

How to reduce anxiety

Feelings of anxiety — uneasiness, dread, fear, or an inexplicable sense of impending doom — can be deeply unpleasant. Whether anxiety presents itself as an upset stomach, heart palpitations, a nervous tension that colors everything, or even a panic attack, the discomfort and distress can be extremely challenging.

We're not talking about general, everyday anxiousness here, but clinical anxiety — the kind that can be all-consuming and, sometimes, debilitating. When classified as a disorder, anxiety is “persistent and excessive worry” where individuals can lose rational perspective and “expect the worst, even when there is no apparent reason for concern,” according to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America.

Chronic or severe symptoms may be a sign of generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), which affects close to 40 million adults in the US and, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), 1 in 13 globally. Thankfully, there are effective therapies and medications as doctors and healthcare professionals determine the best treatment options that are right for you.

No matter where we are on the scale, there are natural remedies for anxiety that are worth considering, either on their own or as a complement to traditional treatments (though if you are getting professional care, talk to your doctor first). Some are lifestyle changes that can help lessen anxiety over time, such as a regular meditation practice, physical activity, spending time outdoors, or making a few food swaps. Others, like deep breathing and distraction techniques, can provide natural anxiety relief the moment the mind sends an SOS.

With the right skills and lifestyle changes, we can better regulate our emotions and train our brain to view life with a more balanced, less fearful perspective. Here's how to relieve anxiety naturally, and with awareness.

How to ease anxiety: 4 ways to feel calmer right now

1. Take some deep breaths.

When we're anxious, our breath becomes rapid and shallow. Deep belly breathing helps decrease anxiety by stimulating the body's relaxation response, lowering our heart rate and blood pressure. It's a powerful technique that works because we can't breathe deeply and be anxious at the same time. There are many variations to try, including this simple exercise:

Inhale deeply for a count of 4.

Hold your breath for a count of 4.

Exhale for a count of 4.

Repeat several times.

2. Go for a walk.

Exercise is one of the best anxiety remedies, immediately and long term. Going for a walk creates a diversion from worries and releases muscle tension. Grab your headphones or earbuds on the way out: studies show that listening to music brings its own calming effects.

Long term, regular exercise triggers the release of feel-good neurochemicals in the brain, building up resilience against stormy emotions. It boosts confidence and mood, and we don't need to run a marathon to feel the benefits. Washing the car, hiking, gardening, a pick-up game — anything that gets us moving counts. Research shows that 30 minutes, 3 to 5 days a week can help to significantly improve anxiety symptoms, but even 10 minutes can make a difference.

3. Sip some chamomile or green tea.

Known as a sleep aid, chamomile contains a compound called Matricaria recutita, which binds to the same brain receptors as drugs like Valium. Chamomile's sedative effects may also come from the flavonoid apigenin. In one study, patients with generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) who took chamomile supplements (1.2 % apigenin) for 8 weeks showed a significant decrease in anxiety symptoms compared with patients taking placebo. (Despite improved quality control, herbal supplements aren't regulated by the FDA the way medications are, so before taking any supplement, check with your doctor.)

Green tea, long used in Chinese medicine to treat depression, contains the amino acid L-theanine, which relieves stress, and reduces blood pressure and muscle tension.

4. Get distracted.

Try anything that redirects your attention away from distressing thoughts or emotions: run your fingers around the edge of your phone, put your hands under running cold water, color or draw on a piece of paper. Distractions work because the brain can't be in 2 places at once, and shifting attention to any activity will interrupt a string of racing thoughts.

7 ways to help lower anxiety naturally

1. Get a good night's sleep.

Research shows that after a full night of sleep — 7-9 hours is ideal — we're likely to feel less anxious and more confident. Physical activity during the day will help us sleep better, too. And remember: if winding down for the night includes reading before bed, don't make these mistakes.

2. Fill the plate with anti-anxiety foods.

Science is discovering more about the “gut-brain connection.” Researchers often refer to the belly as the second brain, since about 95% of serotonin receptors are found in the lining of the gut. (It's why we get butterflies in our stomach when we're anxious.) Science shows that foods containing certain vitamins and minerals may help reduce anxiety, so when we're thinking about natural ways to help anxiety, consider filling up on these:

- Leafy greens, legumes, nuts, seeds, and whole grains, which are rich in magnesium. Evidence suggests that magnesium may have a beneficial effect on anxiety.
- Oysters, liver, and egg yolks contain the mineral zinc, which has been linked to lower anxiety.
- Wild Alaskan salmon is rich in omega-3 fatty acids, which may reduce anxiety.
- Turkey contains an amino acid called tryptophan, which the body needs to produce the neurotransmitter serotonin that helps regulate sleep and mood.
- Berries, apples, prunes, cherries, plums, broccoli, beets, and spices like ginger and turmeric are all high in antioxidants. Anxiety is thought to be correlated with lower levels. Artichokes and asparagus, which is widely used in Chinese medicine, are known for their anti-anxiety properties.

It might also be a good idea to limit caffeine and alcohol — both of which can aggravate symptoms of anxiety.

3. Take a vitamin B-complex or a probiotic supplement.

Research shows that B vitamins have many health and quality of life benefits, and supplementing with B vitamins is gaining scientific traction. This 2018 study found that people who ate food high in B vitamins showed significant improvements in their anxiety and stress scores than those who did not. Taking a high-quality B-complex supplement is generally very safe, since B vitamins are water-soluble, meaning the body excretes what it doesn't use. But always consult with your doctor before taking any supplements since they can interact with medications or have side effects.

4. Warm up in a steam room, sauna, Jacuzzi, or hot bath.

Most of us associate feelings of warmth with a sense of calm and well-being — much the same way we would relaxing in the sun on a sandy beach. Research shows that heating up the body, whether in a bath, steam room, or sauna, reduces muscle tension and anxiety. Sensations of warmth may alter neural circuits that control mood, including those that affect the neurotransmitter serotonin. Try cozying up by a fire with a cup of tea or hot cocoa, too.

5. Spend time in nature.

Most of us intuitively feel relaxed and less anxious when we're outdoors, but in fact there's science to back that up. Spending time in any natural setting lowers our blood pressure, heart rate, and the body's production of the stress hormone cortisol. Research analyzing data from 10,000 people found that those living near more green space reported less mental distress.

When it comes to the healing power of nature, Japan is clearly at the forefront with their practice of *shinrin-yoku*, roughly translated as "forest bathing," or "taking in the forest atmosphere." It's about experiencing nature through all 5 senses, being mindful and present, absorbing the beauty, sounds, scents, and light in your surroundings. It's a cornerstone of preventive healthcare in Japan, with officially designated trails, organized walks, and guided meditations.

6. Consider complementary treatments like acupuncture, aromatherapy, and massage.

Of course a massage feels fantastic, but it's also recognized as an integrative medicine technique, and often recommended to treat anxiety and insomnia caused by stress. Therapeutic massage relieves muscle tension, improves circulation, and helps lower the fight-or-flight response that's typically overactive in people with anxiety disorders.

Acupuncture has become an accepted treatment for both medical and mental-health conditions, and it's also more widely available, including through many hospitals. (Some insurance policies will cover a set number of treatments.) Acupuncturists and medical professionals are unclear exactly why it helps with anxiety, but research notes that acupuncture appears to have a calming effect. If you're considering treatment, speak with your doctor first. To find a licensed practitioner, check these websites:

- National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine
- American Academy of Medical Acupuncture

Aromatherapy uses essential oils derived from various plants to promote well-being. They can be diffused throughout a room, added to bath water or massage oil, and are an ingredient in body lotions, candles, and incense.

- Lavender oil is known for its soothing effects and promoting restful sleep.
- Lemon essential oil may help lift your mood, calm fearful thoughts, and relieve stress.
- Bergamot oil is said to ease anxiety and encourage deep relaxation.
- Ylang-ylang, derived from the flowers of the ylang-ylang tree, may help with self-esteem perception.

Key takeaways:

- Basic lifestyle changes may help lessen anxiety over time
- The right techniques and tools can offer ASAP relief, too
- Meditation can help us change our relationship to anxiety, so we're able to let feelings come and go