# From Panic to Success

Three Types of Stress and How to Cope with Each

## The concepts of health and well-being can be divided into two categories: physical and mental.

I have spent most of my time writing, thinking, and treating the physical aspects of health. However, it strikes me that people are much more capable of coping with physical ailments than mental or psychological ailments. In fact, the worst part of being physically ill is often the uncertainty and fear that come with physical illness.

I learned this first hand after my recent surgery for appendicitis. I didn’t mind dealing with the physical pain and abdominal swelling after my surgery, but I was worried that the symptoms were a sign of a complication. I imagined the worst case scenarios. This worrying made me feel mentally and physically exhausted and I was unproductive for over a week as a result.

Even in the absence of true physical illness, mental and psychological stress can cause physical symptoms such as pain and fatigue. This is called [somatization](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Somatization). In severe cases, patients can even suffer stroke-like symptoms or seizure-like activity due to the conversion of psychological stress into physical symptoms. This is known as “[conversion disorder](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conversion_disorder).”

It’s clear that mental and physical health are inseparable. The human body and mind are not two separate entities, but one integrated whole. I’ve decided, therefore, that I should spend more time understanding and addressing the mental and psychological aspects of health.

In past efforts to alleviate my own stress and anxiety, I have learned various skills and implemented several systems to help me deal with common stressors. I would like to share a few of these with you right now.

## In this article, I discuss three different types of stress: panic, anxiety, and disappointment. I will address causes for each, and remedies that I have found helpful.

## You must dispense with panic before you can deal with anxiety or disappointment.

Panic, or acute stress, is a cognitive and psychological state in which the entire mental content is occupied by an emotional response. It is a state in which no thinking can take place. Instead of clear, linear, rational thinking, your mind races with fleeting incomplete thoughts or ideas. You can’t grab onto any one of these ideas because you are overwhelmed. This state of stress is so mentally disorienting, that it is common to have physical symptoms along with it: a feeling of being in a fog, heart palpitations, dizziness, or even nausea, shaking, and sweating. The essential emotion that underlies this episode is fear, and the body responds physiologically by increasing the tone of your sympathetic nervous system.

In order to think straight, the first thing that must be done is to shut off the fear response. The best technique that I have found for doing this is called “[tactical breathing](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dQsDRGzwuug&ab_channel=SEALFIT).” Tactical breathing is a technique taught to soldiers who must perform mentally and physically under the threat of death in combat. I use this technique in my practice of emergency medicine when I must perform quickly and effectively for patients who are critically ill. I also use this technique when I feel overwhelmed by a writing project or a mountain of tasks. It works equally well in all of these scenarios.

**There are variations of tactical breathing, but the one I prefer is simple and effective and takes only 64 seconds.** - Inhale slowly and deeply for 4 seconds. - Hold your breath for 4 seconds. - Exhale slowly and completely for 4 seconds. - Hold your breath out for 4 seconds. - Repeat this process 4 times.

This technique accomplishes two things. First, it gives you an achievable task that will move you in the right direction. Second, the technique has physiologic effects on your autonomic nervous system. It will slow your breathing and your heart rate. You’ll stop shaking. You can test this sometime even if you’re not in a panic. Look at your Apple Watch or FitBit or any device that shows you a real-time heart rate. Sit down and breath normally. Watch your heart rate. Then perform tactical breathing. You’ll see your heart rate come down by at least a few beats per minute or more.

Once the acute stress has been reduced or eliminated, it should be possible to deal with the task at hand. For performing specific tasks, or maintaining a positive attitude, other techniques like visualization and repeating a mantra (“self-talk”) can be helpful.

Once you’re out of a panic, there’s a good chance that you’ll still feel anxious. This is because anxiety is what leads to panic. But what leads to anxiety?

## One cause of anxiety is a lack of focus.

In order to be focused, you need the following conditions: 1. You must have a purpose or a goal to focus on. 2. You must believe that you are capable and worthy of fulfilling your purpose or achieving your goal. 3. You must know the next step to take towards your goal. 4. You must have a clear mind.

Let’s assume for the purposes of this article that we have numbers one and two covered. We have a purpose and goals; we likely have many. And this is what leads to problems number three and four.

When you have many goals, you end up with many ideas and tasks. Eventually, these tasks lead to a state of mental overload, and it becomes unclear what should be done next. You may try to do more than one thing at a time. When you try to think about and do many things at once, you end up feeling scattered. This is because you can only focus on one thing at a time. You end up switching rapidly from one thing to another. You begin to feel anxious because you feel eventually that something will slip your mind.

If this state of overload continues, inevitably you will forget something important, and this mistake reinforces your feeling of anxiety.

An inability to focus is the primary obstacle that inhibits relaxed, clear, and therefore productive and creative thinking. The state of being unfocused is called distraction. Distraction is caused by mental overload. There are external distractors like text messages and social media, but these are easily dealt with by silencing devices and closing browser windows. What about the distraction that comes from within? Consider how difficult it is to focus on your work when you know that your car needs to be serviced, the bills need to be paid, and you have to shop for groceries and cook dinner. Or, what about the problem of trying to write an article about focusing while trying to incorporate too many ideas about focusing all at once.

Jean Moroney, a consultant who runs a business called Thinking Directions, and writes articles on [her blog](https://www.thinkingdirections.com/) by the same name, tells the following story in one of her [articles](https://www.thinkingdirections.com/what-is-crow-overload/).

”The earliest known discussion of the problem of mental overload includes a memorable story about a crow. It comes from a paper by Sir John Lubbock published in Nature in 1885. A hunter wanted to shoot a crow, which he considered a nuisance. It turns out the crow was too savvy. If the hunter came to the area, the crow hid until he left. Yes, he was playing “Hide and Go Seek” with a bird. Thinking to outsmart the crow, two hunters came. The bird hid. Then one hunter left, and one stayed behind, hoping the crow would come out so he could get it. But the crow wasn’t fooled. It stayed hidden. The hunters tried again with more people. Ultimately, they needed to send in 5 hunters, then have 4 leave, in order to fool the crow into thinking it was safe to come out. The crow had exceeded its psycho-epistemological capacity. It couldn’t tell the difference between a group of 4 or a group of 5 hunters. It saw only that many hunters came in, and many left. Just as with humans, when overloaded, the crow Can’t Really Operate Well."

The point of the story is clear, if you attempt to focus on too many things at once, something will get lost in the shuffle."

Fortunately, there is a solution. In his book *How to Take Smart Notes*, Sönke Ahrens tells the following story about Soviet psychologist Bluma Zeigarnik.

“The story goes that she went for lunch with her colleagues and was very impressed by the waiter’s ability to remember correctly who ordered what without the need to write anything down. It is said that she had to go back to the restaurant to get the jacket she left there. Much to her surprise, the waiter she admired just minutes ago for his great memory didn’t even recognize her. Questioned about what seemed to her a contradiction, he explained that all the waiters had no problem remembering the orders and matching them with the guests at the table. But the very second diners left the restaurant, the waiters all forgot them completely and focused on the next group. Zeigarnik successfully reproduced what is now known as the Zeigarnik effect: Open tasks tend to occupy our short-term memory – until they are done. That is why we get so easily distracted by thoughts of unfinished tasks, regardless of their importance. But thanks to Zeigarnik’s follow-up research, we also know that we don’t actually have to finish tasks to convince our brains to stop thinking about them. All we have to do is to write them down in a way that convinces us that it will be taken care of. That’s right: The brain doesn’t distinguish between an actual finished task and one that is postponed by taking a note. By writing something down, we literally get it out of our heads. This is why David Allen’s “[Getting things done](https://amzn.to/39PIqdm)” system works: The secret to have a “mind like water” is to get all the little stuff out of our short-term memory.” ([Location 1301](https://readwise.io/to_kindle?action=open&asin=B06WVYW33Y&location=1301))"

According to Ahrens, Zeigarnik, and David Allen, in order to have a clear and focused mind, and thus one free of anxiety, we must get these important, but currently extraneous and distracting ideas out of our heads.

We must trust that these ideas and tasks will be dealt with later, even though we are dispensing with them now.

### This is why you must have a system of note taking that works for you, and you must use it.

There are many possible methods ranging from the simplest - a list on a piece of paper, to the most complex - a “slip-box” or zettelkasten.

For more information on task lists, and creating a system of getting things done, the book [*Getting Things Done*](https://amzn.to/39PIqdm), by David Allen is widely considered to be the bible. For more information on the “slip-box” or zettelkasten, read [*How to Take Smart Notes*](https://amzn.to/2MS7tTY) by Sönke Ahrens.

Sometimes off-loading tasks is not enough to gain focus and clarity. Even a single problem can have many parts to it and can be difficult to sort through at first.

The best way to clarify your thoughts is to flesh them out and focus on one at a time. The best way to do this is on paper. I suppose it’s possible for some people to do this in their heads, but I am not one of them. And, according to an [interesting article](https://www.artofmanliness.com/articles/the-pocket-notebooks-of-20-famous-men/), I am not alone. Many famous intellectuals kept notebooks including: Mark Twain, George S. Patton, Thomas Jefferson, Charles Darwin, Beethoven, Hemingway, Benjamin Franklin, Rockefeller, Edison, Newton, and of course Leonardo da Vinci. These are just a few examples. These geniuses obviously knew that writing is essential to thinking.

### This is why my next technique for managing stress and anxiety is: [thinking on paper](https://www.thinkingdirections.com/speed-up-confusing-bogged-down-tasks-by-slowing-down-your-thinking/).

Briefly, thinking on paper is the process of writing down your thoughts in full sentences. Since a sentence represents a unit of thought—an entity and its action—writing in full sentences causes you to focus on one idea at a time. It also causes you to notice contradictions and missing pieces in your thoughts.

The process of writing facilitates the identification of the issues at hand, and promotes step by step causal thinking. In other words, writing facilitates the process of reason and reason leads to clarity.

As you write your ideas, you can identify the relationships between them. For instance, I was not sure what to write about in this issue of the newsletter. I read journals, books, and articles on many topics this past week, and they were all swimming around in my mind. The night before I wrote this draft, I first attempted to summarize what I’ve been learning and thinking about. After a few sentences, I saw a pattern emerging. I realized that I could write about mental health. On reflection, this idea passed through my mind earlier in the week, but it didn’t solidify until it was on paper; only then it became concrete and clear.

Ridding your mind of irrelevant tasks and ideas gives you space to think. When thinking still doesn’t work, think on paper. This can help clarify thoughts.

Tactical breathing, task lists, and thinking on paper are all effective tactics that can help us turn panic into calm, anxiety into confidence, and confusion into clarity.

## But even the calmest, clearest, most purposeful people can still suffer from yet another more insidious type of stress: disappointment.

**disappointment**: the state or feeling of being depressed or discouraged by the failure of one’s hopes or expectations. - *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, College Edition, 1969* says that

Unfortunately, many people who appear remarkably successful often fail to experience a feeling of success.

Guy Winch Ph.D., a clinical psychologist recently appeared on Peter Attia’s podcast, *The Drive*. Guy and Peter discussed a variety of mental health topics. [The episode](https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/guy-winch-ph-d-emotional-first-aid-how-to-treat-psychological/id1400828889?i=1000506478059) is worth a full listen. One of their discussions was about individuals who do not enjoy their own success. You can read a transcript of the excerpt below, [or click here to listen to the clip](https://www.airr.io/quote/601c5e4eeed6321c6da7e378).

**Peter**: You’ve talked extensively about the impact of failure on our emotional health. A lot of what you just described can be viewed as a failure, right: By definition, if you’re willing to compare yourself to a broad enough array, you’re a failure. I mean, there’s always someone who is smarter, better looking, richer, more popular. There’s no metric by which I couldn’t in 30 seconds come up with 10 people who are better than me. So what is the antidote to that misery that comes from comparison? **Guy**: First of all, it’s a true misery, and the issue is that, for example, I work with a lot of successful people. They don’t think of themselves as failures. It’s more painful. They just don’t think of themselves as successful because they’ve only made 20 million and they’re looking at the person who made 50. There’s something extraordinarily tragic about someone who went from nothing to $20 million and doesn’t think of it as a success, right? I mean, that’s just unfortunate that you would spend so much effort to get somewhere and have zero appreciation for the fact that you’re there. I work with somebody once who tried to climb Everest and only made it to base camp, and I was like, “Oh, my god, you made it to base camp?” They were like, “yeah but I didn’t get to the top of Everest.” I’m like, “again, you made it to base camp?” In other words, that’s actually impressive. It’s not that simple. It’s not that easy. And if you keep looking up, you will never, ever be satisfied you will never, ever be happy. And one of the things I say to my patients all the time is if you just pause and celebrate these stations along the way, it doesn’t mean you’re done. This idea that I only celebrate when I reached the top of the heap that doesn’t have a top is such a bad life plan, because you will never be satisfied. You will always feel envious. You will always feel insufficient, even though you’ve done so much – how unfortunate. And it is very difficult to get people to look down or look sideways rather than up"

* *Source*: #146 - Guy Winch, Ph.D.: [Emotional First Aid and How to Treat Psychological Injuries](https://peterattiamd.com/guywinch/) by The Peter Attia Drive

### In this conversation, Peter and Guy identify two separate reasons that make people feel inappropriately unsuccessful;

1. Improper goal setting
2. Improper measurement

#### The common error in goal setting is: setting an **outcome** based goal rather than an **effort**, or **process** based goal.

In the example of the Everest climber, they set the goal of climbing to the top of Everest. This is a set up for failure. A better goal would have been to say, “I will make my best effort to climb Everest.” To be a success, you must in fact make your best effort, but you need not actually make the summit.

Consider my medical practice as another example. An outcome based goal would be, “I will have a practice with X clients and Y revenue within the next year.” Contrast this with an effort or processed based goal. For instance: “I am going to spend 10 hours per day building my business and providing as much value as I can to my clients.”

For the climber, an avalanche, bad weather, an illness, or injury will make him a failure if he has the improper goal. For me, a pandemic, financial collapse, or a few bad business ideas will make me a failure. With the process based goals, consistent efforts make you a success no matter the outcome.

Aside: Of course in business you do also need quantitative measures of success, which ultimately include profitability in some form or another. But for the purpose of this article, I'm not talking about the success of a specific business, but rather an individual identifies themselves as fundamentally successful or not.

#### The common errors in measuring success are:

1. Measuring in comparison to others
2. Measuring compared to your future self rather than to your past self

Both of these can be reduced to one mistake - comparing yourself to anyone other than your past self.

The millionaire in Peter Attia’s podcast measured his success in comparison to others instead of in comparison to his past self.

Alex Epstein is a writer, philosopher, and advocate of industrial progress. He talks about this mistake on his podcast, [*The Human Flourishing Project*](https://industrialprogress.com/the-human-flourishing-project/). He tells a story of himself as a beginning writer. At that time, he was learning to research and write, but hadn’t yet made much money. Instead, he was losing money and going into debt. He saw himself as a failure. When he relayed his feelings to a close friend, this friend was dismayed. The friend pointed out the enormous amount of progress that Alex had already made, and the necessity of the hard work and debt that Alex was investing for future achievements. Alex says that this change in perspective was transformative for him. At first, all Alex could see was that he was still far away from his goals. After talking with his friend, though, Alex could see how far he had come from his starting point. This change in perspective enabled him to feel successful, and made him feel positive towards his work.

* [Listen to the clip from the podcast](https://www.airr.io/quote/601c63ff4f97f694c4b261cc).

Interestingly, if you set an effort based goal instead of an outcome based goal, the only way to measure yourself is to look at your past efforts. In this way, proper goal setting avoids all of the above problems and further, it causes us to focus on our efforts rather than an uncertain future.

Of course it’s also true that you have to be an honest appraiser of your own efforts, and you may need to work harder, change course, try something new, or you might even need to change careers. None of these course corrections constitute failure in-and-of-themselves so long as you’re pursuing proper goals.

To recapitulate, a proper goal, I believe, is self-referential, effort or process based, and is measured by looking backwards. -

## In review, I’ve done my best to present three distinct types of stress, and to provide methods for dealing with each.

The first type of stress is acute stress, or panic. In its most severe form, panic is both cognitive and physiologic, so you must do something that is both cognitive and physiologic to break away from it. My favorite technique that is battle tested and emergency medicine tested is called “tactical breathing.” The method that I use is a 4 count method. The technique begins with 4 seconds of deep inhalation. Then, hold your breath for 4 seconds. Next, exhale for 4 seconds, and finally, hold your breath out for 4 seconds. Repeat this cycle 4 times. When this is complete, you should be mentally and physically calmed.

Once you are calm, you should be able to perform. But, sometimes you may still feel anxiety because your mind is overloaded and scattered, and you don’t know what to do next. In this scenario, retrieve pen and paper and dump extraneous ideas and tasks that are filling your mind. Pick the one or two ideas or tasks that must be dealt with now, and trust that you will return to the list later to finish remaining tasks.

Now you know what to do, but you still may not know how to do it. That’s okay. Think on paper. Write your ideas in full sentences. Look for contradictions, inconsistencies, and holes. Find the relationship between your ideas. Consider following Jean Moroney’s “[One-Minute Rule](https://www.thinkingdirections.com/the-one-minute-rule-for-thinking-on-paper/)” for thinking on paper.

When you’re feeling disappointed in yourself, check your method of self-evaluation. Make sure your goals are explicit. This means writing them down on paper in full sentences. Make sure the goals are process or effort based. Measure your success not in comparison to others, but instead based on your own progress and effort.

## Resources

* *Getting Things Done* by David Allen
* *How to Take Smart Notes* by Sönke Ahrens
* Thinking on Paper by Jean Moroney
* Tactical Breathing
* Guy Winch Ph.D. on Peter Attia’s *The Drive*
* *The Human Flourishing Project* by Alex Epstein
* Task and Idea Management Systems
  + My favorite: RoamResearch
  + Todoist
  + Google Tasks
  + Paper notebook like a moleskin
  + a nearly endless list of productivity and task apps.