

Why Anxiety Feels So Real



A simple guide to understanding your nervous system and anxiety triggers

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Before we begin...

Anxiety can feel overwhelming, confusing, and even scary.

It can feel like something is wrong with you.

Like your mind is working against you.

Like your body is reacting faster than you can understand.

But what if anxiety isn't random?

What if it actually makes sense once you understand what your nervous system is doing?

*This guide will help you begin to see anxiety in a new way—
not as something to fight,
but as something to understand.*

What anxiety actually is

Anxiety is not just “overthinking.”

*It is a **nervous system response**.*

Your nervous system is designed to keep you safe. It constantly scans your environment and your internal sensations for signs of danger.

When it detects something it perceives as a threat, it activates a survival response:

- *Fight*
- *Flight*
- *Freeze*
- *Fawn*

The problem is:

Your nervous system doesn't always distinguish between real danger and perceived danger.

So it can react strongly to:

- *Thoughts*
- *Memories*
- *Emotions*
- *Relationship dynamics*
- *Bodily sensations*

Even when you are physically safe.

A helpful way to understand this is to think of a smoke detector in your house.

It's designed to go off at the first sign of smoke to keep you safe. Sometimes it reacts to burnt toast or steam from the shower. The alarm isn't broken — it's just being overly sensitive.

Your brain works the same way. Sometimes it sounds the alarm for situations that are uncomfortable but not truly dangerous.

When that happens, you can recognize it and let your brain know you're actually safe: false alarm.

Your body isn't working against you — it's actually working for you.

Why anxiety feels so real in your body

Anxiety is not just in your thoughts—it lives in your body.

When your nervous system activates, it can cause:

- *Racing heart*
- *Tight chest*
- *Shallow breathing*
- *Dizziness*
- *Nausea*
- *Restlessness*
- *A sense of "something is wrong"*

Your body's natural survival response has been activated.

Your nervous system is turning on what's called the **fight, flight, or freeze response** — an intelligent, built-in alarm system designed to protect you from danger.

When this response turns on, your body releases stress hormones — especially **adrenaline** (and cortisol).

Adrenaline is what creates many of the physical sensations you feel.

These sensations are real physiological responses.

That's why anxiety feels so convincing.

Your body is responding as if something is happening—even when it isn't.

Why you keep getting triggered

Triggers are not random.

They are usually connected to past experiences where your nervous system learned:

“This situation is unsafe.”

So now, even in different situations, your body may react the same way.

Common examples:

- *Fear of abandonment → relationship anxiety*
- *Criticism → shame or shutdown*
- *Conflict → panic or over-explaining*
- *Silence or distance → overthinking or fear*

Your nervous system is not trying to hurt you.

It is trying to protect you using old information.

A different perspective

Instead of asking:

“How do I get rid of anxiety?”

Try asking:

“What is my nervous system trying to protect me from?”

This shift changes everything.

Because now anxiety is no longer the enemy—it becomes information.

And when you can understand the message, you can begin to respond differently.

You are not broken

Your nervous system is doing exactly what it was designed to do: protect you.

But sometimes, protection becomes overactive.

And when that happens, you don't need more self-criticism.

You need understanding, safety, and new experiences that teach your body:

"I am safe now."

That is where healing begins.

How to Calm Your Anxiety in the Moment

When you're in the middle of an anxiety or panic attack, calming your nervous system is the quickest way to help your heart rate come down and feel more in control.

In simple terms:

It's the act of lowering your anxiety when it suddenly spikes — whether you feel panicked, overwhelmed, or angry.

When anxiety hits hard, most people react in very normal ways. Your body thinks you're in danger, so it goes into survival mode. You might:

- Fight the feelings ("Make it stop right now!")
- Try to escape the situation immediately
- Search for reassurance (calling someone, googling symptoms, checking your pulse)
- Spiral with "what if" thoughts
- Freeze up or feel disconnected from your body
- Reach for something to quickly numb the feeling

These reactions make sense in the moment. But they often keep the anxiety going longer.

The good news?

There's a better way.

Instead of fighting the sensations or running from them, you can gently **calm your nervous system** in the moment.

How Calming Actually Helps

During intense anxiety, your body is in full "fight-or-flight" mode. Your thinking brain basically goes offline, making it hard to think clearly or feel safe.

Calming is like turning down the volume on a very loud alarm. It sends safety signals to your body, so the panic starts to settle. Once the intensity drops, you can move back into a calmer, steadier state.

Put simply:

Calming tools don't just help you "relax." They speak directly to your body in the language it understands best — physical safety cues. That's why they often work faster than trying to think your way out of it.

Below are five simple calming tools you can use right away when anxiety spikes. Everyone is different, so experiment and see what works best for you. Sometimes even one tool is enough.

1. Slow, Intentional Breathing

When your nervous system enters fight-or-flight, breathing often becomes faster and more shallow.

One of the fastest ways to signal safety to your nervous system is through your breath.

When you slow your breathing and make your exhale slightly longer than your inhale, it activates the body's calming response. Longer exhales help signal to your nervous system that the danger has passed and that it can begin to settle.

Even a few slow breaths like this can begin to shift your nervous system out of survival mode.

Try this simple rhythm:

Breathe in slowly through your nose for **4 seconds**

Hold for **4 seconds**

Then breathe out slowly through your mouth for **7 seconds**

You don't need to breathe perfectly. Just breathe slowly and gently.

2. Ground Yourself in the Present

Anxiety pulls the mind into the future.

"What if this gets worse?"

"What if I lose control?"

Grounding helps bring you back to the present moment.

Try the **5-4-3-2-1 technique**:

5 things you can see

4 things you can feel

3 things you can hear

2 things you can smell

1 thing you can taste

This reminds your nervous system: "I'm here. I'm safe."

3. Relax Your Body (Progressive Muscle Release)

Tension often fuels anxiety. During anxiety, muscles tighten automatically. You can interrupt this by releasing tension.

Try:

- A.** Shrug your shoulders toward your ears. Hold for 5 seconds. Then slowly release for 10 seconds.
- B.** Clench your fists tightly. Hold for 5 seconds. Then slowly release for 10 seconds.

This signals the body that it doesn't need to stay in high alert.

4. Temperature Reset

Cold sensations quickly calm the nervous system.

Try:

- A.** Splash **cold water on your face**
- B.** Hold an **ice cube**
- C.** Put a **cool cloth on your neck**

This activates the **Diving Reflex**, which slows heart rate.

5. Reassure Your Nervous System

How you speak to yourself during anxiety matters.

Instead of catastrophizing, try reassuring language:

"This is anxiety."

"My body is trying to protect me."

"These sensations are uncomfortable, but they are not dangerous."

"This will pass."

You're not arguing with anxiety.

You're guiding your nervous system back to safety.

What If You're Feeling Anxious — But Not in Full Panic?

You don't always need a long or formal calming routine.

Sometimes anxiety is present, but it hasn't fully spiked into panic.

Maybe your mind feels unsettled.

Maybe your chest feels a little tight.

Maybe you feel on edge, overstimulated, or uneasy — but not like you're about to lose control.

In those moments, you may not need to “do all the things.”

Sometimes one small calming signal is enough.

That might look like:

- taking one slow breath
- placing a hand on your chest
- dropping your shoulders
- grounding your feet into the floor
- gently reminding yourself, “*I’m safe right now.*”

You can also move more quickly into regulation tools when the anxiety feels lighter.

The most important thing is still the same:

Send a small signal of safety to your nervous system.

That’s what helps interrupt the spiral before it grows.

Ready to go deeper?

If this guide resonated with you, you’re not alone—and you don’t have to navigate this by yourself.

Through coaching, we can work together to:

- *Understand your anxiety patterns*
 - *Regulate your nervous system*
 - *Identify your triggers*
 - *Build emotional safety and confidence*
 - *Create lasting change in your relationships and life*
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