



Directly Calming Your Body's Threat Response

Lowering your stress hormones and levels of inflammatory proteins/cells decreases the unpleasant sensation that humans have labeled anxiety. Anxiety is necessary for life and powerful. You cannot control or get rid of it. It is a gift. So, the first step is to separate your identity from this essential feeling.



Then, there are direct methods that effectively calm down this response. Here are some suggestions:

- **Changing sensory input**

- Active meditation/mindfulness – you are placing your attention on something more pleasant.
- Deep tissue or light touch massage
- A cold compress to the face (Mäkinen), especially after exercising or if acutely stressed.
- Connecting with nature – historically a basic aspect of the human experience.
 - Walking barefoot in the sand.
 - “Hearing” the silence
 - Taking in all of the senses
 - Birdwatching
 - Learn about the flowers and trees
 - Notice different smells and fragrances

- **Awareness**
 - Become aware of your feelings of anxiety and anger and train yourself to watch them.
 - Just awareness is a powerful tool. A pain psychologist and close friend of mine pointed out that, “You have to feel to heal.”
- **Breath work** directly stimulates the Vagus nerve, which is strongly anti-inflammatory (Mason).

There is a lot of research that has been done on the effectiveness of meditation. It is challenging to measure as there are so many schools of thinking that espouse different methods. However, one common factor was looked at in an extensive literature review (Zaccaro), which was slow breathing.

- A respiratory rate of < 6 breaths per minute (bpm) and < 10 bpm was consistently correlated with stimulation of the parasympathetic nervous system, which also decreases inflammatory cytokines (communication proteins). Whether you paid attention to your breath or not, was not a factor.
- Breathing through your nose during either inspiration or expiration could be of some benefit.
- One deep breath, followed by a slow exhalation
- Meditation with deep breathing. Try using a counting method (such as 4 counts breathing in and 4 counts out; or 4 counts in, hold for 7, and release for 8)
- Alternating nostril breathing (block one nostril while breathing in and the other nostril while breathing out)
- Focus solely on your breath (Mason).
- **Calming activities**
 - Yoga, Tai Chi, Chi Gong,
 - Acupuncture
 - Exercise – hard workouts
 - Biofeedback
 - Medical hypnosis
- **Visualization**
 - Remembering in detail the most enjoyable of your life.
 - Connect with and feel it.
 - Visualize what others are seeing when you are upset.
 - Would you be attracted to you?
 - Would you want to be around you?
 - Is this really how you want to treat those who care about you?
- **Decrease stimulation of your nervous system**

A sensitized nervous system creates anxiety. So, it is important to be mindful of activities you engage in that fire up your brain. It is not a matter of right or wrong. The point is to observe the effects on your nervous system. Consider what you feel happening to your body when you:

- Play intense video games or watch violent movies
- Argue with family members
- Watch news that upsets you

Some suggestions to remain calm include:

- No discussing your pain or medical care with anyone except your health care providers.

- Limiting the time that you spend watching news and other over-simulating programs.
- Choose less intense video games.
- No complaining about anything, including the pandemic.
- No criticizing anyone. You are simply projecting your view of yourself onto them.
- No offering advice that is not requested. How do you feel when you are on the receiving end?
- No gossip

These techniques are effective and necessary short-term strategies, they can be incorporated into the larger picture to solve your pain. The bottom line is to use common sense to actively calm yourself and avoid activities that stress your nervous system. It is surprising how much difference it can make.

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