

SELF-HELP STRATEGIES FOR PTSD

STEP 1: Educate yourself: Learning about anxiety & PTSD

No matter what type of anxiety problem you are struggling with, it is important to know the **facts about anxiety**.

FACT 1: Anxiety is a normal and adaptive system in the body that tells us when we are in danger. This means that dealing with your anxiety **NEVER** involves eliminating it, but rather managing it.

FACT 2: Anxiety can become a problem when our body tells us that there is danger when there is no real danger.

As an important first step, you can start by understanding that all of your fears and physical feelings have a name: **ANXIETY**.

To learn more details about anxiety, see [What Is Anxiety?](#)

Because PTSD can include scary symptoms such as nightmares, flashbacks, or dissociation (that is, acting or thinking as if you are living the trauma all over again), you might be worried that you are going crazy. For this reason, it is so important to educate yourself about all of the feelings that are common to PTSD. The problem is **not** that you are crazy. Rather, the problem is that you have anxiety because of a traumatic event you have experienced.

The good news is that there are skills that you can learn to help you cope with this anxiety.

STEP 2: Building your Anxiety Management Toolbox



TOOL #1: Learning to calm anxiety by slowing down your breathing (see [How to do Calm Breathing](#)).

If you have PTSD, you might find that you are anxious throughout the day. Calm breathing is a quick and portable tool that you can use to “bring the volume down” on some of those anxious feelings.

NOTE: If you experience flashbacks or dissociation, it is a good idea to keep your eyes open when doing calm breathing.



TOOL #2: Learning how to calm your anxiety by relaxing the muscles in your body (see [How to do Progressive Muscle Relaxation](#)).

Because many people with PTSD are tense and jumpy throughout the day, it can be very helpful to learn how to relax your body.

Calm breathing and progressive muscle relaxation can you help to reduce some of the anxious and tense feelings in your body.



TOOL #3: Grounding techniques

Grounding is a very helpful technique if you are experiencing flashbacks and you find yourself sometimes losing touch with the present moment. Having this symptom of PTSD is not only terrifying for you, but it can also be scary for people around you, such as friends and family.

Grounding teaches you to stop losing touch with the present moment by concentrating and focusing on the present or by directing your attention to something else.

Some Examples of Grounding

- Touch objects around you, and describe them (texture, colour). For example, “I’m sitting on a red chair, and the fabric is really soft; it’s velvet. The carpet is beige, and there is a red couch in the corner.”
- Run water over your hands, and describe aloud how it feels.
- Name all the different types of animals you can think of (e.g., zebra, cat, dog, cow, etc...), or types of flowers, cities in B.C., etc...
- Say the alphabet backwards

TIPS FOR GROUNDING:

- 1. Eyes open.** When doing grounding techniques, make sure to keep your eyes open, so that you can see and focus on what is around you right now. It is also a good idea to speak out loud, describing what you are seeing and doing.
- 2. Practise:** Like any other skill, it is important to practise grounding techniques. It will be most useful if you have tried using this skill when you were calm, and you practised it often. That way, when you find yourself needing to use it, you already know how.
- 3. Enlist help:** Teach a friend or family member about grounding and why you need to use it. If someone you trust understands when grounding is useful, they can remind you to use it (and do it with you) if you are starting to lose touch with the present. For example, they might say, “I think you might want to do some grounding now... can you describe what you are wearing? What am I wearing? Where are we right now?”



TOOL #4: Getting back into your life

Sometimes adults with PTSD will stop doing the things that they used to enjoy, and isolate themselves by avoiding friends and family. Although this is an understandable reaction after living through a trauma, **it is not helpful.**

Even though it might be difficult, it is important to get back into the normal routine of your life as soon as possible; this includes going to work, socializing with friends, and keeping up with hobbies or sports that you enjoy.



KEY: If it feels too difficult to get back to your usual activities, such as going to work, start with short pleasant activities that will take you out of the house for a brief period of time. These might include: going for coffee with a friend, going to see a movie or renting a DVD, or going out for a walk. Even a small step toward getting back into your life is a positive step forward!

It is also important that you take proper care of yourself. Some people with PTSD stop paying attention to what they eat, when they sleep, or whether they are getting enough

exercise. Unfortunately, these bad habits can actually make your anxiety worse. For tips on how to practise good habits and take care of yourself, see [Tips for Healthy Living](#).



TOOL #5: Facing your fears

Some adults with PTSD will find themselves avoiding situations that are associated with the trauma they experienced. Some examples of this avoidance include:

- If you were in a car accident, you might be avoiding driving, being in cars, walking in areas where there is a lot of traffic, or being in the neighbourhood where the accident took place.
- Avoiding general places, situations or people associated with your trauma, such as parks, crowded places, and people of a particular ethnicity, age, or gender.
- Avoiding trauma reminders such as movies, TV, conversations.

The best way you can help yourself to deal with these fears is by facing them, rather than avoiding them. Normal activities such as driving or being in a car or reading the newspaper are best addressed by gradually approaching these situations. For tips on how to do reduce your avoidance see [Facing Your Fears –Exposure](#).

STEP 3: Knowing when to ask for help...

Although the skills listed here can be very effective in helping you to manage your anxiety, sometimes they are not enough. For example, you might feel completely unable to be around others or to face some of your fears by yourself. This is understandable, since dealing with PTSD can feel like an overwhelming struggle.



If this is the case for you, it might be a good idea to consult with your family doctor, a psychiatrist or a psychologist/mental health worker to get some help in dealing with your PTSD. Working with someone trained in dealing with PTSD can also give you a chance to talk about any feelings of guilt, shame, or self-blame you might have because of your traumatic experience.

Why do I need to deal with my guilt?

Many people with PTSD think that they are either responsible for what happened in some way, that they could have prevented it, or that others would blame them if they knew “the whole story”. For example, it is not uncommon for people who have been sexually assaulted to think that they didn’t “fight back” enough, or that they acted in a careless way that invited or encouraged the attack.

Thoughts of guilt about a traumatic event can lead to strong negative feelings of sadness, depression, and shame.

KEEP IN MIND:

Although it is common for people with PTSD to feel very guilty about what happened to them or the way that they acted during the trauma, **these thoughts and feelings are false**. No one can predict the future, so you could not have predicted the trauma occurring. Also, it is easy to think about what you should have done, after it has already happened: knowing what you could have done (if you had predicted the trauma before it happened) does not mean that you are wrong or to blame for what you did do (see [Realistic Thinking](#) for more information).

A therapist can help you to talk through these thoughts and feelings, which is an important step toward coping with your PTSD.

STEP 4: Building on bravery

Remember that any progress you make in managing your anxiety and PTSD symptoms comes from a lot of hard work. If you are noticing improvements, take the time to give yourself some credit: reward yourself!

The best way to see your progress is to record all the work you are doing with your PTSD management skills. For example, write down how often you use relaxation or grounding techniques, and how effective it was each time. If you are trying to get out and socialize more, keep a record of the activities you have participated in each week. Set realistic goals for yourself, and reward yourself when you achieve those goals.

How do you maintain all the progress you made?

PRACTISE, PRACTISE, PRACTISE!!

The PTSD management skills presented here are designed to teach you new and more effective ways of dealing with your anxiety. If you practise them often, they can become new habits that are a part of your daily routine.

Like an exercise program, it is important to “keep in shape” even when you are feeling better and you have reached your goals.

For more information on how to maintain your progress and how to cope with relapses in symptoms, see [Learning about Relapse Prevention](#).