Do this for young children too with virtual playdates, home school time with classmates and planned time with relatives, especially with grandparents. Well I would say that wouldn't I.
5. **Cook something new.** It may seem obvious but drink plenty of water and eat for your wellbeing. It's all too easy when you are at home all day, and night, for some of us to overeat. So, when you go to the fridge, go less often and do not pull up a chair. For others it's easier not to eat enough. Make a plan. Take regular meals. Little and often.
6. **Check your units.** Remember that alcohol is a depressant drug.
7. **Limit social media and COVID conversations,** especially around children. Stop consuming endless news. In the media, it pays to alarm and catastrophise. You do not need to join in.
8. **Be courteous.** Give everyone the benefit of the doubt and if possible, a wide berth. There is no need to show up for every disagreement you are invited to join. Let go of grudges, disagreements and drama. Resentment is a toxic emotion.
9. **Be happy.** *'Most folks are about as happy as they make up their minds to be.'* Anon. Remember to forgive yourself the moments you fall below the standards you usually like to keep. Say sorry if you need to. Then move on.
10. **Find a separate place to be alone.** A place to retreat to. A place to work and a place to relax. If space is at a premium then it's good to know you all still have a special place to go to be alone. Furnish with a pillow and a blanket.

11. **Stop worrying.** Worrying is a misuse of your imagination and a waste of your time. If you find yourself drifting into your imagination and inventing scary, hopeless, catastrophic scenarios, then remember you are in charge and you have a choice about what you run by your brain. You are the film director so be creative and show your brain a better movie with scenes of you managing, thriving and coping well. Instead of worrying, try some problem solving instead.
12. **Get Busy.** Distraction can lower blood pressure back to normal levels. Try listening to your favourite music, go for a walk, take a relaxing bath. Find a long term project. Study. Read. Start a giant jigsaw. Learn a language. Play an instrument. Dive in. Try painting, sewing or knitting. Be creative. Sing, sculpt, draw, dance. Whatever you choose, give it your all and see how relieved you feel. Find something that will keep you busy and engaged. Something so interesting and absorbing it will allow you to take a break from the outside world.
13. **Try reframing your stressful situation.** Instead of saying 'I'm stuck, alone in a terrible situation' try 'this is a challenge we are facing together'. Seeing things from another angle or in a new context can decrease anxiety and stress. Eleanor Roosevelt is credited with this gem: *'you can often change your circumstances by changing your attitude'*.
14. **Keep a journal.** List your achievements. Write a gratitude list. Focus on the small things that bring happiness. Write them down. Reflect on them.
15. **Clean up.** Take this opportunity to clean and tidy your house. 'Kondo-ing' your home, removing clutter, has been shown to carry many benefits for most people. Each day clean, tidy or straighten something. In these uncertain times, in this task you can be in control over a small space in your home. It feels grounding, anchoring and can bring some peace of mind. Begin each day by making your bed.
16. **Laugh out loud.** Laughter releases tension. Find some lightness and humour in each day. Counterbalance heaviness with whatever comedy works for you. Those memes, gifs and daft videos serve a purpose. Community and comedy. And smile. Take a big wide smile. Even if you don't feel happy, confident or in control, acting as if you are can be highly effective in lifting your mood.
17. **Take one day at a time.** That's enough. Chunk your quarantine into manageable bite size pieces. Sometimes you might take it minute by minute or even moment by moment. Sometimes hour by hour or day by day. Week by week. Month by month. This new way of life will go on for an as yet undetermined amount of time. And that's ok. Adjust yourself to it. Do not argue with it. Remind yourself daily that this is temporary and you are more resilient than you think. Eventually, this will pass. How do you eat an elephant? One small bite at a time.
18. **Check your negative thoughts.** Hold them up to the light. Ask yourself: Is that thought really true? Yes or no? Is that thought fair? Is that thought helpful? Be in charge of your thoughts. Dismiss anxiety laden, intrusive, unhelpful, negative

thoughts and replace them with positive thoughts that are true, are fair and are helpful. Beware of dementors like 'what ifs' and 'if onlys' and 'shoulds'.

19. **Help other people.** Find ways, large or small to give back to others. Give support wherever you can. Do somebody a good turn and do not get found out. If you are found out it won't count. Notice good things in the world and particularly notice those who help others.
20. **Reach out for help.** Remember you are not alone. We're all in this together. Expect to feel the gamut of emotions regardless of your usual stoicism. Everyone, even the person you think of as the most together, is feeling the same. Times are testing for everyone, no matter their age or background. Seek out support groups of all kinds and get connected. Help and support are out there. You can connect virtually.
21. **Be kind.** Show compassion. Give compliments. Use this time to strengthen your key close relationships. They are the central pillars of your wellbeing, affecting both physical and brain health. Relationships sit alongside or are perhaps even more important than diet, exercise and genes as predictors of your future health and wellbeing.
22. **Watch your language.** Choose your words with care. Words can be like blunt instruments at the best of times. Words can cause damage. Once said they can't be unsaid. Less can be more. Keep your voice low. Be only on your own case.
23. **Search for the learning.** The COVID 19 pandemic seems sad, wasteful, unnecessary and pointless. Perhaps it could have been avoided? As with any traumatic event, afterwards there will be a need to find some meaning and new purpose so that we can collectively and individually move forward from here. What good can come from this period of crisis and loss? And on a personal level, what have you learned and what do you need to change?
24. **Focus your mind.** Have a quiet half an hour by yourself and during that time try to get a better perspective on your life. It can be difficult when you try to clear your mind not to think about current stressful events. The Serenity Prayer. Some would say trite and overused but I would say a potent, meditative piece that can help you to focus your mind on four achievable aspirations. Serenity. Acceptance. Courage. And Change.

*[God] grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,  
Courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.*

Linda Singer

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