



Mind over Matter Scotland

QUICK EXERCISES TO STOP ANXIETY IN ITS TRACKS

When we experience anything, the first thing our brain does is to try to associate this experience to any similar ones from the past. When it finds a similarity, no matter how small, it associates the two experiences to save time in the future and strengthens the appropriate neural pathway. You can think of it like this, one thought creates a single thread, each subsequent thought adds another thread and eventually, if you think or behave in a certain way, the neural pathway ends up more like a thick rope.

Hebb's Law states that 'neurons that fire together wire together' and just as a musician or a sportsman improves their performance with practice, the more we think or behave in a certain way, the better we become at it.

Anxiety unfortunately works exactly this way. I've heard it described as 'a typical bully who is tough, thick and overly touchy', which makes it easily triggered. The good news is that neuroscience tells us that it is possible to weaken even the toughest neural pathways and replace them with stronger, more beneficial responses.

You may hear, see or remember something that causes a reaction resulting in feeling anxious. This shows it is a structural problem and it is possible to dismantle the structure of anxiety by interrupting the chain of thought.

Once you know that anxiety can't arrive from nowhere, that it must be generated, it means that you can begin to change it and the exercises in this little booklet give you ways to do just that.

The exercises are as follows:

Page 2	Jaw Drop
Page 2	Side to side
Page 3	Two steps to calm
Page 3	My lips are sealed
Page 4	Ground control
Page 4	So-so



Mind over Matter Scotland

Jaw Drop

This is a nice simple one, read through the instructions a couple of times before doing it.

To begin, allow your jaw to drop open. Give it a wiggle if it helps to relax it. Place a hand on your tummy.

Making sure you can feel your tummy expanding as you breathe in, breathe in for a count of two (through your nose if possible), hold it for a couple of seconds and on the out breath, breathe out for a count of four and relax the jaw even further.

Do this again, again in for 2, out for 4, loosening the jaw on the out breath.

...and again, this time increasing the count in to 3 and the count out to 6.

With practice it's possible to breathe in for 4 and out for 8 though it's still effective with a lower count. The important bit is for the out breath to be double the in breath

Sciency bit!

This exercise engages the vagus nerve which associates with the heart and lungs through the body's parasympathetic nervous system and it counteracts the fight or flight response.

Side to Side

Pick up something you can pass from hand to hand.

Think of something that causes an anxious feeling

Rate it between 1 and 10 (with 10 being the worst it can feel and one being barely noticeable)

Hold both hands out in front of you and begin to pass the item from hand to hand, swinging the arms to pass the centre line of your body each time. Continue for a minute, take a deep breath and rate the feeling. Do it again if necessary, until the feeling has gone.

This exercise engages both hemispheres of the brain, sending chaotic neural messages and spreading blood through several areas of the brain. This confuses the anxiety driven neural pathway into submission.



Mind over Matter Scotland

Two Steps to Calm

Our brains love symbols and imagery. So much of our everyday language is made up of metaphors and similes e.g. time is money, it's raining cats and dogs as strong as an ox, as blind as a bat. We use these figures of speech without thinking and they engage our imagination to make sense of the world

It's so easy for us to do, it also makes sense to use this language along with imagination to help ourselves. I often use this technique.

Many people can describe anxiety.

Ask yourself "what is this feeling like?"

I once had someone who described anxiety as a huge, cold metal ball that rolled heavily around their gut. When I asked what needed to happen for it to change, she told me that she would have to wedge it still and heat it up so it would melt and pour away when she breathed out.

I asked her to close her eyes and imagine doing that. Her response was that the anxiety had immediately reduced, and she smiled.

So easy it seems *too* easy, yet so often it dissolves anxiety effortlessly.

Go on, have a go - it's worth playing around with this technique!

My lips are sealed

Another exercise that engages the parasympathetic nervous system by stimulating parasympathetic fibres spread over the lips.

Lightly run one or two fingers over your lips. It's extraordinary how this simple gesture can produce an immediate sense of calm in both mind and the body."



Mind over Matter Scotland

Ground Control

This can be done in two parts, together or separately.

Stage one - standing

Stand up, plant feet flat on the floor, shoulder width apart and imagine you're breathing through the soles of your feet. Pretend that as you breathe in, your breath is being drawn up from the ground and through your body.

On each in breath, imagine the breath reaching a different body part and as you breathe out, your breath returns to the ground.

Stage two – walking

Choose a leading foot and set off walking slowly, noticing the way your feet feel with each step you take. Notice what your feet look like, what they feel like and sound like with every step. Extend this noticing to your ankles, lower legs, thighs, hips and all the way up to your head, as far as you go.

Imagine breathing in through your leading foot on an up-step and breathing out as your foot descends, returning the breath to the ground as you plant your foot.

So-so

Questioning or doubting our ability through negative self-talk can feel crippling. This is a brilliant way of giving a metaphoric two fingered salute to the things that inner voice might be whispering, such as:

“What if I make a mess of this?”

“I can't do it!”

“What if they don't like me?”

With this exercise, all you do is add “So” or “So what if...” to the statement. Using the above statements, see the difference in tone.

“So what if I make a mess of this?”

“So what if I can't do it!”

“So what if they don't like me?”

Think of the things you say to yourself and hear how different they sound.