Fight, flight and freeze

What your body is doing when the alarm goes off, and why.

When your brain senses danger, it prepares your body to fight, to run or to freeze. This happens in a fraction of a second, before the thinking part of your brain has had a look. It is the same response whether the threat is a dog off its lead or a presentation on Monday.

Every sensation has a job. None of them is harmful.

What you notice	What your body is doing	Why
Racing or pounding heart	Pumping blood faster to the big muscles	More fuel for running or fighting
Fast, shallow breathing	Taking in extra oxygen	Ready for a burst of effort
Dizzy or light-headed	A side effect of breathing faster than you need to	Harmless, and it settles as breathing slows
Tight or shaky muscles	Muscles tensed and ready to move	Faster reactions
Sweating	Cooling the body down	Stops you overheating
Churning stomach, dry mouth	Digestion switched off for now	Energy goes where it is needed
Tunnel vision, racing thoughts	Attention narrows on to the threat	Nothing else matters in an emergency
Cold or tingling hands and feet	Blood moves from skin to muscles	Protects against blood loss
Frozen, blank or numb	The freeze response	Staying still and unnoticed can be safest

After the alarm

Once the threat has passed, a second system (the "rest and digest" system) brings everything back down. This always happens. The body cannot stay at full alarm for long.

Afterwards you may feel shaky, washed out or tearful for a while. That is the adrenaline clearing. It does not mean something is wrong.

> **Try this**
> Next time you notice a sensation, name what it is for: "That is my heart getting blood to my legs." Many people find this makes the sensation less frightening.

My notes and questions

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Your brain's alarm system

Why you cannot "just think straight" when you feel under threat.

Three parts of the brain do most of the work when we feel under threat. Knowing how they talk to each other explains a lot about anxiety, anger and trauma reactions.

The alarm
The amygdala. Fast and crude. It scans for danger all the time, and would rather be wrong a hundred times than miss one real threat.

The thinking brain
The prefrontal cortex. Slower and smarter. It weighs things up, makes plans, and can tell the alarm to stand down.

The memory keeper
The hippocampus. It files memories with a time and a place, so the brain knows "that was then, this is now".

What happens when the alarm goes off

Something happens	A noise, a look, a thought, a body sensation
↓	
The alarm fires	In a fraction of a second, before you have had time to think
↓	
The body gets ready	Heart, breathing and muscles prepare to fight, run or freeze
↓	
The thinking brain catches up	"Is this really dangerous?" If not, it settles the alarm.

When the alarm is very loud, the thinking brain goes quiet. That is why, in a panic or a rage, you cannot reason your way out, find the right words, or remember what you planned to do. Nothing is wrong with you. The system is working as designed, at the wrong moment.

A smoke alarm, not a fire

A smoke alarm cannot tell burnt toast from a house fire. It only knows "smoke". After a long stretch of stress, or after trauma, the brain's alarm can be set too sensitive and go off at toast. The feeling of danger is real. The danger often is not.

The alarm can be retrained

- **Settle the body first.** A slow breath out and grounding quieten the alarm enough for the thinking brain to come back.
- **Then think.** Once you are steadier, questions like "What is most likely?" start to work.
- **Teach it through experience.** The alarm learns from what happens, not from being told. Facing a feared situation and finding that you are safe is what resets it.
- **Look after the basics.** Poor sleep, too much caffeine and alcohol all make the alarm jumpier.

This is a simplified picture. The brain works as a network, and each of these areas does many other jobs as well.

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Calm breathing

Slow breathing with a longer out-breath, to calm the body.

When we are anxious we breathe fast and high in the chest. Slowing the breath down, and making the out-breath longer than the in-breath, switches on the body's calming system. It will not make anxiety vanish, but it takes the edge off and gives you something steady to do.

How to do it

1. Sit or lie comfortably. Drop your shoulders. Put one hand on your belly.
2. Breathe in gently through your nose for a count of 4. Let your belly rise under your hand.
3. Pause for a moment.
4. Breathe out slowly through your mouth for a count of 6, as if you were blowing on hot soup.
5. Carry on for three to five minutes. If your mind wanders, bring it back to the counting.

Tips

- **Slow, not deep.** Big gulps of air can make you dizzy. Keep the breath slow and low in the belly.
- **Practise when calm.** Twice a day for a few minutes. It is easier to use under stress once you have practised it when calm.
- **Find your own count.** If 4 and 6 feels strained, try 3 and 5. The out-breath being longer is what matters.
- **Use a cue.** Link it to something you already do: the kettle boiling, sitting into the car, getting into bed.

Day	Morning practice	Evening practice	What I noticed
Mon			
Tue			
Wed			
Thu			
Fri			
Sat			
Sun			

A caution

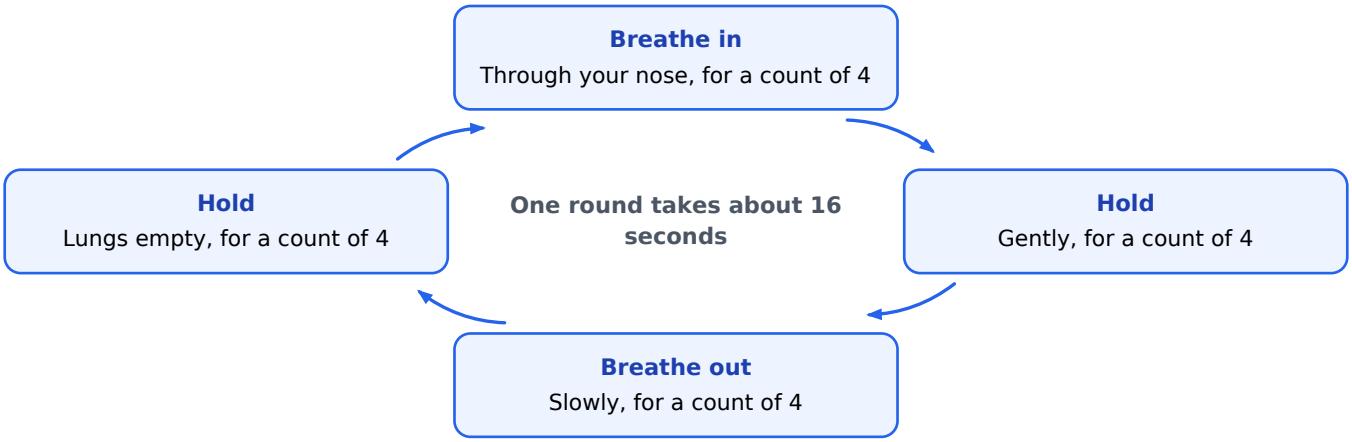
If you have panic attacks, use breathing as a way to steady yourself, not as a way to escape the feelings. The sensations of panic are safe, with or without breathing exercises.

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Box breathing

Four equal sides: in, hold, out, hold.

Box breathing slows your breath into four equal parts. Counting gives your mind one simple job, and the slower rhythm tells your body that it can stand down. Most people feel a difference within a minute or two.



How to do it

1. Sit with your feet on the floor, or stand. Let your shoulders drop.
2. Breathe in through your nose for a slow count of 4. Let your belly move, not your chest.
3. Hold for 4, with your throat and jaw loose.
4. Breathe out for 4. Then hold for 4 with your lungs empty.
5. Go round four to six times. Then let your breathing go back to normal.

Tips

- **Picture the box.** Trace a square with a finger: up, across, down, across.
- **Shrink the box if you need to.** Count to 3, or shorten the holds.
- **Practise when calm,** twice a day, so that it is there when you need it.

Day	When I practised	Rounds	How I felt after
Mon			
Tue			
Wed			
Thu			
Fri			
Sat			
Sun			

Go gently

Holding your breath does not suit everyone. If you feel dizzy or panicky, stop and breathe normally. If you are pregnant or have a heart or lung condition, leave out the holds, or check with your GP first.

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Progressive muscle relaxation

Tensing and releasing each muscle group in turn, to learn what relaxed feels like.

Anxiety and stress leave muscles tight, often without us noticing. In this exercise you tense each muscle group on purpose, then let go, so you learn what release feels like and can find it again when you need it.

Allow about fifteen minutes. Sit or lie somewhere quiet. For each area, tense for about 5 seconds, then release for about 15 seconds and notice the difference. Tense firmly, not painfully. Skip any area that is injured or sore.

Area	How to tense it
Hands and forearms	Make tight fists.
Upper arms	Bend your elbows and tense your biceps.
Shoulders	Lift them up towards your ears.
Forehead and eyes	Raise your eyebrows high, then screw your eyes shut.
Jaw	Press your teeth together and pull the corners of your mouth back.
Neck	Gently press your head back against the chair or pillow.
Chest and back	Take a breath in and pull your shoulder blades together.
Stomach	Pull your belly in tight.
Thighs	Press your knees together or push your heels into the floor.
Lower legs	Point your toes up towards your face.
Feet	Curl your toes under.

To finish

Scan through your body from head to toe. If any tightness is left, let it go. Breathe slowly for a minute or two. Get up slowly.

Tension before

0 — 1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5 — 6 — 7 — 8 — 9 — 10

None Extreme

Tension after

0 — 1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5 — 6 — 7 — 8 — 9 — 10

None Extreme

With practice, most people can relax by scanning and releasing, without needing to tense first.

Progressive muscle relaxation was developed by Edmund Jacobson.

Notes

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Grounding with your five senses

The 5-4-3-2-1 exercise, for bringing your attention back to the present.

When anxiety or a memory pulls you out of the present, your senses can bring you back. Go slowly. Say each thing out loud or in your head, and really look, listen and feel.

5 things I can see	Look around. Notice colours, shapes, light and shadow. Pick out small details.
4 things I can feel	Your feet in your shoes. The chair under you. The air on your skin. An object in your hand.
3 things I can hear	Near and far. Traffic, a clock, your own breathing.
2 things I can smell	Coffee, soap, fresh air. If nothing is there, name two smells you like.
1 thing I can taste	A sip of water, a mint, or just the taste in your mouth.

Finish with one slow breath out, and remind yourself where you are: "It is Tuesday afternoon. I am in my kitchen. I am safe right now."

Make it yours

Things I can keep nearby to help me ground (something to hold, smell, taste or look at)

A sentence that reminds me where and when I am

When I tried this, what did I notice?

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A menu of grounding techniques

Different things work for different people. Try several and keep what helps.

Grounding means anchoring your attention in the here and now. Use it when you feel overwhelmed, spaced out, panicky or caught in a memory. Tick the ones you want to try.

Using your body

- [ ] Press your feet into the floor and notice the pressure
- [ ] Hold something cold, or run cold water over your wrists
- [ ] Stretch, stamp your feet, or push against a wall
- [ ] Clench your fists, then let them go
- [ ] Walk, counting your steps
- [ ] Hold a warm mug in both hands

Using your mind

- [ ] Describe the room in detail, out loud
- [ ] Say the date, the time and where you are
- [ ] Count backwards from 100 in sevens
- [ ] Name an animal for each letter of the alphabet
- [ ] List everything you can see that is blue
- [ ] Read something out loud, slowly

Soothing yourself

- [ ] Say something kind to yourself, as you would to a friend
- [ ] Picture a place where you feel calm and safe
- [ ] Listen to a favourite song
- [ ] Wrap up in a blanket
- [ ] Smell something you love
- [ ] Think of people who care about you

Tips

Practise when you are only a little stressed, so the skills are ready when you need them. Keep your eyes open. Rate your distress from 0 to 10 before and after, to learn which ones work for you.

My top three

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A calm place in your mind

A guided exercise for imagining a calm place in detail.

Your body responds to what you imagine. Picture biting into a lemon and your mouth waters. In the same way, picturing a calm place in detail can settle your body down.

Steps

1. Sit comfortably and take a few slow breaths.
2. Bring to mind a place where you feel calm and at ease. It can be real or made up: a beach, a hillside, a room, a garden. Somewhere with no difficult memories attached.
3. Look around it. What can you see? Colours, light, the time of day?
4. What can you hear? What can you smell? What is the air like on your skin?
5. Notice where you feel the calm in your body. Let it spread.
6. Give the place a name or a cue word.
7. Stay for a few minutes. When you are ready, bring your attention back to the room.

If the image changes or something unwelcome appears, you can alter it, as you would edit a film. It is your place. If no place feels safe, try imagining a calm activity or a kind presence instead.

What I can see

What I can hear

What I can smell and feel

Where I feel calm in my body

My cue word or name for this place

When could I use this? What did I notice when I practised?

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The two-minute reset

A quick way to bring your stress level down a notch, anywhere.

Use this between tasks, before a meeting, or whenever you notice you are wound up.

1. **Stop.** Put down what you are doing. Sit back or stand up.
2. **Feet.** Feel both feet flat on the floor.
3. **Shoulders.** Lift them up to your ears, hold for three seconds, and let them drop.
4. **Jaw and hands.** Unclench your teeth. Open your hands.
5. **Breathe.** In gently through the nose for 4. Out slowly for 6. Five times.
6. **Look.** Find three things in the room you had not noticed.
7. **Ask.** "What is the one thing that needs me next?"
8. **Go.** Do that one thing.

When to use it

- [ ] Before I open my email
- [ ] After a difficult call or conversation
- [ ] Before I walk in the door at home
- [ ] When I notice my shoulders are up
- [ ] Before a meeting or presentation
- [ ] When I am about to snap

Try it for a week

When I used it	Stress before (0 to 10)	Stress after (0 to 10)	What I noticed

The cue I will use to remind myself (for example: each time the kettle boils)

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