

## How the 3-3-3 Rule for Anxiety Can Calm Your Mind

This simple and effective technique can help you head off a thought spiral

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Many of us struggle with anxiety in our daily lives, whether it's due to work stress, personal challenges, or just the general chaos of the world around us. However, there are strategies we can use to cope with anxiety and keep it from overwhelming us. Enter: the 3-3-3 rule.

The 3-3-3 rule is a super simple technique that can help you regain control and calm your mind. It essentially requires you to identify three things you can see, three things you can hear, and three ways you can move your body.

"It's basically a way of distracting yourself from your anxiety by shifting your attention to your senses," says Aimee Daramus, PsyD, a clinical psychologist at Clarity Clinic, Chicago. "By redirecting your focus away from anxious thoughts, it grounds you in the present moment," says Leigh McInnis, LPC, executive director of Newport Healthcare in Virginia.

In this article, we'll explore what the 3-3-3 rule is, how it works, and why it can be a game-changer for anyone looking to manage their anxiety more effectively.

### At a Glance

When you're feeling anxious, you can cut off the spiral of stressful thoughts by using the 3-3-3 rule. Here's how to do it:

- Notice three things you can see around you.
- Identify three sounds you can hear.
- Move three parts of your body.

Yes, it's that simple! You can repeat this process if you need to until you feel more calm and composed.

# How to Use the 3-3-3 Rule for Anxiety

If you find yourself getting caught up in anxious thoughts, you can use the 3-3-3 technique to bring your attention back to the present moment.

Here's how to do it:

- **Look around:** Identify three things you can see. Take a moment to really observe these objects, noting their details, colors, and shapes. "This process helps to shift your focus from internal anxiety to your external environment," says McInnis.
- **Listen closely:** Find three sounds you can hear. These could be as loud as a blaring siren or as subtle as the hum of an air conditioner.
- **Move your body:** Move three parts of your body. It could be as simple as rolling your shoulders, wiggling your toes, or turning your head. Pay attention to the sensations caused by each movement.

The beauty of the 3-3-3 rule lies in its simplicity and accessibility—it's a technique you can use anywhere and anytime. What's more, you can repeat it as many times as needed, until you feel more calm and collected.

## Pro Tip

If you're prone to anxiety, it may be helpful to be prepared. Dr. Daramus suggests making:

- A sensory bag with tiny objects to touch and look at
- A photo album on your phone with pictures you enjoy looking at
- A playlist of sensory music

This way, if you find yourself feeling anxious, you have something with you to look at or listen to.

## Scientific Basis of the 3-3-3 Rule

The 3-3-3 rule is a grounding technique. By engaging our body and our physical senses, grounding techniques interrupt the flow of anxious thoughts and bring our focus back to the present moment.



It works because we only have so much attention to give at any moment. If we're giving our attention to a tree, a flower, a bird, or a picture on our phone, the anxiety is denied that attention, so it automatically decreases."

— AIMEE DARAMUS, PSYD

Let's unpack how this technique works:

- **Engages the senses:** Anxiety often has us ruminating over stressful or negative thoughts. The 3-3-3 rule forces us to shift our attention away from those thoughts and focus on our sensory experiences. Engaging the senses diffuses the hyper-alert state we're in, says McInnis.
- **Promotes mindfulness:** The 3-3-3 rule encourages mindfulness by directing our attention to our surroundings (things we see and hear) and our body (our movements). This helps to redirect our focus away from anxious thoughts and grounds us in the present moment, McInnis explains.
- **Calms the stress response:** Anxiety often triggers the body's stress response, leading to physical symptoms like increased heart rate and muscle tension. Grounding exercises, like the 3-3-3 technique, activate the parasympathetic nervous system, which counteracts the stress response and relaxes the body.
- **Disables triggers:** The 3-3-3 rule helps redirect our attention from internal **anxiety triggers** to external, non-threatening stimuli. This can help reduce the power of the trigger.
- **Relieves muscle tension:** Physical movement relieves muscle tension, a common symptom of anxiety, and promotes a sense of control over the body, further anchoring us in the present.

## Other Coping Strategies for Anxiety

There are several techniques that can help us manage anxiety. What works for one person may not always work for another, so it can be helpful to try different methods to find what works best for you.

These are some coping strategies that may be helpful:

- **Deep breathing:** Taking slow, deep breaths can help you relax and calm down. This is an easy exercise that you can do just about anywhere. All you have to do is start paying attention to your breath and the way the air fills up your lungs as you inhale and exhale. Keep your focus on your breath, bringing it back if it wanders, until you feel calmer.
- **Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR):** PMR is a relaxation technique that involves tensing and then slowly releasing different muscle groups in your body. You can start from your toes and work your way up to your head, tensing each muscle group for a few seconds before releasing it. This exercise is best performed when you're lying down on your back, so you can relax completely.
- **Visualization:** Imagining peaceful scenes can help reduce your anxiety by distracting your mind from stressful thoughts. When you feel anxious, try to close your eyes and visualize a place where you feel safe and relaxed, such as a beach or a forest.
- **Journaling:** If you like, you can write down your thoughts and feelings in a journal, to help reduce anxiety. You can spend a few minutes each day writing down what's on your mind or keeping a gratitude journal to focus on positive aspects of your life.
- **Social support:** Talking to friends, family, or a support group can be comforting. When you feel anxious, reach out to talk to someone you trust.
- **Hobbies:** Doing things you enjoy can distract your mind from anxious thoughts, while also providing a sense of happiness and accomplishment. Make time for your hobby, whether it's reading, painting, gardening, or playing an instrument.
- **Exercise:** Physical activity reduces stress hormones and releases endorphins, which are natural mood lifters. Walking, running, dancing, swimming, and yoga are all great options.
- **Therapy:** If you're having difficulty coping with anxiety, it can be helpful to reach out to a mental healthcare provider. A therapist can help you explore the causes of your anxiety, identify triggers, and develop healthier coping mechanisms.

## Takeaways

The 3-3-3 rule can be a powerful tool for managing anxiety, offering a simple yet effective way to regain control of your senses during stressful moments. By grounding you in the present and engaging your senses, this technique can help disrupt the cycle of anxious thoughts.

However, it's important to remember that anxiety can be a complex issue. If you find that anxiety is significantly impacting your daily life, don't hesitate to seek professional help. A therapist can provide additional tools and strategies to manage your anxiety and help you live a fulfilling life.

If you or a loved one are struggling with anxiety, contact the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) National Helpline at **1-800-662-4357** for information on support and treatment facilities in your area.

For more mental health resources, see our National Helpline Database.

## 6 Sources

Verywell Mind uses only high-quality sources, including peer-reviewed studies, to support the facts within our articles. Read our editorial process to learn more about how we fact-check and keep our content accurate, reliable, and trustworthy.

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