

The Calm Teacher

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In this article, Michael LeBlanc writes about how teachers can calm their anxiety by focusing on 3 areas: recognizing when you are anxious, calming your body, and calming your mind.

We teachers are living in stressful times. There is a lot going on in the 'outside' world, and in the world of education. Things feel like they are spinning faster and faster. A lot of us have too many balls in the air. We have a lot on our plates. We are up to our eyeballs in work. We are swamped. Backed against the wall. Overwhelmed. Keeping a healthy mind, body and spirit as a teacher is proving to take more energy and intention than ever before. **But it is possible!** I believe this because I know healthy teachers.

I started wondering, "What is the difference between the healthy teachers I know, and the struggling teachers I know?" For some, it's life and work circumstances. For others, it's their genetics or upbringing. But for most, it's their ability to quickly and regularly **regulate their nervous system**, and get to a state of calm before anxiety becomes a habit. They can ground themselves before anxiety takes over. They have developed an ability to calm themselves quickly and often so anxiety doesn't become habitual and start taking a toll on their physical, mental and cognitive functioning.

It's important to note here that anxiety is a normal reaction to ambiguous situations. It can be very healthy and helpful. Paying attention to what might be coming around the corner is a biological trait we all have. The issues come when we start feeling anxious even when we aren't in the ambiguous situation – meaning, when it becomes generalized. Learning how to utilize our nervous system to help us move from fight or flight to calm can make all the difference.

This article is about **how to calm yourself**, which can reduce your stress and possibly head off burnout at the pass. First off, I wish I could do the one thing for you that I know would help: Reduce your workload. This one change would improve a lot of teachers' lives. I can't offer you that. But what I can offer you are 3 areas of focus with multiple strategies I have learned and practiced over the years, or have heard from others, that have proven to be effective to reduce anxiety.

Recognizing When You Are Anxious

How do you know when you are anxious? It can be hard to pinpoint because when we are anxious we lose our perspective and focus all of our energy on survival and protection. To notice our anxiety, we need to be intentional. In terms of the signs, everyone has a different set of indicators. It might be a racing heart, twitching eye, poor mood, sweating, headache, nausea, restlessness, catastrophizing, or fidgeting.

My anxiety cues are racing heart rate, headache, sweaty palms and underarms, and/or catastrophizing. When I have one or more of these signs I know it is time to do something to shift. I

have learned that if I just wait for the symptoms to fade away it takes much longer to get to a calm place. And if I'm not careful, it could spiral into a panic attack.

We need to become aware of our signs, and we need to interpret the signs in a way that allows us to take action that leads us to calm without judgment. One interpretation could be, "Hmm. I'm starting to catastrophize now - that must mean I am anxious." Or, "I'm getting anxious. Good thing I know how to calm down." Or, "Here it comes. It's time to breathe from my belly."

Try to take a practical look at your indicators of anxiety. Being anxious doesn't have to 'mean' you've done anything wrong or that you've messed up. You haven't 'blown it' - you just got anxious. And it happens out of our awareness, so we have to look for the signs. If we look practically at our signs, we can stop the worrying in its tracks and shine a light on what is going on in our body and mind. This allows us to start putting our strategies to work.

Calming Your Body

Once we notice we are anxious, we need to work on calming our body. Our physiology is at the core of our anxiety - and thoughts, feelings and actions follow suit. We are in a state of temporary 'fight or flight', and the goal is to shift out of that state and into a state of calm. Our nervous system is on alert for something bad to happen, and it's our job to create a sense of safety and connection.

There are lots of ways to calm our body when we are anxious. The quickest and easiest way is to focus on your breathing. Diaphragmatic breathing is often the best first choice. Breathing from your belly changes everything. Let me repeat that – *breathing from your belly changes everything.*

Start by becoming aware of your breathing, then focus on breathing slowly from your belly...in...out...in...out. S-l-o-w things down. **Focus on a longer exhale** in particular because the exhale connects you to calm, while the inhale connects to you energizing your body. If you feel you need some guidance, there are a lot of options. YouTube has millions of guided breathing videos. There are also many apps out there that can help. The 'Calm' app is a popular one.

There is also a protocol called the 'The Relaxation Response'. It is a science-based set of steps aimed at reducing anxiety and stress in your body. It was developed by Dr. Herbert Benson from Harvard University. You can learn about it from his book of the same name, take an entire 8-week course on it, or watch a variety of videos teaching you how to do it.

Deciding to **refocus and shift your energy** is another strategy. Perhaps you need to move to walk around (preferably outside), get up and stretch to move your energy, do some yoga, do a

body scan (see URL in resource list), or lay down for a few minutes with a cold pack over your eyes. Some folks deal with immediate anxiety by **exercising**. Running has always worked like a charm for me.

Connect to another person or animal that is calm. Nervous systems feed off other nervous systems. **Hook on to another living organism that is calm.** Your spouse, friend, pet, or something in nature.

Other people need to **talk it out** - move the energy by chatting with a friend or partner. This can be effective as long as you are working toward a solution and not just complaining. Talking through a worry with a commitment to try something new can ensure you exit from the 'complaining loop'.

Aromatherapy is becoming increasingly popular. Get a diffuser and start enjoying scents that can lift your mood and reduce your anxiety.

The other thing that works for me is to either **sing or laugh**. It helps stimulate the Vagus Nerve, which brings us into a state of calm (see URL in resource list).

Calming Your Mind

A calm mind always starts with calming your body first - so do your deep breathing before you try to change how or what you think.

Then work to bring **self-compassion and acceptance** into your mind and body. Anxiety loves negative self-energy, so we combat it by accepting that we are anxious, then giving ourselves a mental hug or reminding ourselves that we are doing our best right now. Anxiety always gets worse by getting upset that we are anxious in the first place. Allowing ourselves the space to be anxious gives us a chance to shift without guilt or shame.

You can build a habit of stopping or reducing your anxious or 'What if something happens' thoughts. These are thoughts that look for the worst-case scenario and try to prepare us for it. We can deal with 'What-if' thoughts by using a CBT strategy called **'Thought Stopping'**. Here are the steps: a) Deep breathing for 30 seconds, b) Ask yourself if the 'What-if' thought is true, and ask what purpose it is serving, c) If you realize the thought is likely not true, tell yourself to 'stop', d) then change the direction of

your thinking and move to another topic that you know keeps you calm, such as thinking about something going well or a friend you know has your back.

Positive and hopeful self-talk is very helpful. When you feel a pang of anxiety is setting in, using self-soothing language right away can help. Say things like "I know I am feeling anxious right now, but it always goes away", "Just breathe", or "I can deal with this anxiety if I focus on my breath."

If you are catastrophizing or ruminating, **decide that you are only going to allow yourself to worry for 5 minutes.** Put on a timer. Then start either writing down your thoughts, or record yourself on your phone. When the timer goes off, start a new timer. This time give yourself five minutes to come up with solutions and strategies. When this second timer goes off, decide which solution you are going to pick. Next, either start taking action, decide when you will act, or choose to let it go. Then move on to doing something else.

If your mind is full of too many things to do, **write out your to-do list with time frames and priorities** attached. Incorporate gentle reminders along the way about your limits, such as "I'll do what I can and let go of the rest", "I can't please everyone" and "Rome wasn't built in a day."

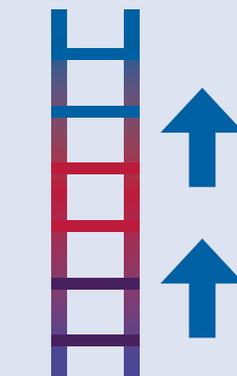
Conclusion

Why not commit to practicing a number of different anxiety-reducing strategies and making them part of your life? With practice, you can have several go-to anxiety strategies that can build your confidence and keep you grounded and calm. These are life-long skills that can change your life.

Resource List:

- The 10 Best-Ever Anxiety Management Techniques* - Margaret Wehrenberg
- The Anxiety Toolkit* - Alice Boyes
- Rewire Your Anxious Brain - Pittman and Karle
- The Calm App - <https://www.calm.com/>
- The Relaxation Response - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KZ7JfC3_Zgc
- Body Scan - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QS2yDmWk0vs>
- Vargas Nerve - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fSN2CeDkslg>
- Self-compassion - <https://self-compassion.org/>
- Anxiety resources - www.teacherwellness.ca, Twitter: @wellteacher235
- Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/Nbteacherwellness>

A Teacher's Nervous System: Calm, Fight or Flight, and Shut Down



What do you need to do to move up the ladder?

- Notes:**
- Many teachers fluctuate between all 3 states in a day.
 - There is a spot between F&F and Calm - here you are 'on' with your class.
 - Focus on moving up the Nervous System Ladder.