

# RETRAINING<sup>1</sup> REACTIONS

*Practice letting fears go past changes the way my mind reacts.*

Over time, panic becomes an automatic conditioned reaction to certain situations or to symptoms of anxiety. Retraining involves desensitizing your reactions to anxiety that seems to come from nowhere. A toddler was conditioned to be afraid of a stuffed rabbit by hearing a loud bang every time he touched it. He was then desensitized to this fear by being given food on which to refocus when the rabbit was present, or he simply faced his anxiety without hearing a bang. These two methods can be used to make the worst panic as harmless as a stuffed rabbit. Practice refocusing during panic and check which strategies are most helpful to you.

## WHEN FEARS ARE BOGUS, JUST REFOCUS

- Refocus on something pleasant—take a walk, knit, shoot baskets, work a crossword puzzle, count backwards from 100 by 3, hum, or recite poems. At first, you may still notice some anxiety. You will need to remind yourself that the effects of adrenaline always pass and that the less concern you give symptoms, the more quickly they fade away. Refocusing is no different from reading an exciting novel even though you hear a siren in the background. Refocus not to avoid anxiety, but to allow sensations to continue as “background music.”
- Refocus on breathing. Taking breaths with awareness is one of the best things you can do for yourself. The following “calming breaths” should be practiced frequently so you can easily execute them when you are feeling anxious:
  1. Take a deep, slow breath through your nose to the count of three, completely filling your lungs.
  2. Hold for three counts.
  3. Exhale through your mouth while counting to six.
  4. Pause for three counts.
  5. Repeat steps 1–4 two more times.
- Refocus on a positive image during calming breaths. You can imagine a safe place where you would feel peaceful by yourself. This might be the beach, the woods, a mountain, or a church. You can also imagine yourself doing something you enjoy, such as swimming, playing bingo, or bowling. It’s important that you make the details of where you are or what you’re doing as vivid as possible: What time of day is it? What is the temperature like? What colors and shapes do you see? What sounds do you hear? What textures do you feel? Make sure your image is the right size and intensity. When people experience panic, they often want to run to a place of safety. You can do this instantaneously by imagining such a place in your mind.
- Refocus on a spot. Concentrating on a focal point will spontaneously cause a relaxation response. You may notice becoming still, your jaw and shoulders dropping, your eyes blinking, your eyelids getting heavy, and your eyes wanting to close. Like focusing on breathing or imagery, staring switches you from being a thinker to being an observer. The only thing that produces tension is thoughts. Repeating a comforting word when thoughts dare to enter your mind helps maintain a state of observance that makes panic impossible.<sup>2</sup>
- Tapping acupressure points may go further than refocusing by removing an imbalance in the body’s electrical flow that “holds negative emotions in place.” The most important treatment points to tap (about seven times each) during a panic attack are:

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<sup>1</sup> This term is one of Jeffrey M. Schwartz’s “4-R’s of recovery” for OCD found in *Brain Lock* (HarperCollins, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> *Trans-Formation in Everyday Life* by Kate Cohen-Posey (Golden Nuggets Press, 800-440-1773), [www.psych-assist.net](http://www.psych-assist.net).

1. The bony ridge directly under the eye pupil (ue)
2. Four inches under the armpit (ua)
3. Where the nose meets the ridge of the eyebrow (eb)
4. An inch under the collarbone (cb) and an inch to the side of the sternum
5. Inside the little fingernail (lf).

After noticing some calming effect, further reduce anxiety by moving your eyes in a horizontal figure 8 while tapping the outside points of your eyebrows, humming a few notes, counting to three, and humming again. This is supposed to balance the emotional and logical brain hemispheres.<sup>3</sup> Then repeat steps 1–5.<sup>4</sup>

- The floor-to-ceiling eyeroll combines the use of acupressure points with automatic eye closure that is a sure sign of relaxation. While tapping the back of your hand between the little and ring finger knuckles, hold your head still and look down until your lids are almost shut. Slowly roll your eyes up as if you were trying to see your own eyebrows. When it is too tiring to look up anymore, allow your lids to flutter closed. Take a deep breath, stop tapping, and exhale while your eyes rest.

### **WHEN YOU FACE A FLOOD OF TENSIONS IT LOSES ITS DIMENSION**

- Flooding is the opposite of trying to control symptoms. If you face your sensations, encourage them (flood), and float past them, panic will last less than 60 seconds and go through you like a wave. When you try to control your symptoms, you are actually trapping anxiety inside yourself. Attempting to hide what is happening or holding still are ways of trying to control. Even worse, some people run from panic to a “place of safety.” This pumps adrenaline into their systems and is like pouring gasoline on a fire. Shaking, allowing a racing heart to run its course, and doing the following allows anxiety to pass through.<sup>5</sup>
  - Challenge your symptoms by encouraging them—“Come on, Panic—do your worst. Let’s see how bad you can get.” Try making yourself shakier. Inviting anxiety makes it back off. Remember that peace is always on the other side of panic. The faster you get into the worst part of panic, the more quickly you will reach peace of mind!
  - Change your tone of voice to say your worst fears in pig Latin, sing them, pinch your nose, or use a Donald Duck accent.
  - Use a support person to help you discover the power of reverse psychology to flood away tension. Outrageous comments can be made in a soothing tone of voice to outwit fear—“Oh good, you’re panicking. Let’s see what happens. If you don’t come out of it, I’ll let all the people who have recovered know that their worst fears can come true.”

<sup>3</sup> The brain balancing approach has numerous relaxation exercises used here was developed by Fred Gallo to modify Callahan’s original “Algorithm.” Contact fgallo@energypsych.com or see *Energy Psychology* by Fred P. Gallo (CRC Press, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Algorithm for treating panic disorder was developed by Roger Callahan. Contact Callahan Techniques at 760-345-4737 or www.tfrx.com.

<sup>5</sup> Flooding is further described in *Simple, Effective Treatment of Agoraphobia* by Claire Weekes (Bantam, 1979)