

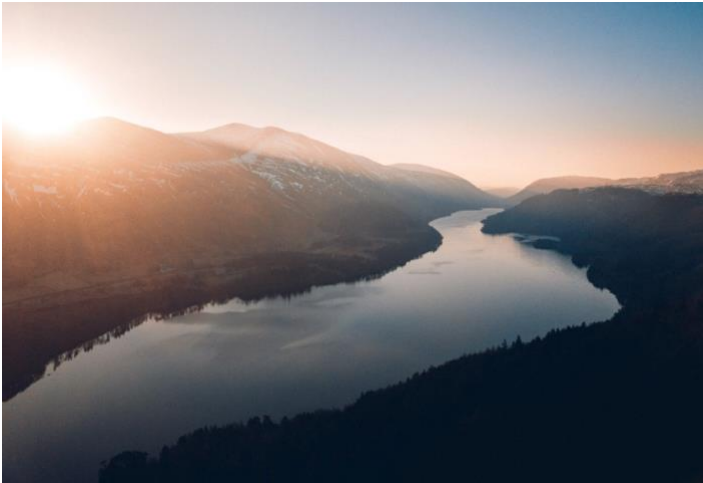
A Guide to Soothing Anxiety



 OREN JAY SOFER

Table of Contents

Understanding Anxiety	3
Meeting Anxiety	6
Soothing Anxiety	9
Transforming Anxiety	10
Additional Resources	12



“

Understanding anxiety can help you relate to it more wisely.

Understanding Anxiety

Anxiety is a universal, natural emotion. It is a form of fear and is part of our nervous system's 'flight' response to a perceived threat.

From a nervous system perspective, the **function** of anxiety is to protect us. It is an early stage of fear that mobilizes energy for safety.

Characteristics of anxiety

- Unpleasant physiological/emotional state
- Usually generated mentally
- Tends to be without shape or form
- Is often future-oriented
- Can manifest physically and/or mentally
- Trying get rid of anxiety usually increases it, creating a vicious cycle

Fear is generally focused on escaping a specific danger.

Anxiety tends to be more vague and amorphous.

Anxiety can resolve:

- Physically, by attending to the energy and sensations in the body
- Mentally, by disengaging from the thoughts generating the anxiety

The good news:

- Anxiety is simply energy in the mind and body.
- It's part of how we're wired.
- It can be soothed, calmed, and ultimately transformed.

With practice, you can learn to handle anxiety and shift its patterns. You can reduce its intensity, frequency and duration and increase your capacity for courage, compassion, and other positive states.

“

How you think about stress and anxiety affects how you experience it.

How to think about anxiety:

Anxiety is a form of stress and it can make us stronger when we learn to navigate it. The following views stress tolerance and protect against negative effects of stress and anxiety.

Healthy views of stress and anxiety:

- Stress is here to help me. It is preparing me to meet a challenge.
- I can handle stress or I am learning tools to handle it better.
- Stress is universal. It is something everyone deals with rather than a personal failing.
- All emotions have the nature to change. This anxiety will pass.

PRACTICE: Tools to understand anxiety

1. Pause and name it.

This increase meta-cognitive awareness, creates mental space, and helps you begin to develop a relationship with anxiety.

2. Investigate its source.

Is this anxiety about something that is real or imagined? Is it about something happening now or is it future-oriented?

3. Recall a protective view.

Recollect one of the above views about stress to see if that shifts your experience.

4. Let it be.

Don't try to "calm down" or make it go away. Forcing something to happen often comes from automatic fear or aversion and therefore tends to make it worse.

Meeting Anxiety

There are two general ways of working to soothe anxiety:

1. **Indirect:** Redirect attention with skillful distraction to soothe
 - (use when there is insufficient balance or resource)
2. **Direct:** Work with thoughts, feelings and sensations of anxiety
 - (use when there is sufficient balance or resource)

Redirecting attention:

Use any of these tools for rebalancing and resourcing when the anxiety feels overwhelming or like too much.

Tool	Examples
Orient	Connect to your environment through your senses. Name three things you see, three things you hear, three you can touch and repeat until you settle.
Widen Attention	Put your attention in your hands or feet, or widen awareness to sounds or the space around you.
Social engagement	Call a friend, talk with someone
Change your environment	Go outside or a different place
Skillful distraction	Do an activity that takes your mind off the anxiety: exercise, clean, cook, read, sing, bathe, listen to music, watch a movie, chant, etc.
Cultivate positive mind states	Gratitude, generosity, kindness, compassion, etc.

Creating conditions for direct engagement

Anxiety multiplies through thinking. To soothe anxiety, we ultimately need to be able to contact and feel it. To do this, it's helpful to first establish a sense of inner safety. Try one of the exercises below.

PRACTICE: Establishing inner safety**1. Sense your inner stability.**

Take a few deep breaths and quiet yourself. Feel the weight of your body, the places it touches the ground and the upright quality of your spine. Touch into any sense of inner stability that comes when you notice these aspects of your experience. Linger there.

- *Notice how this feels. Internalize a felt memory of it.*

2. Remember love and friendship.

Think of someone you care about or who cares for you. Picture their face, or imagine being with them in safe, relaxed circumstances. Keep coming back to this visualization and linger there.

- *Notice how this feels. Internalize a felt memory of it.*

3. Recall feeling like yourself.

Think of a time in the last few weeks or months (further back if you need) when you felt most like yourself. Remember where you were, what you were doing, and how you felt. Linger there.

- *Notice how this feels. Internalize a felt memory of it.*

4. Visualize a favorite place.

Call to mind a beautiful, calming, or soothing place. This could be real or imagined. Make it as real as possible in your mind's eye, sensing as much detail as you can. Linger there.

- *Notice how this feels. Internalize a felt memory of it.*
-
-

Meeting the unpleasant:

Anxiety is by its nature unpleasant. It includes uncomfortable physical and emotional sensations. Our conditioning is to recoil from that which is unpleasant, to try to get away from it or destroy it.

However, the more you fight anxiety—trying to escape or control it—the worse it gets.

The role of compassion:

Compassion can take the edge off the discomfort of anxiety, and help you learn to contact anxiety as a felt experience.

Cultivating compassion:

You can cultivate compassion for yourself as well for others suffering from anxiety.

“
The more you
fight anxiety,
the worse it gets.
—

Compassion is the willingness to turn towards pain or suffering to see if we can help.

PRACTICE: Self-compassion

Explore these three steps for cultivating self-compassion:

1. **Kindness:** Try to bring as much tenderness to your experience as possible, rather than judging yourself. Try a short phrase like “It’s okay” or “I care about this pain.”
 2. **Connection:** Remember that we all feel anxious. Instead of isolating, try to see it as an experience of shared humanity.
 3. **Mindfulness:** Be mindfully aware of the anxiety, rather than being lost or overidentified with it.
-

Soothing Anxiety

The following tools rest upon a foundation of some inner balance with anxiety. The key is to cultivate an intention of care and compassion towards yourself (and the anxiety) rather than avoidance or control.

Breathing Tools:

Breathing is a reflection of our nervous system; alter your breathing and you shift the nervous system. Try any of the following:

- **Deep breathing:** Breathe in through your nose, filling your lungs, then breathe out through your mouth long and slow in a thin stream of air. Notice any settling, ease, or relaxation.
- **Box breathing:** Begin by exhaling completely then: inhale 4-count, hold 4-count, exhale 4-count, hold 4-count; repeat. There are many excellent videos and tutorials online.

Synchronized Movement:

Any gentle, flowing, repeated movements coordinated with breathing can soothe anxious energy in the body. Search for Qi Gong videos on YouTube or check out Oren's [QiGong resource page](#).

Subtle Movement:

Try making subtle movements with any part of your body and coordinate them with the natural flow of breath: lightly squeeze a finger as you inhale, release slowly as you exhale. Make the movement as subtle and gentle as possible. (For more, see Michael Krugman, [Sunder Sleep](#)).

Visualization:

Focus your attention on the palms of your hands or the soles of your feet until you feel sensation there. Imagine the energy or sensations of anxiety flowing down through your limbs and draining out your hands or feet. You can also do this with the solar plexus, eyes, or temples.

Space:

Widen your awareness to the space around you, or the space in the room. Let your awareness be larger than the sensations or the felt experience of the anxiety.

Transforming Anxiety

Over time, you can begin to transform the underlying mental and emotional patterns that create anxiety. This process happens slowly by working in the ways we've described: shifting your views about anxiety, finding balance with it, bringing compassion to yourself, working with the patterns that drive anxiety, and soothing its energy in the body,

- Soothing anxiety is the beginning of a process.
- To transform anxiety you need to redirect or channel its energy.
- This can happen through understanding and through action.
 - Understand that our emotions are information.
 - They point to something that matters to us: our needs.

Listen to anxiety:

Ask yourself, "What do I need right now?"

Consider seeking support:

- Emotional support (e.g., listening, empathy)
- Practical support (e.g., with a project)

Understand the nature of anxiety:

The deepest transformation comes when we see and understand anxiety clearly.

Observe anxiety mindfully, with curiosity and balance:

- **Notice that it's temporary:** Notice its absence. It comes and goes.
- **Notice how it changes:** Track its intensity on a scale of 1 to 10 over a day or longer.
- **Study the story:** Get familiar with the content that triggers your anxiety and create new narratives.
- **It's not personal:** Recognize that we all feel anxiety. It is a natural, normal human experience.

“
Consider:
What do I need
right now?
—

Anxiety is not only an individual problem. It has an internal and an external cause.

Internally, many of us lack a sense of true refuge. We do not know and see our own true nature, so feel anxious on a fundamental, existential level about change, loss, and mortality.

Externally, we live in a dysfunctional world predicated on violence, income inequality, and resource depletion. There is a collective atmosphere of anxiety rooted in the unhealthy conditions of our society.

Action can shift anxiety:

Action transforms the energy of anxiety, especially when the cause is related to something external (relationship issues, marital stress, workplace dispute, or larger issues like climate change, politics, oppression, or injustice).

Consider if any of these responses would be helpful or appropriate:

- Speak up, name the issue
 - Say no
 - Set limits or boundaries
 - Challenge the beliefs or stories driving the anxiety
 - Leave what is not working
 - Seek support elsewhere
 - Disengage from thoughts or activities that provoke anxiety
 - Wait and be patient
 - Observe what is happening inside
-

Additional Resources

Hanson, Rick. [*Resilient: How to Grow an unshakeable Core of Calm, Strength and Happiness.*](#)

Hendrickson, Ellen. [*How to Be Yourself: Quiet your Inner Critic and Rise Above Social Anxiety.*](#)

McGonigal, Kelly. [*The Upside of Stress: Why Stress is Good for You, and How to Get Good at it.*](#)

[Ten Percent Happier](#): Meditation App with courses and guided meditations on anxiety *(includes original material from Oren)

[Unwinding Anxiety](#): Evidence-based, mindfulness app on handling anxiety. (Free videos here by Dr. Jud Brewer [here.](#))