

TOOL 11

Confidence at Work

Proven techniques for nerves, true affirmations, and a quick-break guide for the hard moments.

Inside

Six techniques with the research behind them

The quick-break guide: 1, 3 and 10 minutes

What to tell yourself in hard moments · The values exercise

30 affirmation cards to print · When it is more than nerves

You are not behind

The first month in a new job is one of the most stressful times in working life. Feeling nervous does not mean you are failing. It means you are new, and you care.

WHEN YOU HAVE	USE
1 minute	Cyclic sighing, box breathing, renaming nerves as excitement
3 minutes	5-4-3-2-1 grounding, the 3-minute desk reset
10 minutes	Writing your worries down, the values exercise, a short walk

How to use this guide

- ☐ Try each technique once in a calm moment, so you know it before you need it.
- ☐ Pick your favorite two. Write them on a card and keep it in your bag.
- ☐ Use them before hard moments, not only during them: before the boss meeting, before a difficult call, before your first minutes.

WHY IT WORKS

Every technique in this guide is backed by published research or by widely used practice. The source is named on each page, in plain words, so you can look it up.

PLEASE NOTE

This guide is for everyday nerves at work. It is not medical advice. If worry is affecting your sleep, your health or your life outside work, please see the last page.

Breathe it down

1 • Cyclic sighing

- 1 Breathe in through your nose.
- 2 Before you breathe out, take a second, smaller breath in through your nose, on top of the first.
- 3 Breathe out slowly and fully through your mouth, longer than the breaths in.
- 4 Repeat for one to five minutes.

WHY IT WORKS

In a 2023 study at Stanford published in *Cell Reports Medicine*, Melis Yilmaz Balban and colleagues found that five minutes a day of cyclic sighing improved mood and reduced anxiety, and did so more than the same time spent on mindfulness meditation.

2 • Box breathing

- 1 Breathe in for a count of 4.
- 2 Hold for 4.
- 3 Breathe out for 4.
- 4 Hold for 4. Repeat four times.

WHY IT WORKS

Box breathing is a slow, paced breathing method widely taught to people who must stay calm under pressure, including some military and emergency teams. Slow breathing with long breaths out is linked in research to a calmer heart rate.

FROM 26 YEARS AT THE DESK

I used to do my breathing in the restroom before big meetings. Nobody ever knew. Two minutes there made the next hour easier.

Change what your mind is telling you

3 • Call it excitement

When your heart is racing before something new, do not try to tell yourself to calm down. Say, quietly or in your head: **"I'm excited."**

WHY IT WORKS

Alison Wood Brooks (Harvard Business School, 2014, *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*) found that people who said "I am excited" before stressful tasks such as public speaking performed better than people who said "I am calm". Nerves and excitement feel the same in the body; the name you give them changes what happens next.

4 • Write your worries down

Ten minutes before something big, write freely about what you are worried about. Then close the notebook.

WHY IT WORKS

Gerardo Ramirez and Sian Beilock (*Science*, 2011) found that students who wrote about their worries for ten minutes before an exam performed better than those who did not. Writing a worry down frees up the attention it was taking.

5 • 5-4-3-2-1 grounding

Notice **5** things you can see, **4** you can touch, **3** you can hear, **2** you can smell, and **1** you can taste. It brings your attention back to the present moment when your thoughts are racing ahead.

The values exercise

Ten minutes, on your first weekend and again on your last. It reminds you that one hard week does not define you.

WHY IT WORKS

Geoffrey Cohen and David Sherman (*Annual Review of Psychology*, 2014) reviewed many studies of self-affirmation: briefly writing about values that matter to you. It helps people stay calm and open under pressure, and in some studies it improved performance for months afterwards. Real self-affirmation is about your values, not about telling yourself you are perfect.

1 · CIRCLE THE VALUES THAT MATTER MOST TO YOU

FAMILY FAITH HONESTY KINDNESS LEARNING INDEPENDENCE HEALTH
 CREATIVITY SECURITY SERVICE FRIENDSHIP EXCELLENCE FAIRNESS
 HUMOR COMMUNITY GRATITUDE COURAGE PATIENCE

Something else that matters to me _____

2 · CHOOSE ONE. WHY DOES IT MATTER TO YOU?

3 · WRITE ABOUT A TIME THIS VALUE GUIDED YOU

When it gets too much at your desk

A short break is not laziness. It is how you keep doing good work all day.

1 minute

At your desk, without anyone noticing.

- ☐ Three cyclic sighs
- ☐ Unclench your jaw
- ☐ Drop your shoulders
- ☐ Feet flat on the floor

3 minutes

The desk reset.

- ☐ Stand up and stretch
- ☐ Drink a glass of water
- ☐ Look far away for 20 seconds
- ☐ Tidy one small thing
- ☐ Sit down and pick one task

10 minutes

For a hard morning.

- ☐ Walk outside or around the building
- ☐ Leave your phone at your desk
- ☐ Eat your packed snack
- ☐ Come back and write your next step

When to take one

- ☐ After a difficult call
- ☐ Before an important meeting
- ☐ After you notice a mistake, before you fix it
- ☐ When you have read the same email three times
- ☐ Mid-afternoon, when energy drops

Where to go discreetly

The restroom, a walk to the water cooler or kitchen, a stairwell, or outside "to get some air". Nobody needs to know why.

GOOD TO KNOW

The American Academy of Ophthalmology recommends the 20-20-20 rule for screen work: every 20 minutes, look at something about 20 feet away for 20 seconds. It is an easy reminder to take micro-breaks too.

What to tell yourself in hard moments

How you speak to yourself matters. Speak to yourself the way you would speak to a friend on her first day.

WHEN	SAY TO YOURSELF
After a mistake	<i>I made a mistake. I'm fixing it. One mistake is not who I am.</i>
When you feel overwhelmed	<i>One thing at a time. What is the next small step?</i>
After criticism	<i>This is information about my work, not a verdict on me. What can I use?</i>
When nobody invites you to lunch	<i>Everyone has a routine. I'll enjoy this break, and I'll join in when it's natural.</i>
When you feel you don't belong	<i>I was hired for a reason. I'm learning, and that is exactly what I should be doing.</i>
When you compare yourself to others	<i>They had a first month too. I'm on day [number].</i>
Before something big	<i>I'm excited. I've prepared. I can do the next five minutes.</i>
At the end of a hard day	<i>Today is done. I learned something. Tomorrow I start fresh.</i>

FROM 26 YEARS AT THE DESK

In my hardest weeks, under very demanding bosses, I learned that the voice in my head was either my best support or my worst critic. I chose to make it my support. It took practice, and it changed everything.

30 affirmation cards

One for each day. Keep today's card on your desk, in your notebook, or as your phone wallpaper.

I was chosen for this role. That was not
an accident.

I don't need to know everything today. I
need to know where to write it down.

Asking a question is part of my job.

Every expert assistant once had a Day 1.

I can make a mistake and fix it
professionally.

Calm is a skill, and I am practicing it.

I prepare, so I can stay steady.

My notebook remembers, so my mind
can rest.

I can say "I'll find out" with confidence.

I treat everyone with respect, and that
includes me.

Cards 11 to 20

I am allowed to take a short break.

Being new is temporary. Being reliable lasts.

I listen first. It is my strength.

One step at a time is still progress.

I don't have to be liked by everyone. I have to be trusted.

I bring today's energy, not tomorrow's worries.

Feedback is information, not a verdict.

I'm learning faster than I think.

Quiet competence gets noticed.

My boss's day is easier because I'm here.

Cards 21 to 30

I can protect my time and still be kind.

A clear "no, but" is professional.

I finish what I start, and I say when it's done.

I keep confidences. That is why people trust me.

I am more prepared than I feel.

Nerves mean I care. Caring makes me good at this.

I can handle this hour. Then the next one.

My work matters, even when nobody sees it.

I am building a career, not just getting through a week.

I'm no longer new. I'm the person who knows.

When it is more than nerves

First-month nerves fade as the job becomes familiar. Sometimes, worry is bigger than that, and it deserves real help.

Signs it may be more than nerves

- ☐ You have trouble sleeping most nights, for more than two weeks
- ☐ You feel dread every day, not only before specific moments
- ☐ You have panic attacks: a racing heart, trouble breathing, or feeling you might faint
- ☐ Worry is affecting your eating, your health or your relationships
- ☐ You feel hopeless, or that things will never get better

Where to find help

- ☐ **Your doctor.** Anxiety is common and very treatable.
- ☐ **Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP).** Many US employers offer free, confidential counseling sessions. Ask HR, or look in your benefits pack.
- ☐ **In a crisis in the US,** call or text **988** to reach the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, any time. Outside the US, contact your local emergency or crisis service.

CALM MOMENT

Asking for help is the same skill you are using at work: noticing what you need, and asking the right person. You are good at that now.