

ANXIETY TOOLBOX: VIRTUAL EDITION

Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)
Stanford University

Anxiety Toolbox

- Confidentiality/group agreements
- 2-hour session
- Practice in session, and outside of session using CAPS resources online
- Focus on skill building, not examining the individual causes of anxiety

What we are all up against right now

- Loneliness
- Health concerns
- Loss of a job
- Loss of community
- Disconnection from family
- Worry about the future
- Racial injustice
- Political anger
- Lack of structure/routine
- Food insecurity
- Death/illness
- Zoom fatigue
- Financial insecurity
- Family conflict
- Re-entry anxiety
- Invalidating environments
- Loss of rituals/celebrations
- Loss of daily human interactions
- Grief, grief, and more grief

Is it **STRESS** or **ANXIETY**?

Stress	Anxiety
In response to a specific stressor (exam, job interview, first date, deadline, difficult conversation with partner)	-In response to an unknown stressor -Accumulation of stress responses -Stress + worry
A temporary physical and mental shift, meant to go away when the stressor goes away	Symptoms remain despite no identifiable stressor, or symptoms feel like they are constantly running in the background
Natural, normal response to internal and external stressors: - <i>External</i> : school, family, work, cultural expectations, discrimination - <i>Internal</i> : self-criticism, body image, identity, memories, worries about the future*	Constant worry that causes distress or interferes with your daily life. Mental “loops” that are hard to redirect
A biologically induced cycle of physical and mental changes that prepare you to fight, flight, or freeze	Can be a response to avoiding painful emotions (shame, sadness, fear, guilt, disappointment)
*Adapted from “Burnout: The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle,” by Emily and Amelia Nagoski	

What stressors cause your anxiety?



Fight/Flight/Freeze and the Stress Response

- Threat present → Stress Response turns on
- Threat gone → Stress Response turns off
- Multiple threats that never go away + worry → Anxiety

Everyday “Threats”



- Exams
- Deadlines
- Choosing a major
- Do I have COVID?
- What will my friendships be like when we all go back to school?
- Seeing violence on the news, especially when there are shared identities with victims
- A discussion with your advisor
- Getting an email from your PI
- Getting a grade back
- Seeing others perform well, and worrying about your own performance
- Making a mistake
- Worrying about being judged in class when you participate

How do I lower my anxiety?

- 1) Recognize the signs that your stress response has been turned on
- 2) Lower the intensity of the stress response- soothe or “complete the loop”
- 3) Critically examine thinking patterns, and gain control of your thoughts
- 4) Buffer yourself against unnecessary stress responses



DISCLAIMER



- Not a linear process
- Not about achieving a static state, but to be able to move flexibly within all the states of emotions and experiences
- Not a checklist, just a way of being human

1) Recognize the signs that your stress response has been turned on

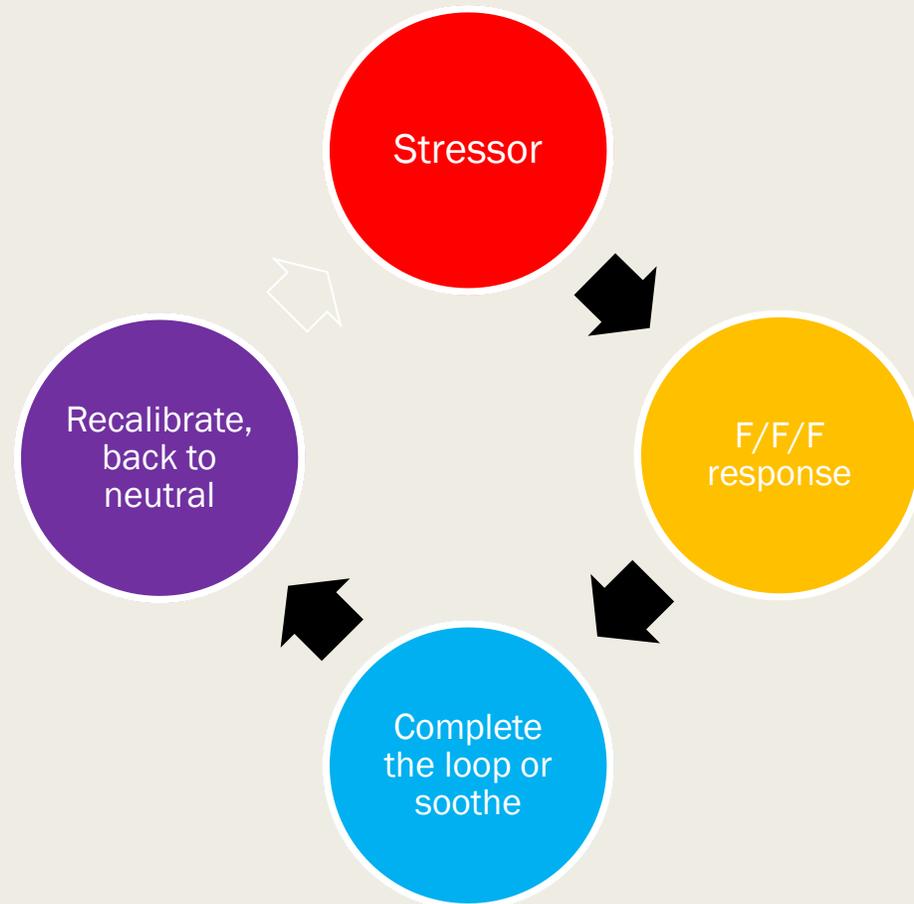
Break out group:

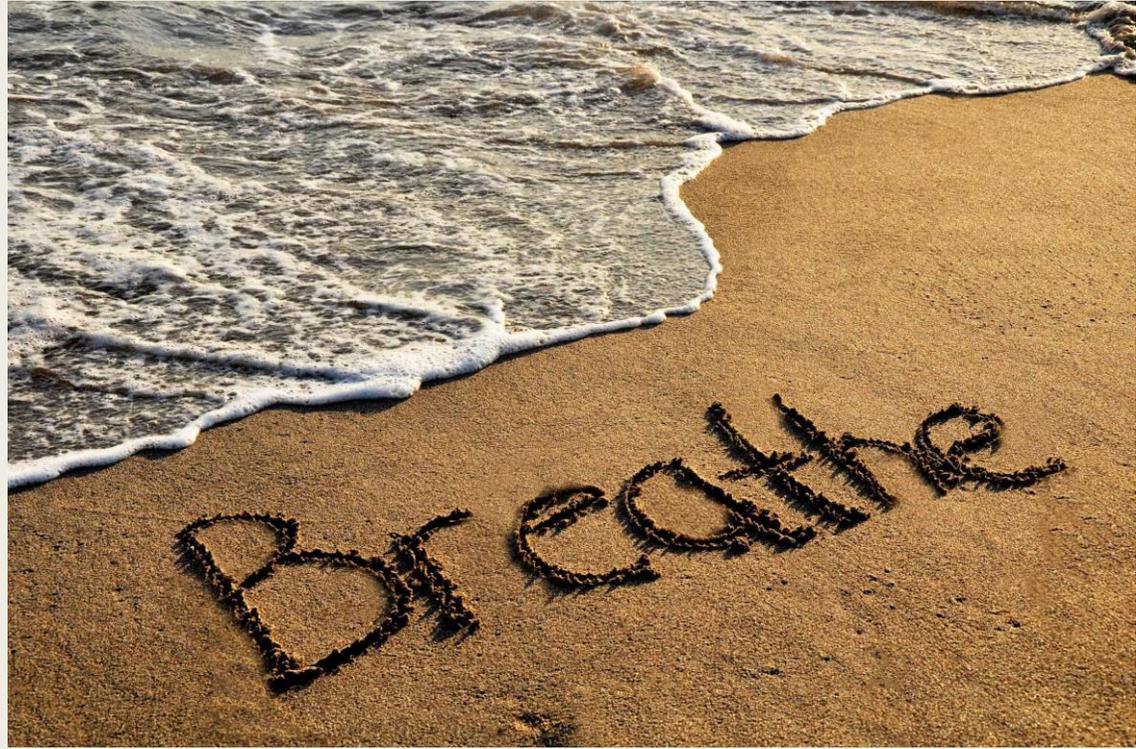
What changes do you notice in yourself when your stress response has been turned on?

- Emotional: how do you feel?
- Mental: how do your thoughts change?
- Behavioral: how do you act differently?
- Physical: what changes do you notice in your body?



2) Lower the intensity of the stress response- soothe or “complete the loop”



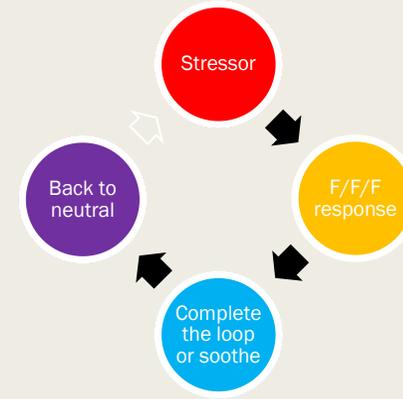


Soothe the System



- Take a warm bath or shower
- Drink a glass of water
- Look at pictures/watch videos of cute animals
- Physical touch (hugs, massage, holding hands) with someone you feel safe with
- Smell a candle, lotion, or food that is particularly pleasant to you
- Go for a walk and look at the trees, plants, sky
- Listen to calming music
- Meditate
- Positive social interaction (even just a friendly “hi” to your neighbor)
- Doodle or color
- Grounding (notice 10 things around you while slowing your breathing, notice your body in the chair)
- Yoga
- Weighted blanket
- Fidget toys
- “Weirdly satisfying” IGs or TikToks

Completing the Loop



- **Move your body:** do 20 jumping jacks, run around your building, dance to your favorite upbeat music, do push ups, swim, sports, etc. Anything that gets you breathing deeply. Ideally for at least 20 minutes per day
- **Laughter:** Full body, belly laughter
- **Crying** (allowing the body to release the energy)
- **Feel the feeling all the way to the end, without feeding it thoughts** (sadness, grief, shame, rage- all of these have a beginning, middle, and end. Feel it, label it, tend to it)
- **Creative expression**
- **Progressive Muscle Relaxation** (tensing and releasing every muscle)
- **Any activity that shifts the energy (safely) from your head to your body**

*Adapted from: “Burnout: The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle” by Nagoski and Nagoski, and “Why Zebras Don’t Get Ulcers” by Stanford’s own Robert Sapolsky

Lets take a 5 minute
break

Anxious Thoughts



Anxious Thoughts

What are some anxious thoughts that you notice?

3) Critically examine thinking patterns, and gain control of your thoughts:

Unhelpful thinking patterns:

- **All or nothing thinking:** “I have to get it all right or it feels like a failure.”
- **Mental filter:** Only paying attention to the bad aspects of a situation, not the neutral or positive parts. Paying attention to negative feedback only.
- **Mind reading:** Assuming we know what others are thinking. “I can’t believe I said that, they all must think I’m incompetent.”
- **Fortune telling:** Thinking we can predict the future. “I’ll never finish this project, won’t be able to publish, and then will be kicked out of the PhD program.”

3) Critically examine thinking patterns, and gain control of your thoughts:

Unhelpful thinking patterns:

- **Labeling:** “I’m just lazy, which is why I can’t get things done” or “she’s a selfish person.”
- **Catastrophizing:** Assuming the worst possible outcome, or thinking of all the ways something could go wrong.
- **Personalizing:** Taking blame for something that may not be your fault. “My advisor didn’t get back to me, I think she’s disappointed in my most recent presentation.” Or “no one was really listening to what I was saying in that meeting, maybe I wasn’t making sense.”

3) Critically examine thinking patterns, and gain control of your thoughts:

Unhelpful thinking patterns:

- **Comparative Suffering (there is only so much pain to go around):**
Questioning the validity of your personal struggles. “It’s not like anyone I know died of COVID, I just missed my freshman year of college. Its not that bad.”
- **Shoulds:** “I shouldn’t feel this lonely/depressed/anxious. There is nothing major happening that would make me feel that way” or “I should have known better” or “I should feel grateful for what I have.” The “abyss” between expectation and reality.
- **“Fix it” Mentality:** “I feel anxious, I need to fix it/go back to how I was before/get rid of it/not feel it.”

Break Out Groups



Challenging Anxious Thoughts



- Am I looking at the whole picture?
- Am I focusing on *what is*, or *what if*?
- What unhelpful thinking style might I be using here?
- What is the helpful part of this stress/anxiety? What is the emotion underneath trying to tell me?
- If this is true, what do I need to do NOW to effectively handle the situation?
- Am I overestimating the severity of the problem I am facing? Am I underestimating my power to manage it?
- Can I really predict the future?

Challenging Anxious Thoughts



- If a friend or loved one were in this situation and had this thought, what would I tell them?
- Even though avoiding this stressor feels good in the moment, how might this hurt me in the end?
- Am I needing to work on acceptance, letting go of control, being okay with less than perfect, or having faith in the future and myself?
- When I'm not feeling this way, do I think about this situation differently?
- What else might this anxiety be related to? Is it *really* about feeling _____ ?
- Is it more useful to deal with the *stress* or *stressor* in this moment?

Challenging Anxious Thoughts



Systemic Oppression and Discrimination:

- Is there an external system that is playing a role in my thoughts right now?
- Are there factors related to identity (race, ethnicity, financial security, ability status, gender) that are influencing how this situation is playing out?
- Am I believing lies told to me about my people?
- Am I experiencing imposter syndrome because a structure is telling me I don't belong?
- Am I listening to a harsh inner critic that actually comes from internalized messages of oppression?
- Who benefits from me internalizing this?

Break Out Groups



4) Buffer yourself against unnecessary stress responses

- **Sleep:** Go to sleep and wake up at roughly the same time each day (including weekends), get enough sleep for you (7-8 hours most likely), and don't take naps.
- **Reduce Screen Time:** Disconnect. Set limits. Turn off notifications. Leave your phone in the other room.
- **Social Connection:** Find your person, community, tribe, home away from home. Spend time in spaces that validate your identities and experiences. Try reading a book, following a blog, getting involved in activism, spending time with others that share your intersecting identities. Community is particularly important for combating race based and minority stress.
- **Eating:** Eat at regular times, reduce caffeine, eat a balanced diet.



4) Buffer yourself against unnecessary stress responses

- **Substance Use**: Pay attention to short and long term affects.
- **Rest/Pleasant Activities**: Give your brain time to turn off. EVERY DAY.
- **Avoid Unnecessary Stressors**: Are there people/places/jobs/environments that chronically trigger your stress response?
- **Utilize Other Supports**: Financial Aid office, Academic Advisors, RDs/GLO Deans, healthcare team, community services. Who else can help?



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Where can I find out more?



Books/Articles:

- “Burnout: The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle” By Emily and Amelia Nagoski
- “Why Zebras Don’t Get Ulcers” by Robert Sapolsky
- “Laziness Does Not Exist” by Devon Price
- Stanford magazine article about re-entry anxiety:

<https://stanfordmag.org/contents/of-two-minds-reentry-anxiety>

Podcasts/Apps:

- **NPR Life Kit:** How to Deal with Burnout, Start Therapy and Make it Work for You (Spotify)
- Liberate Meditation
- Insight Meditation Timer
- Headspace: <https://www.headspace.com/studentplan>
- Stop, Breathe and Think

Social:

- @notsosecretdiaryofanxiety
- @journey_to_wellness_
- @anxiousalexia

Websites:

- CAPS: <https://vaden.stanford.edu/caps>
 - Videos, useful apps, additional CAPS services, referral help, and lots more
- Well-Being at Stanford: <https://vaden.stanford.edu/well-being>
 - Free well-being coaching sessions, seminars, outreach events, mental health mini-grants, and more online resources
- Racial Trauma/Social Justice Toolkit:
 - <https://www.bc.edu/bc-web/schools/lynch-school/sites/isprc/isprc-advisory-board.html>
 - <https://www.asianamtoolkit.org/the-toolkit>
 - Practical tools and structured plans for managing race based stress

Please complete the
feedback poll



THANK YOU!

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