

Moderate Your Fight-or-Flight Response

Objective

To understand the relationship between your physical sensations and your anxiety and practice a body-scanning meditation to reduce symptoms.

What to Know

The fight-or-flight response refers to a wide range of physical sensations that occur when you are in imminent danger. This response is natural, healthy, and necessary for survival. For example, it helps you spring into action if a bear appears in your path, if someone is chasing you, or if you see your children doing something dangerous.

If you have anxiety, you might find these physical sensations activate a false certainty that danger is imminent – triggering a response to escape or avoid anxious thoughts. When you are experiencing this inner turmoil, you might agonize about the harm coming to you or your loved ones. Your mind may feel as if it is under siege, and you make decisions based on this chaos instead of making mindful decisions based on your values.

The body-scan meditation can teach you to maintain a present moment awareness to accept your thoughts, feelings, body sensations, and surrounding environment. You will practice visualizing your body in a state opposite to how it feels when you are overwhelmed by anxiety. Although this meditation will enable your heart rate to slow down, your blood pressure to normalize, your breathing to slow, and your stress hormones to decrease, it is important to note that it is *not* a relaxation exercise. The goal is not to force yourself to feel relaxed but to invite all sensations, good and unpleasant.

This meditation will help you to:

- reduce your reliance on using your thoughts to negatively interpret your physical sensations.
- listen to what your body is telling you without judgment but with acceptance.
- stop trying to control, avoid, and escape your bodily sensations, which only results in increasing your anxiety.
- appreciate and feel gratitude for your body instead of regarding it as the enemy.
- regain your sense of power over yourself, instead of feeling as though you are a prisoner of your mind and body.
- become more mindful of your actions.

What to Do

In this activity, you will monitor your physical sensations for a two-week period. You can do this daily, every other day, or in whatever time frame you think is necessary. Then you will practice the body-scan meditation daily for an additional two-week period, or until it becomes a habit.

To help you to become in tune with your body, continue to engage in the body-scan meditation on an as-needed basis.

Before you begin practicing the meditation, the first step is to become aware of any physical sensations that trigger anxiety. Place a check by the physical sensations you experience. If you experience any other sensations that are not listed, please add them to the list.

___ **Narrowed vision** (sometimes called “tunnel vision”). You temporarily lose some of your peripheral vision. It is as though you are looking through a dark tunnel or tube. During a crisis, this helps you ignore trivial data to laser focus on the crisis.

___ **Tense muscles.** As your body tenses up, it becomes very alert and prepared for a crisis.

___ **Intensified hearing.** Your ability to discern certain noises that represent danger to you becomes more intensified. At the same time, your body chemistry alters to protect your ears from loud noises.

___ **Cool, pale skin.** Blood flow to the surface of the body is reduced so blood can be directed to areas that are being targeted, preparing you to run or fight.

___ **Sweating.** In preparation for extreme physical activity, the body will automatically increase its body heat. This is why your body immediately begins sweating even before you have started any actual physical activity.

___ **Dilated pupils.** During a crisis, your pupils dilate to let in increased light, which helps to temporarily improve your vision.

___ **Shaking.** Your body produces adrenaline to provide the energy needed to deal with the emergency. The change causes your body to shake.

___ **Tingling/cold limbs.** Intense anxiety can divert blood from your hands and fingers and redistribute it to the heart and other areas that need it for coping with emergencies.

___ **Difficulty thinking.** In a crisis, overthinking can be dangerous. By making it harder to think, your mind helps you act more on instinct.

___ **Rapid heartbeat.** Your heartbeat speeds up to transfer blood more quickly to the areas of your body that may need it.

___ **Hyperventilation.** You begin to breathe more quickly to prepare for a fight.

___ **Dry mouth.** Blood flow to the digestive system is decreased so the body’s attention can be prioritized to focus on your safety rather than digesting food, which can wait until you are safe.

Other sensations: _____

Complete this chart to monitor your physical sensations over a period of two weeks. Write down the triggering event, any physical sensations you experience, and rate your anxiety on a scale from 0 to 10, with 0 = no anxiety, to 10 = the worst anxiety you have ever experienced. Describe what your physical sensations indicated might happen, then describe what actually happened. Write down any additional notes. Use another piece of paper if you require more space.

Triggering event	Physical sensation	Anxiety level	What did your physical sensations tell you might happen?	What actually happened?	Notes

Triggering event	Physical sensation	Anxiety level	What did your physical sensations tell you might happen?	What actually happened?	Notes

Physical Sensation Practice Plan

Make a plan for yourself, noting when you plan to practice, where you plan to practice, and what you might need, for example, a blanket, mat, or special clothing.

After a few practices, try to focus on the parts of your body that you notice are impacted when you feel anxious.

Be aware that you will notice thoughts and reactions as you practice. You may find yourself feeling bored, annoyed, or frustrated with your situation or with the meditation process itself. This is to be expected, so just accept the thoughts. After you acknowledge them, simply go back to whatever body part you were focusing on.

Body Scan Meditation Practice

Practice the body scan meditation on a regular basis to become more aware of your body. This meditation is a mindful physical experience where you purposely become more in tune with what your body is experiencing, apart from how those sensations are interpreted by your thoughts.

1. Lie down on a comfortable but firm surface. Use a yoga mat, blanket, or whatever feels comfortable to you. Begin by closing your eyes. As you lie there, notice what it feels like to allow your body to become one with the surface beneath you. Observe what you sense surrounding you: the hardness of the floor beneath you, the scratchiness or smoothness of the blanket or mat you are lying on, the clothes on your body, or anything else you notice.
2. Observe your natural breathing patterns, focusing on exhaling and inhaling. Notice the rhythm, the feeling of your chest moving up and down, and the sounds of the air as it enters and leaves your body.
3. As you breathe in deeply, notice how it feels to have your breath fill up every space in your chest. Every time you breathe out, focus on one specific part of your body at a time, beginning at your toes and slowly working your way up to your legs, arms, hands, fingers, and the rest of your body, part by part. Be aware of any changes or sensations without judging them.
4. After you have scanned your entire body, focus on your whole body, sensing its entirety and its physical sensations as one. Continue for a few minutes before opening your eyes.

You can engage in a brief form of the body scan meditation anywhere and anytime, whenever you notice yourself reacting to an event, person, or thought that triggers physical sensations. Draw upon the awareness and calm you have grown used to from your daily practices of the longer meditation.

How did it feel to face your physical sensations proactively instead of passively reacting to them?

If you met any barriers while practicing the technique, what strategies did you use to overcome them?

Was paying attention to your bodily sensations and their relationship to your anxiety helpful or unhelpful? Describe.

How will you continue to incorporate meditation into your life?

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
