

The Art of Calm

Practical and powerful ways to bring peace to your day

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What makes for good art? According to San Francisco gallery owner Cheryl Haines, the answer is “Clear intention, unwavering dedication, patience, perseverance, self awareness, and the drive to make for yourself and no one else.” The same goes for "good calm," too.

Whether you suffer from occasional anxiety, generalized anxiety, or its more cumbersome cousin,

social anxiety, the following strategies will help get you on the other side of calm when practiced regularly.

1. *Develop a morning success ritual.* How we begin each day sets the tone for the rest of the day. Wake up 30-60 minutes earlier than usual to focus on personal development. This could include exercise, meditation, reading self-help books or articles, yoga, or simply letting go. The point is not to catch up on household chores or email, but to focus on improving your psychological insight. Make sure your alarm clock is away from your bed and have a glass of water ready to replenish your brain and body. If you're not a morning person, this will be tough in the beginning, but after a month or so, this practice will come naturally.

2. *Practice slow, deep breathing.* I like the 4-4-4: Inhale for a count of four, hold for a count of four, and exhale for a count of four. Do this at least three times in succession, and practice when calm, too. Attention to calming breath is the first line of defense when you feel panic coming on.

3. *Focus on solutions and not on problems.*

4. *Check your thoughts.* Organized thoughts contribute to an organized life. Train your brain to be decisive, methodical, and sound. Would you employ a

haphazard worker who only showed up to the gig when she felt like it? Exactly. Fire unnecessary and unwelcome emotions, just as you would a slacker employee in your company.

Are you aware of counterproductive emotions such as negativity, fear, jealousy or self-loathing? Look up CBT (cognitive-behavioral therapy) which can help you practice healthier, more realistic thoughts to challenge the automatic, negative thoughts which threaten your peace of mind.

5. *Manage your emotional regulation.* The key is to know your triggers and to adjust accordingly. For example, if traffic gets your blood boiling, you'll want to slow your physiological responses to behind-the-wheel stress. Instead of succumbing to the impulsive (and potentially dangerous) reaction of road rage, come up with healthy coping strategies such as driving slower, playing calming music, listening to an enjoyable podcast, or sipping a cool beverage. Pay attention to your physical triggers, and remember you can practice deep-breathing anytime, anywhere.

6. *Stop waiting and start living.* Face it: The perfect time, the ideal weight, or the right amount in the bank account does not exist. Make time for fun and adventure now.

7. *Choose a personality role model.* This could be a

historic figure or someone you know. Years ago I supervised a social work intern with the most amazing attitude. To this day I think about her calm, collected manner and her skill at finding the positive in each situation. Asking "What would so-and-so do in this situation?" can get you back on track.

8. *Drink more water.* Not only does water rehydrate and replenish, it can be used as a distraction tool when your emotional thermometer runs high.

9. *Take a break.* This could be a mid-afternoon nap, a time-out from environmental stimulation, or most importantly, technology.

Speaking of which...

10. *Designate a schedule for checking email.* For example, 9:00 a.m., noon, and 5:00 p.m. I suggest no more than three times per day. Just because everyone else in line for the commuter train, the 3:00 p.m. green tea at Starbucks, or the grocery check-out is bowed in silent prayer to the mobile device, doesn't mean you have to. Be a renegade and focus on your surroundings. You just might make someone's day with your effervescent smile and intentional eye contact.

11. *Boost productivity with the 25/5 Rule.* Work continuously for 25 minutes, then take a five-minute

break. Set the egg timer accordingly. After three consecutive sessions, take a 30-minute break. Repeat. Bonus points if you introduce this to the kids' study routine.

12. *Let go often.*

13. *Smile more.*

14. *Consciously connect.* Schedule in-person time with others at least twice a week. We're wired to connect. Period.

15. *Appreciate what you have.* We're so focused on the end goal that we forget about the small triumphs along the way. And remember what your mom used to say: "Someone else is thankful for less than what you have."

16. *Switch up your responsive routine.* If you know the monthly family dinner inevitably includes too much alcohol, bickering, and reverting back to childhood sibling rivalry, do differently. Acting in the same manner and expecting different results is akin to believing your teen will wake up early tomorrow morning to wash last night's dinner dishes and then prepare a delicious family breakfast...plus cleanup.

17. *Take advantage of therapy.* One of the beauties

of being **in treatment** is you have 50 minutes of designated time every week to focus on personal development. This is your "me" time -- use it wisely.

18. Choose simplicity. Talk less, buy less, eat less, stress less.

19. Resist the urge to regret your DNA, childhood, weight, body type, **choice of spouse/partner**/vocation, etc. It is what it is, or was. Leave the past where it belongs: behind you. Focus on today instead. **Mindfulness** is where it's at.

Picasso didn't wake up one morning and paint the masterpiece Guernica. Conversely, you didn't become nervous, hyper-vigilant and stressed out overnight. Take it slow. Time is your friend, and not something to race against or fear. Calm can be yours when you treat it as an art to be practiced, contemplated, and honed each and every day.

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