

MY ANXIOUS MIND



A TEEN'S GUIDE to MANAGING ANXIETY and PANIC

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CHAPTER 3

BREATHING AND RELAXING

Have you ever watched LeBron James at the free throw line? He takes one, two, perhaps even three slow deep breaths that calm his body and mind as he bounces the ball several times. Then he stops, focuses intently on the basket, visualizing the ball swooshing through the hoop, and then shoots. He usually makes a clean shot. In a similar way, Yo-Yo Ma, the classical cellist, might squeeze his fists or shrug his shoulders to release tension before beginning to play. These actions may seem small and insignificant, but consider this: deep breathing and muscle relaxation allows LeBron James and Yo-Yo Ma to remain calm and focused, which is a big part of what enables them to produce some amazing results.

Learning to relax and calm your body in any situation is the first step toward learning to calm your anxious mind. Breathing is so automatic most of us are unaware we are doing it. But have you noticed how your breathing changes when stress and anxiety hits your body? When you feel stressed or anxious, you breathe faster, also known as hyperventilation, which causes you to inhale more oxygen than you need, triggering an imbalance between the oxygen and carbon dioxide in the blood. This causes the blood vessels to tighten up and prevents a sufficient amount of oxygen from reaching

organs and cells. All this really means is that you can experience sensations of dizziness, tingling, and light-headedness that are completely harmless, but can feel weird or scary and really start your Worry Wheel spinning. In addition, when you breathe too fast, your muscles can tense up, causing you to feel tired and sore. Even if you are not breathing fast but are feeling stressed or anxious, your muscles tense. The longer you feel anxious, the more tense your muscles get.

You can calm your anxious body by learning how to handle rapid and anxious breathing, relax your muscles, and quiet your mind. This chapter will teach you how to do all of this by using three important Calm Body tools—abdominal breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and visualization. We include directions and tips in each section to help you incorporate these tools into your daily life, allowing you to begin to slow down your Worry Wheel. These tools are an important part of a successful plan to calm your anxious mind, and they are easy to learn and even easier to practice. With breathing, relaxation, and visualization tools, you can quickly reduce your body's stress and anxiety. Once your body is a bit calmer, you will be better able to use other tools described in this book.

USING CALM BODY TOOLS

Breathing, relaxation, and visualization practice works best if there are no distractions to get in the way. Find a quiet place to go for 10–15 minutes where no one will interrupt you. Turn off the TV, phone, computer, and music. Make sure there are no other loud noises, too.

Next, find time in your day to practice. You will likely want to schedule some time. You might be thinking, “Yeah right, that’s impossible,” but think for a minute. Is there a time when things are less hectic for you or when you can take a short break? This might

be right after school but before you start homework. Or maybe it could be planned as the first thing on the weekend or right before dinner on Sunday night. Choosing a time that works best for you will make it easier to learn and apply these skills every day, helping you to become an expert at calming your anxious body. Make this practice a priority.

When I first heard about breathing and relaxing tools, I thought they were for people who do yoga and meditation. I also was afraid people could tell if I was practicing them. However, it turns out that all sorts of people use these tools everyday, and they're easy to use without anyone being wise to what you're doing.

—Bobbie, age 15

Abdominal Breathing

Abdominal breathing is the first Calm Body tool. To practice abdominal breathing with a calm mind, go to your quiet spot, close the door, and get comfortable in a comfy chair or lie down. Make sure you are wearing loose clothing and uncross your legs and arms.

Begin by imagining you have a red balloon attached to the end of a long thin tube that starts in your nose or mouth and ends in your stomach. Place your hand on your stomach over your belly button and feel how that balloon inflates and deflates in rhythm with the rise and fall of your stomach. Close your eyes and keep your hand resting on your stomach as you slowly breathe in and out. Take a slow deep breath of air in through your nose as you count to three (one-two-three). Pause and hold it for the count of three. Then slowly breathe out for the count of three.

As you repeat this, picture the red balloon inflating as you inhale and deflating as you exhale. Focus on the air traveling in and out *slowly* and *evenly*. Slow calming breaths will decrease muscle tension and lower your anxiety. Take another slow deep breath in through your nose as you count to three. Hold it for three counts and release for three counts. Pause for a moment and inhale for three counts. Hold for three counts and exhale for three counts. Pause.

On the next inhale, slowly say to yourself, “Calm,” stretching out the letters while you picture the word in your mind’s eye. Hold your breath for three counts and as you exhale, say to yourself, “Mind,” stretching out the letters while you imagine the word in your mind’s eye. Repeat this.

Repeat and continue this slow, calm, and rhythmic breathing for another 5–10 minutes for a total practice time of 10–15 minutes. If your mind wanders during the exercise, just refocus your attention by picturing the word “Calm” or “Mind” and continue breathing in and out, noticing your stomach rise and fall.

To review, here are the steps:

1. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth (unless your doctor or parent has suggested that you should not do this due to medical reasons). If you cannot breathe through your nose, you can do all the breathing through your mouth.
2. Breathe in slowly as you imagine the word “Calm,” stretching out the letters throughout your inhale.
3. Pause for the count of three.
4. Breathe out slowly as you imagine the word “Mind,” stretching out the letters throughout your exhale.
5. Rest for the count of three.
6. Repeat this pattern for a total time of 10–15 minutes.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation is the second Calm Body tool and is an important tool to reduce body tension. As mentioned above, the classic cellist Yo-Yo Ma works to release the tension in his hands prior to and during performances. Professional athletes such as Serena Williams have tricks to relax their muscles before a game. Have you ever noticed how Serena Williams and other tennis players crouch over and hop from one foot to another before a serve? These gestures allow the players to release pent up tension, which helps their muscles perform optimally.

Just like famous musicians and athletes, you can learn to relax your muscles and decrease unwanted tension and anxiety. Begin by sitting or lying down with your arms by your side and your legs uncrossed out in front of you. Close your eyes. Start by squeezing your eyes tight. Then scrunch your nose as if you have smelled a rotten egg and pull the edges of your mouth back toward your ears into a forced smile. Then, bite down to tense your mouth and jaw. Hold this position for the count of 15. Then slowly release your eyes, nose, mouth, and jaw for another 15 seconds. Relax your face so that all the wrinkles disappear. Your face will be smooth and relaxed, your cheeks will feel soft, and your tongue will be loose in your mouth. Notice how different this feels from when your face was tight and tense. If you learn the difference, you can make your muscles relax when you notice they are tense.

Now, move to your neck and shoulders. Tuck your neck into your shoulders like a scared turtle. Hold this position for 15 seconds, observing the pull on your neck muscles and the discomfort you feel. Now release and let your shoulders drop down and your head relax. Hold this position for 15 seconds.

Next, move on to the hands and arms. Make fists with your hands and cross your arms at the wrists. Hold your arms up in front of you and push them together as if you are arm wrestling with yourself. Hold your arms in this position with your fists clenched for 15 seconds. Then let your fists uncurl and your arms slowly fall to your side. Hold this position for 15 seconds. Your arms might feel like wet spaghetti. Observe how your arms are feeling loose and heavy. This sensation of relaxation feels much better than when your muscles are tense and tight.

Next, pull your arms behind your back and try to make your elbows touch. Hold this position for 15 seconds and then release.

Next, suck in your stomach, making your abdomen get hard and tight. Clench your buttock muscles together. Hold this position for 15 seconds. Notice how the tension feels uncomfortable. Then release and let your stomach go out farther and farther while you release your buttock muscles. Do this for 15 seconds. You might notice as you go through all of these muscle exercises, tensing and relaxing, that you are starting to feel more relaxed. Your muscles might feel heavy and calm, and your whole body is beginning to feel relaxed. You are in charge of how your body feels and you are commanding your muscles to relax.

The last exercise is for the legs and feet. Stick your legs straight out in front of you and direct your toes towards your nose while you scrunch your toes into a tight ball. Hold for 15 seconds and then release for 15 seconds. Your legs might feel loose and floppy as they begin to feel relaxed.

You have now gone through all six muscle groups. You can repeat these six steps several times to relax your body even more, beginning again with your eyes.

Briefly, here is the routine for progressive muscle relaxation:

1. Begin with your eyes, nose, mouth, and jaw (face), alternating between tightening and tensing for 15 seconds and then relaxing for 15 seconds.
2. Keep the rest of your body and muscles relaxed. Move through the next five muscle groups one group at a time:
 - Neck and shoulders
 - Hands and arms
 - Upper back
 - Abdomen and buttocks
 - Legs and feet
3. Pay attention to how different your muscles feel when they are tense versus when they are relaxed, noticing how the sensation of relaxation feels better than the sensation of tension.
4. Repeat the six muscle groups if you want to relax more.

Remember, do not engage in these exercises if your doctor or parent does not think the exercise is okay for you because of medical reasons.

Visualization

Visualization is the final Calm Body tool in this chapter. It is a method to reduce tension and anxiety. Actors and athletes, among other professionals, use visualization to remain calm and enhance their performance. Tiger Woods prepares to hit the ball by using visualization. On the tee box, Tiger looks down the fairway and visualizes where he wants to hit the ball. Later, when he steps onto the green, he examines the grade of the green from multiple angles. Then, just before he putts the ball, he imagines the ball rolling across the green

and into the cup. Golf is a game that requires extreme mental focus, and being able to visualize your results ahead of time can make a big difference in how you play. You can learn to use and apply visualization in your daily life to calm your anxious mind and body and to enhance your focus and attention.

To practice developing your visualization tool, begin by thinking of a favorite, calm memory or of a peaceful place like floating on an inflatable raft in a warm pool or lying on the beach on a sunny day. Use all of your senses. What do you see? Look for the colors, shapes, people, or animals near you and far away.

Now what do you hear? Are there birds chirping or waves crashing? Are there any smells like the ocean or freshly cut grass? Can you taste anything? Imagine that you are walking closer to the sea and tasting some of the salt water or taking a sip of that ice-cold lemonade.

Lastly, how do things feel? Touch a soft flower petal or a hard rock and notice the texture. As you are imagining this, you may notice that upsetting or anxious thoughts or images might force their way into your beautiful scene. Don't try to ignore these thoughts, as they will only get louder or more intrusive. Instead, let them pass through the scene like a gentle breeze.

I treat intrusive, annoying thoughts like a nosey neighbor. I say "Hey, anxious thought. I'm busy and can't chat now." Or I imagine folding the thought into a paper airplane. I throw it into the air and watch it fly away from my calm scene.

—Bobbie, age 15

Continue to sit with this image for at least 5–10 minutes, noticing how peaceful it feels and enjoy a sense of calm and the absence of anxiety and tension.

Visualization is a powerful tool. Here is how to practice:

1. Find a quiet place and lie comfortably on your back.
2. Close your eyes.
3. Think of a calm place you like to visit. It does not have to be a location you have actually visited, but can be somewhere you would like to go. Use your imagination! You can create an imaginary place, too.
4. Use all your senses (sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch) to enhance the experience and to explore fully your scene.
5. Notice how you feel in your body. Pay attention to how your muscles are relaxing, how your heart rate and breathing are slowing, and how your mind is quieting and focusing its energy on the images you are creating.

DEVELOPING A SCRIPT

Abdominal breathing, muscle relaxation, and visualization are three important Calm Body tools you can use to help manage your tense and anxious body. We encourage you to be creative in how you use these tools including combining them into a single routine. You can also modify your environment by dimming the lights and playing some soothing music to enhance your experience as you use these tools. Once you have a routine that you like, create your own personalized script. You can find an example of a script at the end of this section.

When your script is ready, it really helps to record an audio message. Then you can practice it anytime and anywhere. For some teens, it helps to practice these tools with another person such as a friend, parent, or psychotherapist. Regardless of whether you chose to practice alone or with another person, begin by practicing for 10–15 minutes once or twice daily for two to four

weeks until using these tools is easy and automatic. Then you are ready to use your Calm Body tools when you find yourself stuck on the Worry Wheel. Some common situations in which you can use your script include:

- Before tests, performances, or athletic events.
- When you are having trouble falling asleep.
- At the onset of or during a panic attack.
- When you are stressed out thinking about all you have to do.
- When you notice your muscles are tight and tense.
- Before any social situation that causes you anxiety.
- At any time you find you are stuck on the Worry Wheel.

Ellie's Calm Body and Mind Script

This is the script I created by combining the three Calm Body tools discussed in this chapter. I recorded this myself and listen to my script right before I go to sleep. You can use my script or modify the words to make one of your own.

- Lie down on your bed and shake out your muscles to get comfortable.
- Close your eyes and imagine a red balloon attached to the end of a long thin tube that starts in your nose or mouth and ends in your stomach.
- Place your hand on your stomach right over your belly button to feel the balloon inflate and deflate in rhythm with the rise and fall of your stomach.
- Now, take a slow deep breath of air in through your nose as you count to three (one–two–three). Pause and hold it for the count of three. Then slowly breathe out on the count of three. Repeat.
- After a few breath cycles, insert the word “Calm” on the inhale breath and “Peace” on the exhale breath.
- Continue to do this for 10–15 additional breath cycles, paying attention to the slow rise and fall of your stomach.

Ellie's Calm Body and Mind Script (*continued*)

- Notice how good it feels to start to slow down your breathing. Remember, slow breaths will help to calm your anxious mind and body.
- Now, squeeze your eyes tight, scrunch your nose, and smile hard as you pull the edges of your mouth back toward your ears. Bite down to tense your mouth and jaw. Hold this position and count to 15.
- Slowly release your eyes, nose, mouth, and jaw and count to 15 again.
- Notice as you relax your face that the wrinkles disappear, like melting snow, leaving your skin smooth and relaxed. Your cheeks feel soft and your tongue is loose in your mouth. Notice how different this feels from when your face was tight and tense. It feels much better to feel relaxed instead of tense and tight.
- Now, focus your attention on your neck and shoulders. Tuck your neck into your shoulders. Hold this position for a count of 15 (one–two–three–four . . .), feeling the pull on your neck muscles and the discomfort you may feel.
- Now release these muscles and let your shoulders drop down, relaxing your head. Your head might feel heavy or floppy as it relaxes. Hold this relaxed pose for a count of 15.
- Shift your focus to your hands and arms by making fists with your hands and crossing your arms at your wrists. Stick your arms up in front of your body and push them together as if you're arm wrestling with yourself. Hold your arms in this position with your fists clenched for a count of 15.
- Let your fists uncurl and your arms slowly fall to your side and hold this position for a count of 15. Notice how your arms feel loose and heavy. A feeling of relaxation is spreading through your body. Last of all, pull your arms behind your back and try to make your elbows touch. Hold this position for a count of 15 and then release for a count of 15.
- With your calm breathing and your relaxed muscles, begin to take your mind to a peaceful place. Imagine that you are lying on a quiet, empty beach. Feel the warm sun on your back, and the grainy sand under your hands. Look out toward the sea, and notice turquoise water and small white waves. The sound of the seagulls calling to one another is shrill against the quiet of this empty beach. Smell the scent of tropical flowers

(*continued*)

Ellie's Calm Body and Mind Script (*continued*)

drifting toward you from a nearby garden. Reach down and take a sip of ice-cold mango juice from your glass.

- As you experience all of these sensations, notice a calm, peaceful feeling and realize that worry and anxiety are far away.
- Begin your slow deep breathing cycles again saying, "Calm" as you inhale and "Peace" as you exhale.
- Continue your rhythmic breathing for 5–10 repetitions while continuing to imagine the beautiful, warm sandy beach scene.
- Enjoy this peaceful and relaxing state for as long as you like.

PRACTICING YOUR CALM BODY TOOLS

Re-training your mind and body to feel relaxed will take time. Like most of the things you do, practice is how you become good at something, whether you are learning to play the piano or to shoot free throws. Daily practice will help you learn a new skill quickly, so decide on a time where you will be free from distraction and can listen to your recording or read your script. Some teens like to do this right before school or last thing before bed at night. There is no right time, just the time that is right for you. To help remind you to practice daily, use the Relaxation Log. For each day of the week, record which Calm Body tool you used and the level of anxiety and relaxation you felt during the practice session. The Relaxation Log can help you to track your level of anxiety and relaxation over time. Watch as your anxiety rating decreases and your relaxation rating increases as you practice. Soon you will be able to relax without using your script or recording.

My Relaxation Log

	CALM BODY TOOLS	ANXIETY RATING	RELAXATION RATING
MONDAY			
TUESDAY			
WEDNESDAY			
THURSDAY			
FRIDAY			
SATURDAY			
SUNDAY			

Rating scale: 0 = not at all; 10 = extremely.

Calm Body tools: abdominal breathing; progressive muscle relaxation; visualization.