# anxiety surfing

Anxiety can feel overwhelming, but it's important to remember that it does not last forever. The experience of anxiety can be thought of like a wave - it rises, reaches a peak, and then reduces over time. This can take anywhere from a few minutes to a few hours. No matter how long it takes, anxiety cannot stay at high levels forever and will naturally decrease.

Using the strategy of **anxiety surfing** means allowing our anxiety to ride its wave and trusting that it will pass. In other words; *ride it don't fight it*.
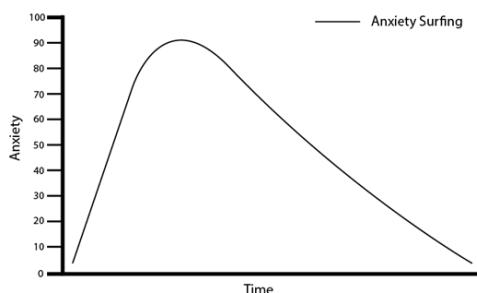
What happens when we fight the wave?

Because anxiety is uncomfortable, it's natural to want to reduce it. We often try to "fight the wave" of anxiety by:

- **Escaping:** Leaving situations that makes us anxious.
- **Avoiding:** Skipping activities that provoke anxiety.
- **Safety Behaviours:** Using certain behaviours to reduce our anxiety (e.g. using phones to distract ourselves from anxiety, or using alcohol or other substances to reduce anxiety symptoms).
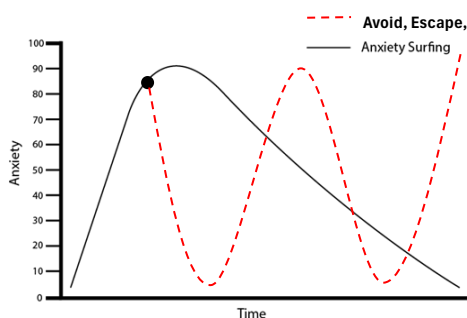
As shown in the graph above, these strategies may provide quick relief, but they also prevent us from learning that anxiety naturally decreases on its own. If we escape before the anxiety wave passes, our brain concludes that anxiety would have kept rising or stayed uncomfortably high forever, thus making us more afraid of facing anxiety in the future.

As a result, when we fight the anxiety wave by escaping, avoiding, or using safety behaviours, we actually keep our anxiety going in the long-term. Over time, anxiety peaks higher, takes longer to pass, and reduces our confidence, making us more likely to rely on avoidance again.

Steps for anxiety surfing

When you notice physical feelings becoming stronger try the following steps:

1. Acknowledge: Take a step back and describe what you're experiencing, such as physical sensations in your body (e.g. "*I notice I am feeling anxious right now, I can feel my heart rate increasing and my breathing getting quicker*"). Don't try to distract yourself from these feelings, acknowledge them instead.

2. Observe: Rate the intensity of your anxiety on a scale of 0-10, note where you feel it in your body, and observe any shifts.

3. Accept: Remind yourself not to listen to any unhelpful judgements or catastrophic thoughts about anxiety (e.g. *"I shouldn't be feeling this way", "It's never going to stop", "Others can tell I'm anxious and are judging me"*).

4. Remain: Resist the urge to fight the wave with escape, avoidance, or safety behaviours tactics. Try to stay in the situation to give your anxiety an opportunity to pass on its own and test whether it is truly unbearable.

5. Be Patient: Waves take time to come and go. Being in a rush to get through the emotions can suggest fear of them.

Helpful tips

Coping imagery
Some people find it helpful to develop a coping image to support their practice of anxiety surfing. To do this, find an image in your mind that represents your anxiety. Then, consider how the image would need to change to represent coping with anxiety and feeling better. Examples include:

Anxious Image	Coping Image
Anxiety as a giant ocean wave I am drowning in	Surfing the wave into shore
Anxiety is a dark cloud above me	The cloud passing by to reveal the sun shining down on me
Anxiety feels like a big rock weighing down on my chest	Pushing the rock of my chest, standing up and taking a breath

Practice makes progress
It may be difficult to surf your anxiety wave the first time you try - don't let this discourage you! With practice, this skill will become easier. You will gain confidence in your ability to cope with anxious feelings and gradually reduce your sensitivity to anxiety. Over time, anxiety will feel less intense and won't last as long.

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