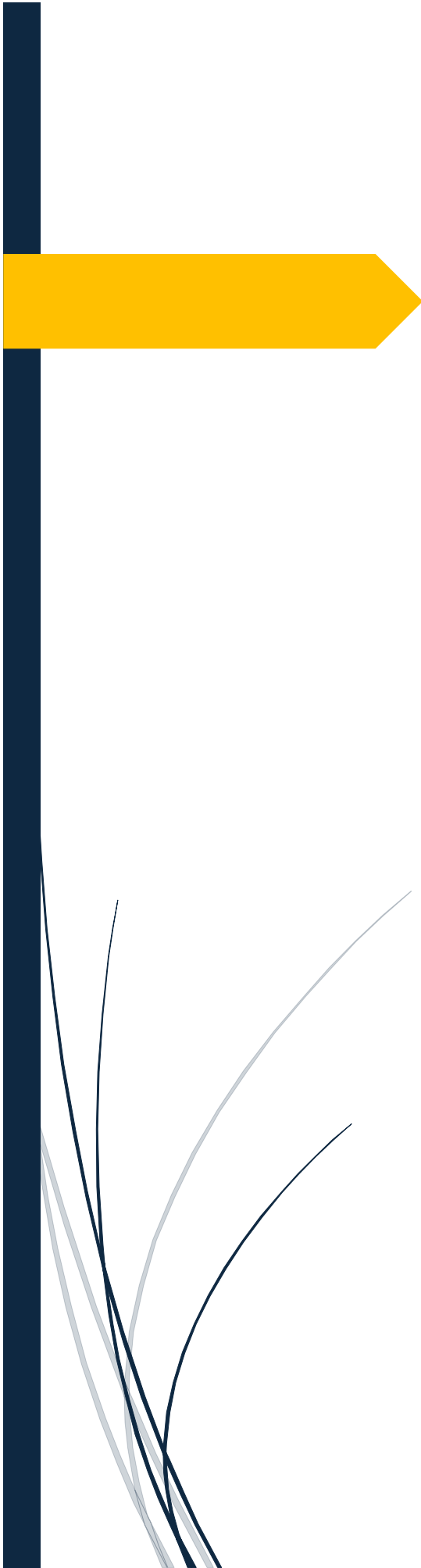




Anxiety & Worry

Tools & Strategies

**Tracy Henderson
Counseling**

Anxiety and worry are *normal* human experiences. They often arise when our brain and body haven't yet gathered enough information to answer a crucial internal question: **"Am I safe?"**

Think of anxiety and worry as your **internal smoke alarm**—a signal that can show up in different forms along a **spectrum**:

- **Silent** – Everything feels fine, I am safe.
- **Chirping** – Something feels off, but I'm not sure what.
- **Louder** – Physical or mental symptoms emerge: tense neck, stomach aches, fast talking, etc.
- **Overload** – If unaddressed, this can lead to intense experiences like panic attacks.

Over time, **anxiety and worry can become habitual**. Sometimes this is helpful (e.g., quickly stepping off a curb to avoid a car), but sometimes it becomes automatic in unhelpful ways—forming patterns that no longer serve us.

It's important to pause and recognize that **anxiety/worry is both**:

- *A natural and useful* part of our survival system
- *A habit* that, when misused, can become unhealthy

When feelings of **worry** or **anxiety** arise, it can be incredibly helpful to have a set of supportive tools and strategies ready. The goal is not to eliminate these emotions entirely—because they are part of the human experience—but to *dilute their impact* so you can stay grounded and present.

Why Preparation Matters

It's often **more effective to practice calming tactics *before*** anxious moments occur. By doing so, you're training your mind and body to respond in a way that supports your well-being—rather than reacting out of habit or fear.

When the challenging emotions *do* arise, you'll be more equipped to respond with intention and self-compassion.

The following pages provide suggested exercises to be curious and practice. Use these exercises to **explore, understand, and reframe** your experiences with anxiety and worry.

Foster a Curious Mindset

Before jumping into strategies, take a moment to get centered and reflect on a few key questions:

- **What is this for me?**
What specific situations or thoughts tend to trigger my feelings of worry or anxiety?
- **What matters to me?**
In this moment, what values or truths help ground me in my identity or purpose?
- **What works for me?**
What tools, practices, or supports help me feel more regulated and calmer?

This self-awareness creates a personalized foundation for navigating challenging moments

Be Curious: Identify Opportunities

- Create a **“Worry List.”**
Write down your current worries.
 - **Rank** them from *least challenging* to *most challenging*.
-

Be Curious: Reflect on What You Already Do

Ask yourself:

- “What do I do when I’m about to do something new?”
 - “What happens *before*, *during*, and *after* these situations?”
-

Be Curious: Take an Awareness Inventory

Tune into your body and write down what you notice:

- Where do I feel worry? (e.g., stomach, chest, shoulders)
 - When do I first notice it?
 - Do I experience symptoms like:
 - Muscle tension?
 - Headaches?
 - Narrowing focus or racing thoughts?
 - Fast breathing?
 - Dry throat?
-

Be Curious: Discover Your Superpowers

Ask yourself:

- “What are my *strengths*?”
(e.g., organized, hardworking, brave, ask for help, creative)
 - How can I use these to address the worries on my list?
-

Be Open: Test & Learn

- Recognize that different situations may require different tools.
 - Stay open, patient, and curious as you explore what works best for *you*.
 - Remember: **There is no one-size-fits-all approach.**
-

Be Willing: To Practice

- Start with one of the *least challenging* worries.
 - Use it as a low-stakes opportunity to try out new strategies.
 - Leverage your strengths to plan for it.
-

Be Collaborative: Talk It Through

- Share your plan with a trusted friend or ally.
 - Discuss how they can support you *during* the situation.
-

Be Reflective & Open to Adjust

- Afterward, evaluate:
 - What worked?
 - What didn't?
- Identify what still needs practice or what tools/skills you might try next time.

Suggested Exercises:

Practice breathing

- When the situation arises, and you begin to experience some worry or anxiousness then practice bringing yourself to the **PRESENT** moment through a short breathing exercise such as "box breathing." Reference: [*Box Breathing*](#)
 - Breathe in for 2-3 seconds through your nose and expand the belly...
 - Hold it for 2-3 seconds...
 - Exhale out for 5-8 seconds through your mouth and compress the belly...(Exhale is longer than the inhale)
 - Hold it for 2-3 seconds...
 - Repeat for 3-5 cycles or 1-2 minutes...
 - Set a reminder to do this 3 times a day as well as when you notice yourself becoming activated.

Practice the fire drill: STOP|DROP|ROLL.

- This translates into STOP what you are currently thinking/doing, DROP into your body and notice what/when/where is holding tension, increasing heart rate/breathing, or building dysregulated energy, and ROLL with the circumstances by focusing on the present moment and immediately stepping away from the situation and self-soothing through one or many techniques/strategies that work for you....

Notice your STUF.

- This translates into a practice of identifying the SENSATIONS taking place in the present moment. Being open to the THOUGHTS that are passing through. Noticing the URGES you are currently experiencing as well as the FEELING labels you are assigning to the circumstances.

Practice giving consent to the circumstances.

- When you begin to experience discomfort, anxious thoughts, or other mixed emotions then try to practice the "pause" and ask yourself a question or two around consent.
 - Ask yourself:
 - *"Do I consent to this experience?"*
 - *"Do I consent to these feelings?"*
 - *"Do I consent to these thoughts?"*
 - Then, if you are not satisfied w/ the situation.

- Practice the mantra: ***"What is a different way of looking at my situation?"***
- Break the thinking loop or the mental spiral that may be occurring by intentionally disrupting the thought pattern with distancing and perspective.

Strengthen your self-compassion muscle through a Loving Kindness practice.

- Referred to as "metta." The practice can support building our ability to let go of what has happened in the past and learn from it so we can move forward in the present.
 - Loving kindness isn't positive self-talk when we're feeling down.
 - It is a genuine well-wishing that we offer to ourselves and others.
- The practice involves developing a series of statements for yourself and towards others. For example:
 - May I be happy...
 - May I be free from harm...
 - May I be healthy...
 - Then, extend the same statements towards someone else or others. For example:
 - May "They/Them" be happy...
 - May "They/Them" be free from harm...
 - May "They/Them" be healthy...
 - Link to learn more: [Loving Kindness](#)

Tap into your senses by noticing or focusing on your surroundings.

- Sensory exercises could include smell, taste, touch, sound, or through vision.
- A commonly used exercise involves 5-4-3-2-1.
 - Touch 5 things that have different surfaces, edges, or tactile feel to them...
 - Taste 4 things that have bitter, sour, sweet, or tart sensations...
 - Smell 3 things that have a range of odor from nice to rancid...
 - Listen for 2 sounds that catch your attention...
 - Focus on 1 object or image that captures your attention and notice the details within it...

Practice focusing your attention on the Bullseye.

- Grab a scrap piece of paper, napkin, or anything handy. Draw a vertical and horizontal line that crosses one another. Then, focus on the intersection where the two lines cross.

Identify how you experience "AWE."

- Practice connecting with something bigger than yourself. The objective is to attempt to connect what you see and experience as well as how it feels within your body. The practice is intended to connect with your body and simmer with the emotions that it offers. Link: [What is AWE?](#)

Consider using 2nd or 3rd person self-talk.

- To help navigate the current circumstances speak to yourself with encouragement and compassion as you would speak to a close friend. E.g., *"John/Jane, you have done this before. You will be okay. Break the steps down and you will finish on time."* Reference: [3rd Person Self-Talk](#) Reference: [Benefits of Self Talk](#)

Consider strategies and exercises to "get it out."

- Such as a "worry" journal or "dump pad." Pick a consistent time of day to give yourself permission to "worry" about "worrying." Then, focus your attention elsewhere!

Address the energy in your body...

- By moving your body to metabolize or discharge the **emotions** of "worry" or "anxiousness" through exercise, chores, or any vigorous activity to get the heart pumping and body in motion, etc.

Finally, a few **"on-going"** strategies to consider may include:

- Limit the "pollution" of noise from news feeds, community updates, social media, etc. by taking a technology time-out or daily/weekly sabbatical by intentionally turning off and stepping away from technology for a few hours, a day, or as long as feasible.
- Filter down or limit the sensory inputs by reducing the amount of multi-tasking. For example, only listen to a podcast vs. listen to a podcast, search on your phone, and listen to music in the background at the same time.
- Create a "zen" zone at bedtime by creating a space in the bedroom that tells your mind and body - "it's time to go to bed!" Reference: [Sleep Hygiene](#)
- Practice slowing down by limiting the *"should's"|"have to's"|"must's* - as well as limiting the number of "tasks" you may be trying to accomplish in an hour/day/week. Take an inventory of the quality activities vs. the quantity activities and attempt to shift the balance towards quality.

- Practice tolerating uncertainty and taking risks. Pick approachable situations where you can practice building tolerance with uncomfortable experiences and/or risky situations that trigger worry or anxious experiences.
 - Practice being "still" and "noticing." Intentionally make time to just "sit" and "notice" what's taking place inside of you as well as notice what's taking place in the environment around you. *Reference:* [Interoception](#)
 - Practice gratitude as well as make time to help others. Focusing on gratitude towards your "self" through writing down what you are grateful for as well as focusing on supporting others can be beneficial to mitigating discomfort. *Reference:* [Gratitude](#)
-

Final Thoughts

Each experience of anxiety or worry is an **opportunity to practice**. With each round of practice, you'll build more **confidence, understanding, and self-agency** in navigating the unknown.

Cultivating emotional tools is an **ongoing practice**. Be kind to yourself as you explore what supports you best. With **time, intention, and curiosity**, you'll build a toolbox that can help you feel more capable and confident, no matter what emotions arise.