

**200 Ways  
to  
Calm Down**

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## Introduction

This book is designed to be a practical guide to relieve anxiety for those in crisis or experiencing prolonged stress. The source may be a specific event such as a death, sickness, divorce, unemployment, trauma, abuse, deportation, or other unexpected challenges. It could also be an on-going situational stress, or a pattern of general anxiety that has become habitual and resistant to change. The techniques in this book can be used to alleviate immediate symptoms as well as to build resilience and strength for long term happiness.

Family, friends and professionals who wish to assist someone who is experiencing a lot of anxiety, may also find this book a useful resource. It is based on the strategies I used to personally, and the techniques I have offered clients. I have compiled them here in an easy to use format so that you, and those that care about you, can help you bring about a more peaceful state of mind.

Long term stress depletes our self-esteem, our identity, and impacts our productivity and ability to relate to others. Each day there are many opportunities to reduce stress to acceptable levels. The task is to have a wide range of short, medium and long term techniques to draw on. With these close at hand it is possible to steadily recover from even the most distressing of events. It is possible to become a more whole and connected person through this process of growth and transformation.

Each Chapter focuses on a cluster of strategies or techniques in a specific domain. This makes it easier for you, the user, to flip to a section you are interested in. For example, Chapter 4 addresses the importance of connectedness to others. People are a critical component to repairing from trauma or long term stress. Some planning and building of networks is required and these can grow over time. Chapter 5 outlines physical techniques that offer immediate bodily relief from anxiety. Chapters 6 through 23 describe numerous

ways to reduce anxiety that have proven beneficial in both short and long term change. The Earlier chapters offer more immediate strategies, essential for times of crisis, and the later chapters focus on more subtle and longer term strategies that lead to sustained recovery and personal growth.

### Building Your Own Calming Down List

When someone is in crisis or under prolonged strain, days can feel uncertain and frightening. If you have a list of strategies to draw on to make it through such days the recovery can be more rapid and less painful. There are moments when you may feel triggered – racing thoughts, edgy sensations in the body, and possibly feeling disconnected from your surroundings. At these moments it is difficult to think clearly. Having your own Calming Down List and gaining confidence in using it can build confidence and reduce the time you will spend feeling terrible. Every hour with less anxiety is an achievement.

It is helpful to have both short and long term strategies. The short term strategies help get you through the next hour, and help return you to a relaxed state or ready for productive balance. The longer term strategies help build understanding, long term networks of support, and patterns of relating. Some people consider the short term strategies to be less important than the long term strategies. I felt this way for many years. It was not until I was in a crisis that I saw the immense value of immediate relief from out of control thinking, rapid, shallow breathing, and feelings of endangerment. I found that having a range of choices at my fingertips gave me confidence that I could find relief quickly and spend less time distressed. Clients also report that these short-term strategies help build resilience and good life habits so that future stress can be navigated more effectively.

To make best use of your list you can keep a copy with you or post it on the wall or fridge where you can see it easily. Over time, as you get better at utilizing the list, you will be able to remember strategies more easily, even when

in distress. You can also update your list as you find new strategies.

I hope this book is beneficial to you and to those you care about. My goal is to provide a resource that will help you find yourself confidence and give you the tools to become more fully who you are. Each of us has a unique contribution to make to our community and I wish for all of us to realize that potential.

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# 1

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## How to Use This Book

This book is designed to be easy to use. During crisis or when anxious it is difficult to concentrate and you need ideas that are readily available. The simplest way to use this book is to flip through the chapters and find strategies to lower your anxiety as you need them. The more systematic way to use this book is to develop a comprehensive plan to lower your anxiety, drawing on the many suggestions described in the chapters. To do this you will make two important lists.

The first will be a list of the symptoms you currently experience and a way to track your improvements as your anxiety decreases. It is called your Positive Change Record. The second is a comprehensive list of strategies you will use to lower your anxiety. It is called your Calming Down List. Both lists can be reviewed and rewritten weekly, or as often as works best for you. After some time you will be fully recovered and not need this book anymore and you can hand it on to someone else.

Chapter 2 outlines the symptoms of anxiety that this book is designed to relieve. You will use it to make your Positive Change Record.

Chapter 3 shows you how to make your Positive Change Record and your Calming Down List

Chapters 4 -23 cover many simple but effective ways to lower anxiety levels. You can select strategies that work for you and add them to your Calming Down List. At the end of each chapter is an example you might want to try.

Once you have reduced your anxiety to normal healthy levels you are free to become more fully who you are. You can embrace your true unique expression of being human and enjoy your precious life. It is an act of grace to care for yourself and it will allow you to make your own unique contribution to society.



## 2

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### **Symptoms Associated with Anxiety**

Anxiety symptoms vary from person to person. However there are many common symptoms that people report, including both brief symptoms that peak during moments of high tension and longer term mental and physical sensations that can become chronic and habitual. Although the symptoms often originate in real events, over time they can be activated by having fearful thoughts, or can be triggered by events that are not dangerous but have some similarities to experiences from the

past. Fears and the symptoms that arise with them can also be triggered by future uncertainties.

The list below is not exhaustive but it does include all the main physical and mental symptoms that commonly occur to people who are experiencing prolonged stress, anxiety, panic, or trauma.

For ease of reading I have clustered the symptoms in groups associated with specific disorders. However many people experience a range of symptoms across all of the categories at different times.

Symptoms commonly associated with Panic

- palpitations, pounding heart, rapid heart rate
- sweating, irritated skin
- trembling or shaking
- rapid breathing, shortness of breath
- choking sensation
- chest pain or tightness
- nausea, loss of appetite
- dizzy, lightheaded, or faint
- feeling detached from oneself, dream-like feelings of unreality
- feelings of going crazy
- memory loss
- feelings of imminent death
- chills or hot flushes
- racing thoughts

### Symptoms associated with trauma

- recurrent or intrusive thoughts about past traumatic event
- recurrent dreams related to the event
- easily triggered by internal or external cues that resemble the trauma in some way
- avoidance of stimuli that resembles the trauma in some way
- withdrawal from previously interesting activities
- loss of range of emotions such as love or joy
- sense of a foreshortened life
- mental tunnel vision, unable to experience normalcy
- desire to escape sometimes experienced as feeling suicidal
- insomnia

## 8 Symptoms Associated with Anxiety

- irritability or angry outbursts
- difficulty concentrating
- hyper-vigilance
- easily startled by noises or movements

### Symptoms associated with general anxiety

- excessive worry across a range of life concerns
- difficulty controlling the worries
- restlessness
- lack of concentration or going blank
- fatigue
- muscle tension
- poor sleep

### Additional long term symptoms resulting from prolonged stress

- headaches
- ringing in the ears (tinnitus)

- dry or cracked lips (from rapid breathing)
- irritated skin
- stiff joints due to muscle tension
- back and neck pain
- mild cognitive disruptions such as forgetting days and dates
- thinning hair or graying hair
- increase or decrease in weight
- restless hands or legs
- development of phobias
- feelings of suicidality



### 3

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#### Positive Change Record and Calming Down List

If you have been worried or anxious for some time it can be difficult to accurately assess your improvements. There is a tendency to underestimate the progress being made and this can slow the recovery time. A Positive Change Record will help you see in a more objective way the positive improvements in your symptom reduction, and in your overall personal growth.

Begin by making a list of all the symptoms you are experiencing. The Anxiety Symptom list in Chapter 2 can be your guide but add any additional symptoms you have. To make the list really specific to you include any additional information that you wish to track. For example you may record how many hours a night you are sleeping, how often you are having palpitations, or how often you are clenching your teeth. Then, about once a week, as you begin to apply the strategies you've included on your Calming Down List, review your symptoms and see where there have been improvements.

Here is an example of the types of questions you might ask yourself:

How many hours sleep am I averaging a night?

How quickly did I fall to sleep?

Did I have nightmares?

What were they about?

Are there any changes or improvements in my thinking patterns?

What repetitive thoughts was I having?

What constructive thoughts did I have?

Have I been more social this week?

How is my exercise regimen going?

How has my diet been this week?

What was my drug and alcohol use this week?

Did I have any panic attacks or panic symptoms this week?

What new skills have I learned?

What new strategies am I using?

Are there any other improvements?

As your Positive Change Record is updated you can look back and see the improvements since you began. There may be some days that are worse than others and feel like a regression but this is unlikely to be a trend. If you are using the strategies on your list it is more likely that positive changes will continue to happen even if the process undulates a little due to life circumstances. Looking at these improvements can help build the hope and optimism you need to keep growing through the difficult period you are experiencing.

## **Calming Down List**

This is the main tool you will be using to relieve your anxiety and grow through this difficult period of your life. This list can be updated as often as you like. Often a weekly update will allow new strategies to be added that better fit your current situation and allow old strategies that you no longer need, or need less, to be taken off. You can keep your list at home, or carry it with you, or keep it electronically. It is important that you can access it easily when needed. You can group your strategies in the same way that they are grouped in this book, using the chapter headings. Or, you may prefer to make your list based on the most important and immediate strategies that work best for you. As you update and rewrite your Calming Down List it is useful to keep the old lists for referencing later.



## 4

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### **Ways to Connect with Others**

It is probably impossible to recover from trauma or prolonged stress without the help of others. People can empathize, give advice, offer support, and help you remember your many positive strengths and qualities. They can also provide a pleasant break from repetitive thoughts or distressing sensations you may be feeling. Often, when people are under a lot of strain, they can lose sight of their positive qualities and feel cut adrift and lost. Family

and friends can remind you that you have talents, aspirations, skills and a history to be proud of. There are many ways to increase the number of people in your life. Some people will be physically close and able to meet you in person at short notice. Others will be connected with you by phone, email, on-line, or by paper mail. Others may need to get back to you. It is important to have a big enough network of people who are available in various capacities so that you can find the support you need when you need it. It is helpful to develop a somewhat thick skin around feelings of rejection. Courage is needed to take the initiative and ask for help, friendship, or advice. There will be many times when people cannot connect with you when you want them too, or do not reply as quickly as you would like. It is important to accept this as part of the process because it is more important that you feel connected than to avoid embarrassment. So overcome your fears and build connections, so you will feel better sooner.

Select some of these strategies to add to your

**Calming Down List**

- Ask acquaintances, colleagues, potential friends for their contact numbers or emails
- Call new and old friends and make times to go walking, or to meet and talk
- Ask people to go out to a movie, an event, a meal
- Strike up conversations with people and find common ground
- Be open and friendly with people so connectedness can occur.
- Do favors for friends to build mutual interconnections
- Chat to strangers and acquaintances when you are out

- Find a core group of 3 to 5 people you can ask to call you regularly without prompting
- Join social groups such as Meetup that offer opportunities to mix with people socially while hiking, biking, painting, or writing
- Use on-line social media such as Facebook and Twitter to feel heard and to enjoy the input of others. However, it is important not to rely exclusively on these virtual mediums as being directly with others is essential to real connectedness.
- Join community groups that have interests similar to yours. This may include church or spiritual groups, social justice, environmental, political, art, or activity groups.
- Join clubs such as gyms, martial arts, and other sports.

- Ask others about their lives. It is easy to assume that you are the only one coping with a stress. It helps to discover that others are coping with their own challenges as it helps remind you that you are not alone.
- You may also consider specific support groups that address issues you are navigating. Groups that follow the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) model offer peer led support groups for a variety of issues. There are also support groups for crises such as domestic violence, divorce, illness, or loss. Meeting others in comparable circumstances can be very helpful and increase resilience.

### **Chapter 4 Example**

Make a list of all the people and groups that you can call, text, email, or meet. Place the list somewhere visible as a prompt for when you are lonely, in need of support, or want company. Often when we are anxious or stressed we feel isolated. We can forget who our friends are and assume no one will want to connect with us. Having a list can help remind you that you have people who care about you and want to support you.



## 5

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### **Move Your Body**

In contemporary society many people get few opportunities to exercise. Physical activity has to be consciously planned. This is very unfortunate because exercise does two very helpful things in relation to stress and anxiety. Exercise releases feel good chemicals, especially endorphins which inspire and expand the mind and relax and refresh the body. Exercise also helps break down adrenalin which is released when you are

anxious. Adrenalin feels very unpleasant in a stationary body. Stress hormones are designed to help us fight or flee. When we are flooded by these hormones and do not do anything to break them down, then we feel physical and mental agitation.

Aerobic exercise is often the quickest way to reduce anxiety. Other steady muscular exercise also helps re-regulate the body, and thus the mind.

Select some of these strategies to add to your  
Calming Down List

- Running, swimming, brisk walking, cycling, hiking, gardening, cleaning, tidying
- Martial arts, kick-boxing, aerobics, gym workouts
- Playing soccer, basketball, volleyball, tennis, baseball and other ball sports

- Dancing to music. Dance has many physical benefits and also can re-awaken spontaneity and feelings of happiness.
- Using an exercise video at home
- Yoga, Tai chi, Pilates, Zumba
- Weight lifting, push-ups, chin-ups, sit-ups
- Additionally, consider doing short errands on foot or by bike rather than using a car

## Chapter 5 Example

Write down, or record your agitated thoughts before you exercise. Then write down or record your thoughts shortly after. Even though nothing has changed in your life during the time of exercise, your thoughts are likely to be more positive and creative. This confirms in a demonstrable way the benefits of exercise on the mind. It also helps you to see that the thoughts are disproportionate to your situation and are a product of your traumatized and anxious thinking. As the positive effects may not last all day, it may be beneficial to exercise two or more times a day if the anxiety is very high. Even brief exercise can help if that is the only option you have. Every small effort is helping you develop the capacity to calm down rather than escalate anxiety.