

89 Ways Through Big Feelings

Things to try when a feeling gets too big to hold

Big feelings can arrive fast and take over. Anger, anxiety, panic, overwhelm, deep sadness, that flooded feeling where there's just too much going on inside. In those moments the thinking part of the brain goes quiet and the feeling runs the show, which is when things can tip into meltdown, shutdown or something we regret later.

The ideas here won't fix whatever caused the feeling. That's a job for a calmer moment. What they can do is help a body move through the feeling right now, so the moment passes without harm and you come out the other side a bit steadier.

Different ideas do different jobs, and which one helps depends on the feeling. When there's anger or agitation, the loud, physical, get-it-out ideas often work best. When it's sadness or overwhelm, the quieter ones tend to help more: being heard, being with the feeling, something sensory. Each section says what it's for, so you can head for the kind of thing that fits the moment.

This works whether you're a parent or carer helping a child, an adult doing this for yourself or someone supporting a young person who's learning what helps them. The trick is to have a few you trust, and to have tried them before you need them, so they're there when a calm choice is hard to make.

You might choose to adapt some of these to suit the person you've got in mind. It's also worth trying the odd one that looks aimed at someone younger, because there's real joy to be had as an adult in squishing a lump of plasticine or blowing bubbles, and these things work far more widely than we tend to expect.

Making the feeling heard

Anger and worry often need a witness before they'll settle. This helps most when a feeling is going round and round and won't quieten, whether what it needs is someone else's ears or just your own.

1. Talk about it with someone you trust
2. Tell a soft toy, pet or plant who'll listen but won't answer back
3. Write a letter to whatever's upsetting you, then keep it or bin it (don't send it)
4. Message a helpline like Childline, or a text support line
5. Journal using 'what's weighing me down?' as a starting point
6. Write a list of the top ten things you wish you could change right now
7. Have a whole conversation with yourself about the hurt using only emojis
8. Take a felt pen for a walk across a big blank piece of paper
9. Make shapes that look how you feel out of playdough or plasticine
10. Paint how you feel, BIG, with poster paints
11. Say the feeling out loud, even just naming it: 'I'm furious', 'I'm frightened'
12. Record a voice note telling the feeling exactly what you think of it
13. Draw a picture of what the feeling would look like if you could see it
14. Tell a trusted person what you need right now, even if it's just to be left be

Sitting with the feelings

Sometimes the kindest thing is to let a feeling be there rather than push it away. These suit sadness and heavy, overwhelmed moments especially, when there's nothing to fix and the feeling just needs room to move through.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">15. Let yourself cry16. Sit somewhere calm and quiet outdoors and let the feeling be there17. Sit in a window and watch the clouds go past18. Build a blanket fort and hide out in it for a while19. Listen to sad or angry music that matches the feeling20. Quietly sit with someone who loves you21. Cuddle a friend, family member or pet22. Watch a film or programme that taps into what you're feeling | <ul style="list-style-type: none">23. Write one sentence about what's going on and look at it until it feels a bit easier24. Put a hand on your chest and feel yourself breathing until it slows25. Wrap up in something heavy and warm and wait for the wave to pass26. Name the feeling and remind yourself it will pass, because it always does27. Let yourself feel sad without rushing to cheer up28. Make a warm drink and wrap both hands around it29. Lie down somewhere comfy and let your body go heavy for a while |
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Moving the body

Big feelings often sit in the body as restless, jangly energy. Getting moving gives that energy somewhere to go, which helps most with anger, agitation or anxious fizzing that won't sit still.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">30. Dance like nobody's watching31. Run on the spot as fast as you can32. Run up a hill33. Have a pillow fight with a wall34. Jump on a trampoline35. Roll down a grassy slope36. Stamp your feet, hard37. Shoot hoops or take penalties, fast and hard38. Roll on a gym ball or foam roller | <ul style="list-style-type: none">39. Run up and down the stairs a few times40. Do as many star jumps as you can until you're out of puff41. Go for a fast walk and match your steps to your breathing42. Play fetch with a dog, throw hard, cuddle between throws43. Shake out your whole body, arms, legs, hands, like a wet dog44. Push hard against a wall with both hands and feel your muscles work45. Squeeze a cushion as hard as you can, then let go, and notice the difference46. Walk outside until your thoughts feel a little quieter |
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Letting it out and letting it go

It can help to put a feeling somewhere outside yourself, then let it go. Good for anger and worry you want rid of, and for the thoughts that keep circling and won't leave you be.

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| 47. Write it down, then scribble it out until the paper wears through | 54. Build a tower as tall as you can, then knock it down |
| 48. Draw your worries on cardboard then tear it into pieces | 55. Draw the feeling in chalk outside then wash it away with water |
| 49. Scrunch worries into paper balls and throw them away | 56. Write the worry on a stone and drop it in water |
| 50. Cut an old piece of material into tiny pieces then throw them out | 57. Blow the feeling into a bubble and watch it float off and pop |
| 51. Scrunch and throw leaves, imagining each one is a worry | 58. Write it on paper that dissolves, or on a steamed-up window, and let it disappear |
| 52. Draw the worry, fold it into a paper aeroplane and fly it away | 59. Fill a jar with worries written on scraps of paper, then choose when to empty it out |
| 53. Make a plasticine version of the feeling then squidge it flat | 60. Tear a worry into smaller and smaller pieces until it feels smaller too |
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Making some noise

Sometimes the noise inside needs some noise outside to match it. This tends to suit anger and frustration, the feelings with a bit of force behind them. Just pick your spot so you don't worry anyone nearby.

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| 61. Play music loudly | 66. Drum your fingers on the table, getting faster and louder |
| 62. Sing very loudly | 67. Hum or make a low sound and feel it buzz in your chest |
| 63. Roar like a dragon | 68. Have a good, loud shout somewhere it won't worry anyone |
| 64. Bang a drum or other percussion | 69. Shout into a cushion as loud as you like |
| 65. Find an echoey place and clap, imagining you're squashing the feeling | 70. Stamp out a rhythm and let it get louder and faster |
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Something sensory

Flooding the senses gives a busy or flooded mind somewhere else to be. This helps a lot with overwhelm and panic, when everything's too much and you need a way back into the room.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">71. Snuggle into a beanbag72. Squeeze ice cubes hard and watch them melt in your hand73. Jump on bubble wrap74. Squash water beads in a bowl or squeeze out a wet sponge75. Blow bubbles and watch the colours76. Watch glitter settle in a glitter bottle77. Suck a strong mint and focus right in on the taste78. Eat something crunchy and focus on the crunch79. Snap dry sticks in half80. Hold something cold against your face, like a cool flannel | <ul style="list-style-type: none">81. Name five things you can see, four you can hear, three you can touch82. Push your feet into the floor and notice everywhere your body is supported83. Run your hands under cold water and pay attention to how it feels84. Wrap yourself in the softest thing you can find85. Press your palms together firmly and hold for a slow count of ten86. Smell something strong you like, like citrus, coffee or a favourite hand cream87. Find a dark, quiet space and let your eyes rest88. Hold a warm hot water bottle against you89. Put on a favourite song through headphones and let it fill your ears |
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Getting the most from these

A few things make these ideas far more likely to help when a hard moment actually arrives.

Try some when things are calm. Have a go on a good day, together or on your own, so the ones that suit you are familiar by the time you need them. In the middle of a big feeling nobody remembers a long list, so it helps to keep a handful of favourites somewhere easy to find: on a phone, on the fridge, in a pocket.

It's worth being clear about what these ideas are and aren't. They help you get through the moment, and that matters, because big feelings are valid and worth moving through rather than squashing or ignoring. But they don't change what caused the feeling. If big feelings are coming up a lot, that's worth noticing rather than just managing, because it can be a sign that something in the situation or the environment needs to change. That's a job for a calm time, and it's often where the real difference is made.

You can't always change the feeling.
You can change what you do while you wait for it to pass.
Stay curious, keep trying
and be kind to yourself when a hard moment gets the better of you.