

Escaping the Bear: Using Your Body to Confuse Your Anxiety

A psychoeducational article written for the Cal Poly Student Body

by **Sarah Colwell**, Psy.D., a Licensed Clinical Psychologist and
Early Intervention Specialist at Cal Poly Counseling Services



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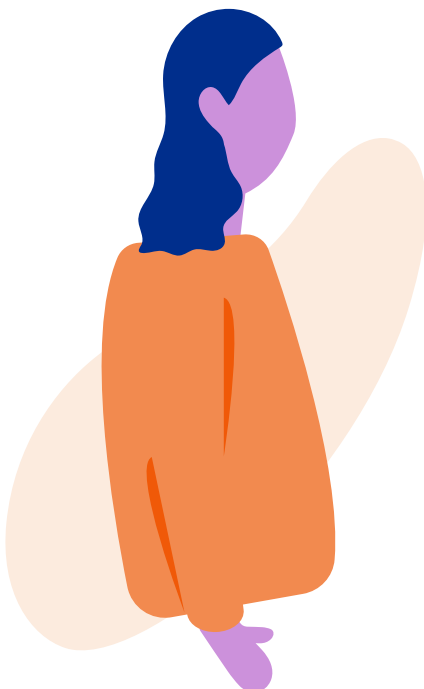
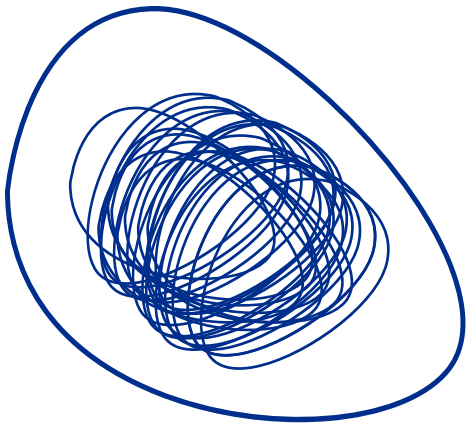
Anxious feelings are a part of being human, albeit sometimes a very uncomfortable part. Anxious feelings are hardwired into us to help us survive. For example, let's imagine you ran into a bear during a hike. Your internal emergency systems would activate, flooding you with adrenalin and other hormones to prepare your body to fight the bear, run away from the bear, or freeze so the bear wouldn't detect you. That all makes sense, right?

What often doesn't feel like it makes sense is when we feel extremely anxious and we see no bear! There may not be a tangible bear before you, but there is likely a metaphorical one that is triggering your emergency system without you being aware it is even occurring. This may be something from your past, something that is occurring biologically, or something in your environment that is causing stress and/or worry. While we might not know exactly what is causing your anxious feelings, we can hold on to the reality that you make sense, your experience of anxiety makes sense, and this anxiety is not a personal or moral shortcoming.

Anxious feelings or being in a state of anxiety is very common right now amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic. Anxiety feelings might include: feeling off, unsafe, restless, or overly tired. They may include behaviors, such as: overeating, seeking constant distractions, or being short with others. Whatever you are feeling, know that it is okay to be experiencing these things. This is an unprecedented time and there is a lot to be scared of. In this case, the bear is an invisible force that has disrupted our lives, throwing them into an unpredictable state.

Whether you're having anxiety feelings related to social distancing and the pandemic or if these are old familiar feelings, there are things you can do to confuse your body into believing that the bear has left and that you're safe now. These skills are inspired by the work I do with students using Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) created by Dr. Marsha M. Linehan. I recommend these skills when your anxiety is moderate to high and your normal self-soothing techniques (e.g., distracting yourself, talking to someone, being kind to yourself, etc) are not working.

The goal is to make your body believe the bear A.K.A the source of your anxiety is gone



Techniques to Try:

Extreme Exercise

So, your body thinks you're about to be attacked by a bear. Then, doesn't it make sense to run!!! You've got all this adrenaline pumping through your body and it needs to go somewhere. While you don't actually have to run, a burst of extreme exercise or activity (according to your physical ability) can help discharge all those chemicals that have been released in your body. It will also hopefully signal to your emergency system, that you have escaped the bear!

Possible **Extreme Exercise Activities**, beyond a quick sprint, include:

- Pacing
- Jumping jacks or jumping rope
- Punching the air
- Dancing to an upbeat song
- Floor push-ups, chair push-ups, or pull-ups

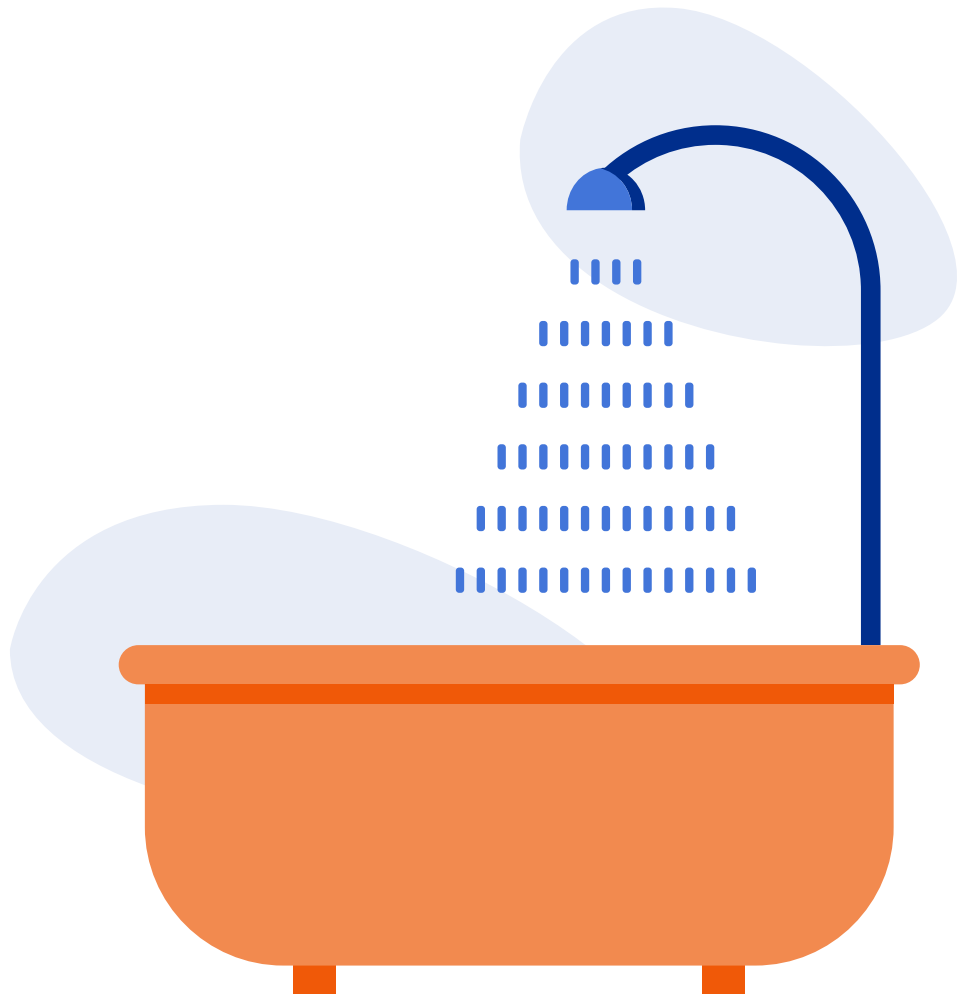


Changing Your Body Temperature

For most of us, when our emergency system is activated we either get hot or cold. Even if you don't notice a change, altering your body temperature will create confusion, help divert your anxiety, and allow your body to believe the bear is gone. If you get cold, gravitate toward something warm and if you get hot, gravitate toward something cold.

The following are **Temperature Changing Techniques** to try:

- Drink a hot or cold beverage slowly
- Grab a heating pad or pouch and cuddle with it under a blanket
- Apply an ice pack or bag of frozen peas (with towel wrapped around it) to your neck or forehead
- Run your hands under the faucet
- Hop in a hot or cold shower

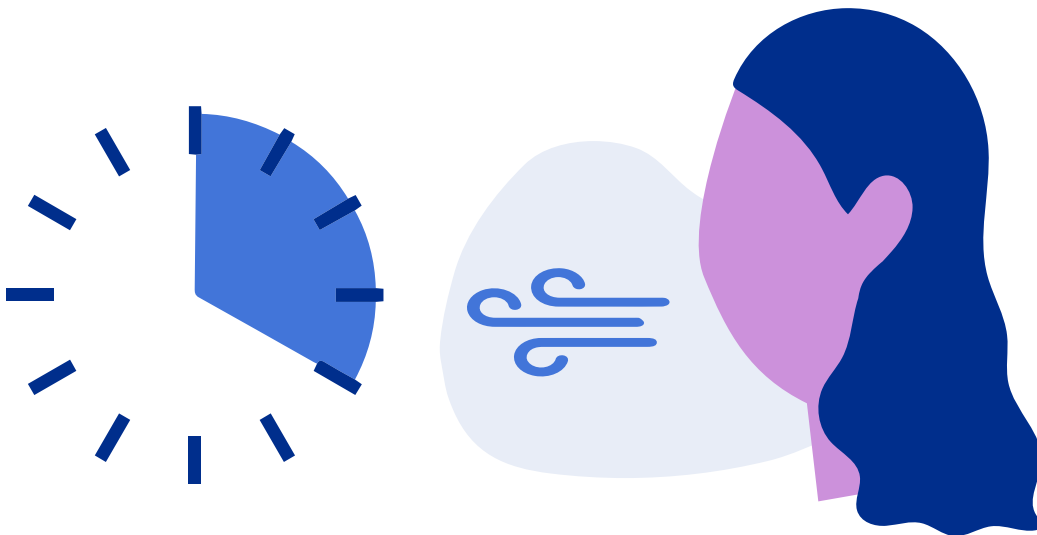


Changing Your Breathing

When our emergency system is activating our breathing becomes more rapid, shallow, and seems to be occurring in our upper chest, as opposed to down in our diaphragm or belly, like it does when our chill system is activated. This allows us the acute energy we will need to run or to fight.

Advice others like to give us when we are anxious is to, “just breathe.” Beyond being a little annoying to hear, it can be very helpful if done right. The problem is when most people try to take deep breaths they can accidentally start to hyperventilate and become dizzy due to not retaining enough CO₂. That tends to make us more anxious! Do not fear, there is a simple technique to help you breathe more deeply, which doesn’t involve breathing into a bag (not that that isn’t soothing).

Extra Tip If you prefer listening to someone instruct you in breathing, check out **Paced Breathing** exercises on Youtube or some other platform. For the first few times try these techniques when you are relatively calm, as there is a learning curve and attempting paced breathing for the first time when you’re in a highly anxious state may not produce the outcome you desire.



The **Balloon Technique** is as follows:

- Place your hand on the upper part of your belly
- Underneath your hand imagine a little, happy deflated balloon. This balloon has enough air to make a little round shape, but is nowhere close to being fully inflated
- As you imagine the balloon, give it a color that is soothing to you and try to associate positivity and friendship with this little balloon buddy. I know it sounds weird, but the more you use this technique, the more appreciative you're going to be of this new imaginary friend/tool and the positive feelings will also help soothe you
- Now as you breathe, try and imagine air flowing down you into your little balloon buddy; just slightly inflating it. This will take a few tries because your breathing is currently wanting to be in your chest, so keep at it and stay confident
- Continue to breathe into the balloon buddy. The goal is to slowly inflate it (but, only a small amount) and then slowly let air out until it returns to its original deflated state
- After about a minute of this paced breathing, try and inflate the balloon a little bit more (not all the way) and try to hold the air in the balloon for 4-8 seconds
- Continue to trust yourself as you breathe into relaxation. There is nothing for you to do right now, except slowly breathe (slowly inflating your balloon buddy)
- When you start feeling better switch to distracting yourself with something fun. You can take a shower, go for a walk, take a nap, call a friend, whatever it is that feels like the next relaxing thing to do and take the sense of calm (and your balloon buddy) with you



Progressive Muscle Relaxation

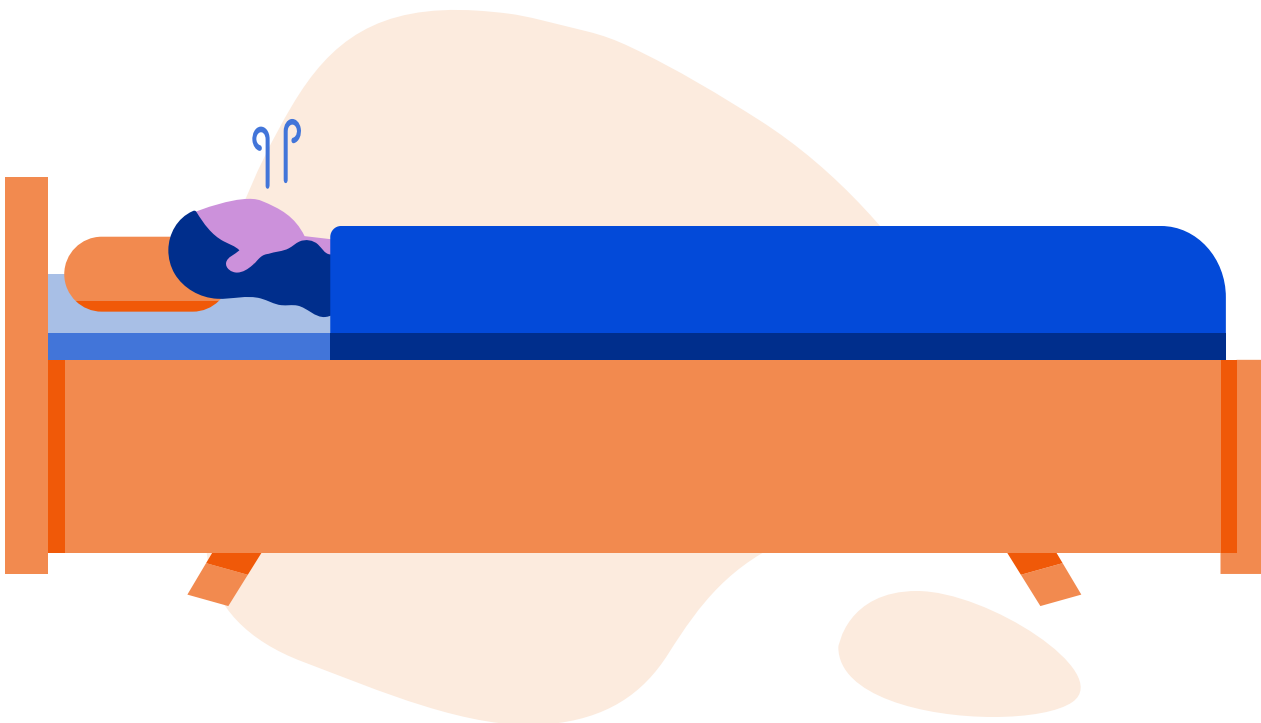
When our emergency system is activated, our muscles tense to prepare to fight or freeze. A way to confuse our anxiety into believing we are calming down and that the bear is gone is to start relaxing those tense muscles. Sounds easier to accomplish than it actually is when you are anxious. Just like with paired breathing, try this exercise a few times in a calm state first.

Side Note This is a great technique to use if you are having trouble falling asleep.

Extra Tip This exercise is much easier to perform with a guide. Checkout Youtube, etc.

The basic guidelines for **Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)** are:

- Don't tense your muscles too hard, instead focus on the act of totally relaxing/releasing the muscle after you've tensed them
- Take a breath in and tense/hold the muscles for 4-8 seconds
- Then release your breath and completely relax the muscle for 10-20 seconds
- It can help to gently tell yourself to "Relax" as you work on relaxing the muscle
- Do each muscle group 2-3x if you're doing a simple PMR before moving on to next muscle group



For a **Simple PMR Exercise** divide your body into 3 quadrants and sit in a chair:

1. Face/neck Raise your eyebrows, pull the corners of your mouth toward your ears, and lightly push your chin down toward your chest

2. Shoulders/arms/torso Bend your elbows, with your hands in fists toward the sky, straighten your back and tighten your stomach; when you relax let your arms fall to your sides

3. Calves/feet Raise your legs off the ground slightly and tilt your toes to each other; when you relax let your feet return to the ground

Note If you are a person who does not have full mobility in these quadrants, know there are plenty of other muscle groups to explore and everyone should adapt PMR to their preference and what muscle groups help them feel most relaxed. You should never feel pain when engaging in these exercises. If you do, stop!

When you try these techniques, know that just like any other coping strategies sometimes they may work and be just what you need, while other times you may need something else. Remember that what you are experiencing is important, you matter, and that you make sense. If you find yourself often experiencing a high level of anxious feelings and would like support please contact Counseling Services at (805) 756-2511.

