

Strategies for 'Coming Down' from Anxiety

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Some key strategies for ‘coming down’ from an acute state of anxiety, centre around: ***grounding, recollection, attention, and policing.***

These strategies actually overlap and complement each other. But what matters most, is not so much the theory but the simple practice of these strategies. The theory will merely help you make sense of the practice being suggested.

Key strategies explained.

Grounding means focusing our thoughts, mind, and attention on our body – on the sensations we feel in our body, and, on our immediate environment. This is mentioned first because it is often the most helpful strategy to begin with, followed by a selection of practices from the other strategies.

Recollection is about recalling our scattered thoughts and mind back to our body. It means finding ways of focusing on and being in the present moment, so that we are neither preoccupied with reflecting on or thinking about the past or the future – both of which can cause us distress due to making ourselves vulnerable to things over which we have no control – things that are past and over, or things we imagine await us in the future (and often we imagine the worst).

We are nearly always equal to the task of coping with what is in front of us – the reality of the present moment but can feel powerless and distressed about what cannot be changed (in the past), or about things we imagine might happen in the future.

Attention means to choose to focus on something, in a more sustained and uninterrupted way than perhaps is usual for us, in order to become better at paying attention to the present moment. Attention (or *attentiveness*) also complements our efforts of grounding and recollection.

The simplest place to start training our attention is by noticing and remaining attentive to ordinary routine things that we do every day, such as bathing, shaving, cooking, driving, dressing, and so on. What can really boost our efforts of training our attention is if we consciously slow down the things we do, so that they become more noticeable than usual; in other words, *slowing our motion* to better notice rather than speeding through or past things.

Policing our thoughts

Stress, anxiety, and emotion can very much be *thought driven* – especially thoughts that we permit ourselves to go over and over in our minds. We need to learn how to recognise the quality of our thoughts learning when to accept them, if they are clearly positive, and when to quickly turn away from them when they are clearly negative and toxic.

Thoughts, especially negative ones, are made all the more powerful by accompanying images and memories (imagination playing a big role in assembling these), which is why, whenever possible, we need to turn away from them as soon as we become aware of them.

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Putting theory into practice

The following suggestions may at first glance appear simplistic, especially when compared to how difficult and challenging the experience of anxiety and distress can be. However, they are in fact quite sophisticated in the way they work and can often deescalate anxiety and distress, getting us into a better place, and more tolerable experience.

Take some time to select from the following practices and see what suits and works for you:

Grounding

- Concentrate on normalising your breathing. When we are anxious, we tend to take shorter breaths with the only movement being in our chest. Try breathing with a little more depth so that you begin to notice movement in your abdomen (belly). Focus on this intentional cycle of breathing until your breathing can establish a calm rhythmic pattern of its own. It may be useful to follow the pattern of a 'triangle' of breathing control:



Take a *slightly* deeper breath, slowly counting 3



Gently hold your breath
for a count of 3



Breath out slowly pursing
your lips, again for a count
of 3

- Touch your skin and run your hands against the physical outline of your arms and legs. Notice the sensations you feel. Experience your own physical presence in the present moment.

- Take a long shower/bath. Really notice how you experience the warm water.
- Run cool or warm water over your hands and pay attention to the sensations, or, fill a bucket with warm water and plunge your hands and arms into it paying special attention to the sensations it creates.
- Grab tightly onto your chair tensing as many muscles in your body as you can, and then consciously relax them beginning with you scalp and working your way down your body all the way to your toes.
- Dig your heels into the floor – literally grounding them. Notice the tension centred in your heels when you do this, and then relax you whole body.
- Engage in some vigorous exercise (if you can do so safely) until you become body focussed and notice a shift in your experience.

Recollection

- Consciously imagine gathering up your scattered mind and thoughts and returning and recalling them to your head and body.
- Use your voice. Pick up a book and read some paragraphs out aloud.
- Position yourself in front of an empty chair and imagine you are advising a friend having the same experience as you, helping them to get things into perspective, solving a problem step by step, or letting go of thoughts that are self-defeating by adopting a more constructive way of thinking about things.
- Call a friend with whom you can have a positive conversation.
- Write out what's going on in your thoughts, physical sensations, and emotions. Keep writing until you start to notice it makes a difference by *letting out* some of the things you're anxious about.
- Write a thoughtful and reflective letter or email to somebody you care about.

- List occasions in the past when you have experienced significant anxiety or distress and try and remember what eventually helped the intensity to diminish (which of course always happens) and see if you can repeat what helped.

Attention

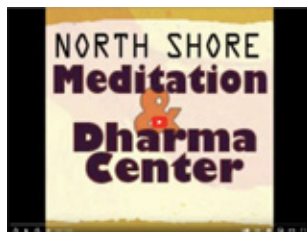
- Take a look at your immediate environment. Name the things you can see individually and in detail as if you have someone on the phone needing you to describe and form a complete picture of your environment.
- Start training your attention by noticing and remaining attentive to ordinary routine things that you do every day, such as bathing, shaving, cooking, driving, dressing, and so on.
- Touch various objects around you, feeling the texture and shape of each one and paying complete attention to them.
- Take a walk somewhere quiet noticing everything that you can along the way. On your return, try and still your mind and think of nothing in particular (becoming recollected) only noticing the motion of your body as it takes you home.
- Train your attention by following a 5- or 10-minute set of slowly disappearing sounds:

5-minute sound

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NIAlly3bQF0>

10-minute sound

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kQrDC4ILpkU>





Policing

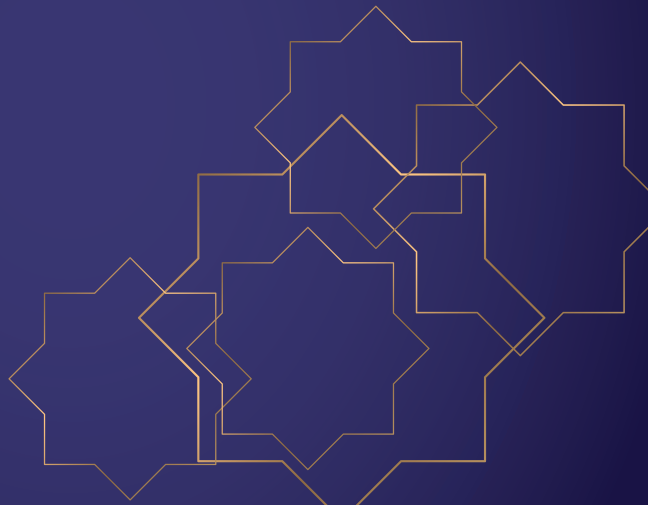
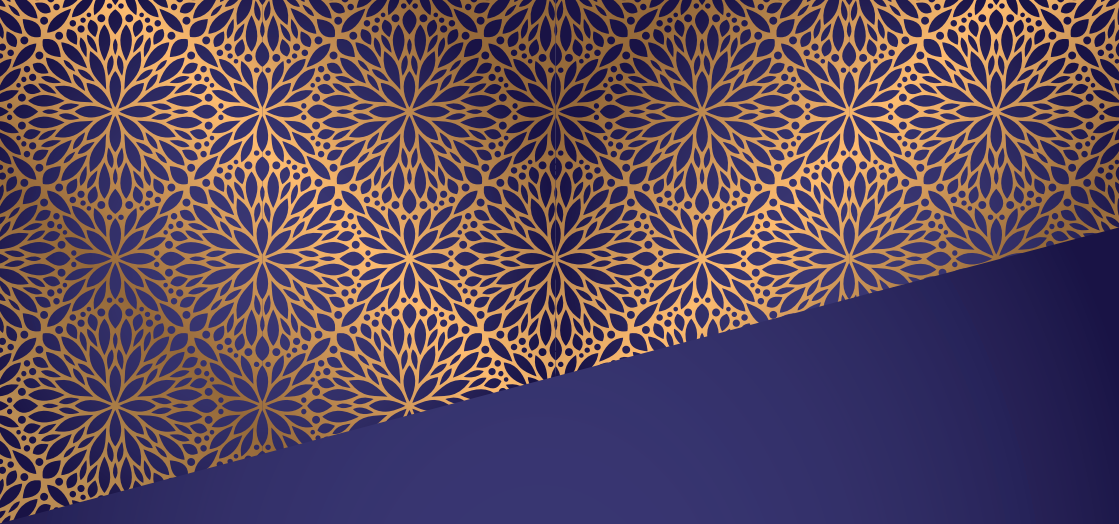
Policing our thoughts and imagination is a vital strategy for the management of anxiety and for avoiding high or intense anxiety states.

Thoughts and thought *themes* that tend to trigger a stress or anxiety experience (and powerful emotions) are often circular and repetitive. They are the kind we tend to think over and over again. They may also be associated with images, memories, and past experience.

Fighting with these is rarely useful, and in fact can tend to energise them. When we identify that a thought or thought theme is detrimental to us, it is best that we *dismiss* them by instead simply turning our attention away from them (especially when images are associated with them), and onto something else that is positive in nature. The quicker we can do this, the less they can gain a foothold and affect us. But even if they have gained something of a hold on our mind, they can still be starved of attention and will depart, if we keep turning away from them and thinking thoughts that are wholesome and positive. For this purpose, we can create a little repertoire of positive thoughts and phrases in anticipation of occasions when we need them.

It is often useful to think of negative thoughts and thought themes as unwelcome visitors that come knocking on our door. If we quickly ignore them, they will soon go away. However, if we answer the door, we have engaged with them and given them some power. If we don't turn away at this point with determination, it is as if we have also invited them in.

Once indoors and 'settled in' it is considerably harder to get them to leave. At this point we will need to work much harder at turning away from them and starving them of attention. If we don't become discouraged, and if we persevere, they will eventually leave. They cannot persist without our consent and attention.



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