A Personal Anxiety and Panic Strategy

This is a learning guide. You build the strategy while you are calm, practise it until it is familiar, and only then have it available when anxiety rises. It is not written to be read during an anxiety or panic attack, when your capacity to take in anything new is at its lowest.

The strategy combines two components: deliberate physical tension and structured breathing. Both work for the same underlying reason. Anxiety floods the body with energy, the physical legacy of a survival response preparing you to fight or flee, and that energy has to go somewhere. Tension and breathing give it somewhere to go, releasing it deliberately rather than leaving it to build.

The Strategy at a Glance

A summary of the whole method, to orient you before you read the detail and to refer back to once you have learned the sequence.

Purpose	Bringing anxiety and panic back down by discharging physical energy and slowing your breathing.
Two components	Full-body muscular tension and structured breathing.
One cycle	Three breaths, followed by full-body tension held to failure or for roughly one minute.
Repetitions	Three cycles as a minimum. Five cycles where time and circumstance allow.
Breathing target	In for four counts, hold for four, out for six, hold for four.
Starting pattern	In for two, hold for two, out for four, hold for two, building up with practice.
Governing principle	Your out-breath is always longer than your in-breath.
Tension target	Thighs, back, upper back, shoulders, neck, calves and toes, all at once.
When to practise	Daily, while calm, until the sequence runs without thinking.
Time required	Roughly ten minutes for a full five-cycle sequence.
Visibility	Can be done discreetly, with no outward sign, in almost any setting.

Before You Begin: Health and Safety

Both components sit within the range of ordinary everyday physical activity, and the technique is designed to return your body to a normal state rather than push it to an extreme. Two considerations apply nonetheless.

Sustained full-body tension raises blood pressure for as long as you hold it. If you have a cardiovascular condition, raised blood pressure, glaucoma, a recent injury or operation, or persistent pain, or if you are pregnant, discuss the tension component with your GP before using it. In the meantime, you can substitute a lighter and briefer hold, which keeps most of the benefit.

> *"There are more things, Lucilius, likely to frighten us than there are to crush us; we suffer more often in imagination than in reality."*
> ***— Seneca, Letters to Lucilius, Letter 13, On Groundless Fears (Gummere translation)***

The breathing pattern includes two deliberate pauses. If you have a respiratory condition such as asthma or COPD, shorten those pauses or leave them out altogether, and keep the longer out-breath, which is the part carrying the effect.

Mild light-headedness in your first few sessions is common and settles with practice. It tells you the pattern is unfamiliar, not that anything is wrong.

When Not to Use the Technique

- Not while driving or operating machinery. The technique deliberately narrows your attention onto an internal task.
- Not standing unsupported in your first few sessions, given the possibility of light-headedness. Practise seated to begin with.
- Not in water, and not anywhere a brief lapse of attention would carry a risk.
- Not as a substitute for medical assessment if the physical symptoms you experience have never been investigated.

Step One: Practise Before It Is Needed

The most important instruction comes first, because skipping it undermines everything that follows: learn and practise this strategy while you are calm, not while you are anxious.

> *"As long as you are breathing, there is more right with you than there is wrong, no matter how ill or how hopeless you may feel."*
> ***— Jon Kabat-Zinn, Full Catastrophe Living***

Anxiety sharply reduces your capacity to think clearly, take in new information, or work something out for the first time. Trying to learn a breathing pattern or a tension sequence in the middle of a panic attack starts you from the worst possible position. The strategy needs to be established, familiar and automatic before you need it, so that using it asks nothing of you beyond beginning the sequence.

Practise daily, in a calm state, until the sequence becomes familiar. This is not a strategy you reserve for moments of crisis. Used regularly, it calms your nervous system over time, quite apart from any specific anxiety attack.

Step Two: Build the Tension Component

The first half of the strategy uses your voluntary muscles, the ones under conscious control, deliberately tensed and released to discharge built-up energy and bring your nervous system down from a heightened state.

The Method

Create as much tension throughout your body as you can, and hold it. You are not after a token gesture such as a clenched fist, but genuine full-body tension, engaging the large muscle groups in particular: your thighs, your back, your upper back and your shoulders. Your shoulders will naturally rise under tension; let that happen rather than fighting it, since it follows your body's own pattern under stress. Tense your neck. Tense your upper back. Tense your legs and your toes. Pulling your feet back will tense your calves as well. Aim for tension spread across your whole body, not concentrated in one or two easily noticed places.

> *"Breath is the bridge which connects life to consciousness, which unites your body to your thoughts. Whenever your mind becomes scattered, use your breath as the means to take hold of your mind again."*
> ***— Thich Nhat Hanh, The Miracle of Mindfulness***

Hold the tension until failure, meaning until your muscles can no longer sustain it, or for a set period of roughly one minute. Use a timer if that helps.

Your breathing during this phase is not the focus and does not need controlling with any precision. Holding your breath, or barely breathing, is normal while your muscles are under full tension. The purpose of this phase is the tension itself.

Using the Technique Discreetly

You can use this component without anyone else seeing it. Create the tension in your toes, push it through your feet into the floor, or make it with your fists, all without any outward sign that anything is happening. That keeps the technique available in situations where leaving the room, moving around, or visibly managing your anxiety would not be practical, such as during a meeting.

> *"If the breath scatters, the mind wanders. If mind wanders, the breath scatters. So still the breath to still the mind."*
> ***— B.K.S. Iyengar, Light on Life***

Step Three: Build the Breathing Component

The second half of the strategy uses your breathing, which gives you a direct route to your nervous system for reasons set out in the closing section.

The Four Parts of a Breath

Every breath has four distinct parts: breathing in, a pause, breathing out, and a further pause. Calming breathing uses all four deliberately, rather than focusing on the in-breath alone, which is the natural instinct.

The four parts of a breath, drawn to relative length. Your out-breath is longer than your in-breath.

The Three Governing Principles

- Your out-breath is longer than your in-breath. This is the most important principle, and the one to hold on to even when you adjust everything else.
- You use both pauses deliberately. The pause after breathing in and the pause after breathing out are part of the technique, not gaps to rush past.
- You keep the breath smooth. The air should move evenly and under control throughout, rather than sharply or unevenly.

The Target Pattern

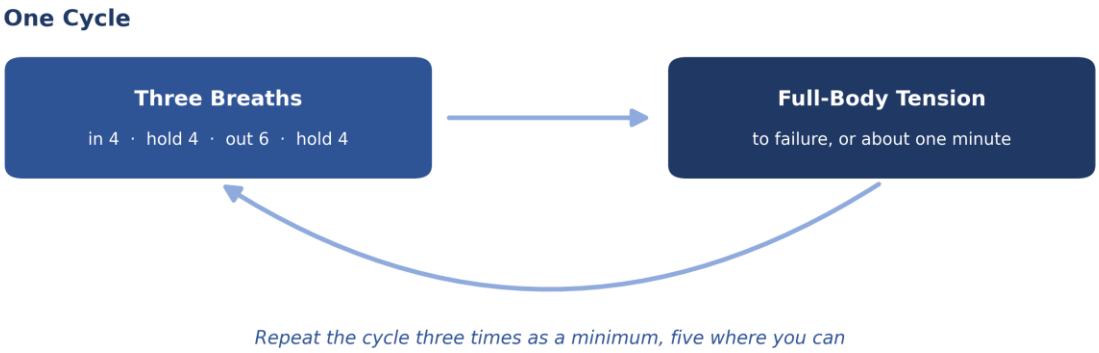
The pattern to work toward is: breathe in for four counts, hold for four, breathe out for six, hold for four, and repeat.

You will rarely manage this straight away. Begin with a shorter, more manageable pattern, such as breathing in for two counts and holding for two, breathing out for four and holding for two. That keeps the underlying principle of a longer out-breath than in-breath intact even at the reduced scale. Build toward the full four-and-six pattern with practice over time, rather than trying to start there.

Step Four: Combine Tension and Breathing Into a Cycle

The full strategy combines both components into a repeating cycle. One cycle consists of:

- Three breaths, using the pattern above, building toward four counts in, hold for four, six counts out, hold for four.
- A period of full-body tension, held to failure or for roughly one minute.



One cycle. Alternating between the two components is deliberate and does work of its own.

Repeat the cycle three times as a minimum, with five as a better target where time and circumstance allow. Across those cycles you are aiming to reach, and then hold, at least two or three full breaths at the four-and-six target pattern by the end of the sequence.

Making the Strategy Your Own

This sequence is a starting template rather than a fixed prescription, and you will need to adapt it. Few people in the middle of a genuine anxiety attack can manage a six-count out-breath immediately; most need to begin shorter and build up. The numbers matter less than the principles behind them: a longer out-breath than in-breath, deliberate use of both pauses, full-body tension spread across the large muscle groups, and a fixed repeatable structure that removes the need to think at a moment when thinking clearly is hard.

Through regular practice, you come to know your own starting point and your own rate of progress, building from whatever count you can currently manage toward the fuller four-and-six pattern, in calm conditions, well before you actually need it.

Troubleshooting Common Difficulties

Most difficulties with this technique are ordinary features of learning it rather than signs that it is wrong for you.

Difficulty	What to Do
The counts feel impossible	The pattern is too long for your current starting point. Drop to two in, two hold, four out, two hold, or shorter still, keeping your out-breath longer than your in-breath. Build up over weeks.
You feel lightheaded	Common in the first few sessions. Practise seated. Reduce how deeply you breathe in rather than the count, and shorten the pauses. If it persists, the pattern is still too demanding and should be scaled back further.
The tension causes pain or aggravates an injury	Switch to the discreet version, tension in your fists, feet and toes only, and shorten the hold to fifteen or twenty seconds. Discharging the energy matters more than how much tension you generate.
Your attention will not stay on the count	Expected, and not a failure. Counting aloud, counting on your fingers, or following a visual timer all give your attention something external to hold. Noticing you have drifted and coming back to the count is the exercise working, not failing.
Anxiety rises during the first cycle	Turning your attention inward often makes you more aware of physical symptoms before it settles them. Finish the full cycle before judging the effect. If anxiety keeps climbing across three full cycles, stop and raise it in session.
Nothing seems to be happening	The effect builds across weeks of daily practice rather than arriving within a single session. Judge the technique on a fortnight of practice, not on one attempt.
You cannot remember the sequence	Use the summary at the front of this guide while you practise in calm conditions. The sequence is meant to become automatic through repetition, not to be memorised deliberately.

What Progress Looks Like

People often judge this technique by whether the anxiety disappeared, decide it failed, and abandon it. That is the wrong measure. Immediate and complete relief is not what the strategy is built to deliver. These are the markers that tell you it is working.

- You can carry out the sequence without consulting this guide.
- The four-and-six pattern becomes comfortable in calm daily practice, even if not yet during an attack.
- Your anxiety peaks lower than it did, even where it still rises.
- You return to baseline faster afterwards, in minutes rather than hours.
- You meet an anxious episode with a plan, rather than with the added fear of having no plan.
- Your general level of tension across ordinary days is lower, quite apart from any specific episode.

These markers appear over weeks and months. Judge your progress across that span rather than session by session.

Why the Technique Works

The reasoning sits here rather than alongside the instructions, so you can learn the steps first and read the explanation whenever you want it. You do not need to understand why the technique works in order to use it, but understanding it does tend to keep people practising.

Why Tension Works

Anxiety is a survival response preparing you to fight or to flee, and it releases energy into your muscles for that purpose. When you neither fight nor flee, that energy stays where it is. Deliberate tension, held to failure and then released, spends it, which is why the technique leaves you physically settled rather than agitated.

Why Breathing Works

The muscles involved in breathing are unusual in being both voluntary and involuntary. You can control them consciously, and they also connect directly to the vagus nerve, which gives you a direct route to calming your nervous system. That is why breathing is a genuine point of leverage over an anxious body rather than a distraction or a platitude.

Why Four and Six

The four-and-six target is not arbitrary. A six-count out-breath sits at the upper edge of what still counts as normal everyday breathing, and almost anyone can reach it without training. Going significantly slower moves into territory associated with deep meditative practice and becomes hard to sustain without considerable training. Going faster means your breathing has not yet slowed enough to have a calming effect on your nervous system. Four and six sits at the point that is both achievable and effective.

> *"Never let the future disturb you. You will meet it, if you have to, with the same weapons of reason which today arm you against the present."*
> ***— Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, Book 7, Section 8 (Long translation)***

Why Not an Activating Pattern

This technique is distinct from breathing methods designed to activate the nervous system, such as those prioritising a long full in-breath and a short out-breath, often used for energising purposes. The calming technique described here works deliberately in the opposite direction. Do not confuse the two: a method built for activation is not appropriate for calming anxiety.

Why the Two Components Alternate

Shifting your attention from breathing to tension and back again gives your mind a structured task to follow, moving attention away from the anxious thought and onto the procedure you are carrying out. This is part of why a fixed, predictable sequence matters: it replaces not knowing what to do with a clear, repeatable plan, and following that plan is itself part of what brings the anxiety down.

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