

# 7 Quick Ways to Calm Down

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I'm easily overwhelmed. When my kids' exuberant screams reach a decibel level my ears can't tolerate, when Chuck E., the life-size "rat" at the pizza place, starts doing his jig while flashing arcade lights blind me, or when I open my email to find 100 messages—I feel a meltdown coming on. Which is why I came up with seven quick ways to calm myself down.

I turn to these when I don't have time to call my mom and hear her tell me, "Everything is going to be fine." They keep me centered and grounded for as long as possible, and they help me relax my body even during those times when screaming kids and dancing life-sized rats converge.

## **1. Walk Away**

Know your triggers. If a conversation about global warming, consumerism, or the trash crisis in the U.S. is overwhelming you, simply excuse yourself. If you're noise-sensitive and the scene at Toys-R-Us makes you want to throw whistling Elmo and his buddies across the store, tell your kids you need a time-out. (Bring along your husband or a friend so you can leave them safely, if need be.) My great-aunt Gigi knew her trigger points, and if a conversation or setting was getting close to them, she simply put one foot in front of another, and departed.

## **2. Close Your Eyes**

Gently let the world disappear, and go within to regain your equilibrium. Ever since my mom came down with blepharospasm (a neurological tic of the eyelid), I've become aware of how important shutting our eyes is to the health of the nervous system. The only treatment available for this disorder is to have surgery that permanently keeps your eyelids open (you need to moisten them with drops, etc.). Such a condition would be living hell for my mom, because in closing her eyes she regains her balance and proper focus.

The only time I recommend not using this technique is on the road (if you're driving).

### **3. Find Some Solitude**

This can be challenging if you are at work, or at home with kids as creative and energetic as mine. But we all need some private time to let the nervous system regenerate.

I must have known this back in college, because I opted for a tiny single room (a nun's closet, quite literally), rather than going in on a larger room with a closet big enough to store my sweaters. When three of my good friends begged me to go in with them on a killer quad, I told them, "Nope. Can't do it. Need my alone time, or else none of you would want to be around me. Trust me."

My senior year I went to the extent of pasting black construction paper on the window above my door so no one would know if I was there, in order to get the hours of solitude that I needed.

Be creative. Find your space. Any way you can. Even if it involves black construction paper.

### **4. Go Outside**

This is a true lifesaver for me. I need to be outside for at least an hour every day to get my sanity fix. Granted, I'm extremely lucky to be able to do so as a stay-at-home mom. But I think I would somehow work it into my schedule even if I had to commute into the city every day.

Even if I'm not walking or running or biking or swimming, being outside calms me in a way that hardly anything else can. With an hour of nature, I go from being a bossy, opinionated, angry, cynical, uptight person into a bossy, opinionated, cynical, relaxed person. And that makes the difference between having friends and a husband to have dinner with and a world that tells me to go eat a frozen dinner by myself because they don't want to catch whatever grumpy bug I have.

### **5. Find Some Water**

While watching Disney's "Pocahontas" the other day with my daughter Katherine (yes, I do get some of my best insights from cartoons), I observed the sheer joy the main character shows upon paddling down the river, singing about how she is one with the water. It reminded me of how universal the mood effects of water are, and how healing.

On the rainy or snowy days that I can't walk the double stroller over to our local creeks, I do something the global-warming guys say not to; take a long shower, imagining that I am in the middle of a beautiful Hawaiian rain forest.

"Water helps in many ways," writes Elaine Aron. "When overaroused, keep drinking it—a big glass of it once an hour. Walk beside some water, look at it, listen to it. Get into some if you can, for a bath or a swim. Hot tubs and hot springs are popular for good reasons."

## **6. Breathe Deeply**

Breathing is the foundation of sanity, because it is the way we provide our brain and every other vital organ in our body with the oxygen needed for us to survive. Breathing also eliminates toxins from our systems.

Years ago, I learned the "Four Square" method of breathing to reduce [anxiety](#):

1. Breathe in slowly to a count of four.
2. Hold the breath for a count of four.
3. Exhale slowly through pursed lips to a count of four.
4. Rest for a count of four (without taking any breaths).
5. Take two normal breaths.
6. Start over again with number one.

## **7. Listen to Music**

Across the ages, music has been used to soothe and relax. During the worst months of my [depression](#), I blared the

soundtrack of “The Phantom of the Opera.” Pretending to be the phantom with a cape and a mask, I twirled around our living room, swinging my kids in my arms. I belted out every word of “The Music of the Night.”

“Softly, deftly, music shall caress you, Feel it, hear it, secretly possess you....”

The gorgeous song — like all good music — could stroke that tender place within me that words couldn’t get to.