



Men'sHealth

THE 4-WEEK CHALLENGE TO BEAT SEXUAL PERFORMANCE ANXIETY

Longer, stronger erections are just 30 days away.

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HAVE YOU EVER been so stressed about keeping your hard-on that you end up losing the very hard-on you wanted to maintain? Or maybe you've been so worried about keeping your hard-on that you've found yourself rushing to finish—only to feel inadequate? You're not alone.

Sexual performance anxiety (SPA) is the overpowering worry that you won't be able deliver sexually. This pervasive negative thought spiral stops you from engaging the way you truly want to in intimate situations.

Performance anxiety in the bedroom plagues at least 25% of the cisgender male population. Some of the common factors that contribute to SPA are stress and anxiety, negative body image, penis shame, fear around sexual performance, or embarrassment about sexual dysfunction (E.D., premature ejaculation, etc.), says Dr. Vipul Khanpara, MD, Chief Medical Officer for Rugiet Health, a digital health clinic focused on Erectile Dysfunction (ED) treatment.

It's time to give you some concrete ways to work through these issues so that you can have a more fulfilling sex life.

SO HERE IS THE CHALLENGE: 4 weeks of mapped-out exercises to help decrease performance anxiety for better sexual experiences.

**Over the course of the next
4 weeks, you'll learn:**

**How to become more acquainted
with your body through breathing, practicing
mindfulness, and focusing on sensation.**

**Techniques to help you control your
erections with confidence.**

**How to stay in the moment
so that you can enjoy sex without
the pressure to perform.**

As with all our sex-related training plans, it's important to understand that our use of the word "challenge" is not meant to put even more pressure on you. It's just a fun word and makes it sound more like a game, you know? This is about learning how to be in your body, to stay truly present, and to enjoy sex to the fullest. All of these exercises are customizable and should be approached with a flexible mindset.

"If you've had sexual performance anxiety for such a long time that it's becoming harder to connect with your partner, there's still hope," says Dr. Nazanin Moali, a licensed sex therapist. This 30-day challenge is just the ticket, pals.

LET'S GET INTO IT.

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WEEK 1

Exercise 1:

The 4-7-8 breathing technique.

When we're anxious, our nervous system fires up. When this happens, our brain sends a signal to the genitals to stop the arousal process. This, in turn, leads to the end of the erection. Deep breathing can help to stop this course of events. "Breathing and mindfulness exercises are known not only to improve clarity of mind, but also to help with blood flow. Both are essential for a satisfying sexual experience," Khanpara says. This is a technique used by therapists to help calm the nervous system. It has a profoundly calming effect.

HOW TO DO IT: If you're starting to get in your head about maintaining an erection, finishing too quickly, or pleasing a partner, stop and take time to breathe. Breathe in for 4 seconds, hold the breath for 7 seconds, and exhale for 8 seconds (hence the "4-7-8").

It can be helpful to stop sexual touch for a few minutes until you're ready to proceed. Before you start sexual touch, simply say, "Babe, I tend to get a bit in my head about my erections, which can sometimes make them not last as long as I'd like. And if that happens, I may need to take a quick break to calm down. Is that OK?" Trust us, any good partner will be empathetic about this. We're all just trying to have a good time, right?

(Fun fact: Not only can this breathing pattern reduce anxiety, but it can also help people get to sleep. Some proponents claim that the method helps people get to sleep in 1 minute.)

Exercise 2:

Take erections off the table.

One of the keys to achieving more reliable erections is to stop trying to get an erection. We know it sounds counterintuitive, but when we put a ton of pressure on ourselves to get or stay hard, or not ejaculate too quickly, we end up getting even more anxious—and in turn, reducing the likelihood of performing the way we want to. Taking penis-related activity off the table for a week or two is a great way to remove that pressure, and therefore, have better sexual experiences.

HOW TO DO IT: Have an evening where you explore each other's bodies, without bringing the penis into it. "Rather than focusing primarily on your erection, have a night where you don't focus on penetrative sex," says Moali. "You could have an evening where it's all about your partner's pleasure, and you go down on them with no chance of reciprocation."

Exercise 3:

Try mindful masturbation.

Now that you've done the previous exercise, and you know that your penis isn't the be-all and end-all of a sexual experience, it's time to pay *more* attention to your penis in order to decrease anxiety.

Practicing mindfulness means focusing on the present moment, not the whirlwind of anxiety-inducing thoughts spinning through your head. In this case, we want you to focus on your penis.

When we disconnect or try to distract ourselves in order to avoid ejaculating, we actually lose the ability to control our erections.

HOW TO DO IT: Set up a comfortable, warm space. Privacy is very important for this. "Remove your cell phone so that you don't accidentally see the notification that your boss just emailed at the exact wrong moment," Moali says.

Start by touching your whole body. Pay attention to your sense: the way your skin feels; what you smell, taste, and hear. Masturbate the way you normally would, using only your imagination. Focus on the sensations in your penis, bringing attention to everything you're feeling. Breathe deeply using the 4-7-8 breathing method from exercise 1. Practice this technique until you start feeling more connected to your senses and grounded in your body.

WEEK 2

Exercise 1:

Use the squeeze technique.

The squeeze technique is a tried-and-true sex therapy technique that is primarily used for premature ejaculation. However, it can help performance anxiety around any erection difficulty because it gives you a better sense of ejaculatory control over your orgasm.

HOW TO DO IT: When you're masturbating and you reach that "point of no return" right before climax, gently squeeze the penis with your forefinger and thumb between the shaft and the glans. Repeat this 5 times. After the fifth time, allow yourself to orgasm.

Exercise 2:

Practice box breathing (or 4, 4, 4 breathing).

Like the 4-7-8 method, box breathing helps to bring you into your body and calm the nervous system any time you feel anxious about sex.

HOW TO DO IT: Take a deep breath in for 4 seconds. Hold your breath for 4 seconds. Breathe out for 4 seconds. Repeat this 3-5 times until you begin to feel more grounded and in your body. This can be done during sexual play (solo or partnered), or you can stop the play while you recenter yourself.

Exercise 3:

Try solo edging (the start/stop technique).

Edging is the act of stimulating a penis until the very brink of climax, then removing all stimulation. Once you've returned to a state of lessened or non-arousal, you start the stimulation all over again. (This is different from the squeeze technique above, where you keep your hand on your penis throughout.) Repeat this start/stop pattern until you either can't hold back any longer or you've consciously decided to step over the "edge" and have an orgasm. This technique helps bring more awareness to "the point of no return." When you focus on your sensations and learn to stop before going over the edge, you can feel more comfortable in your body.

HOW TO DO IT: Be sure you're in a warm, comfortable, and private place. Masturbate the way you normally would. When you begin to feel a lot of sensation, slow down just a little and try to focus on the sensations in your penis. This is a great time to try box breathing. Pay attention to what it feels like just before you climax. Let go and enjoy your climax. Try this again the next day. Masturbate until you're about to climax. Stop. Let the sensation return to baseline. Then masturbate again. Try to stop as many times as you can (usually about 3 times). Then, enjoy your climax. Be sure to use lube.

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WEEK 3

Exercise 1:

Masturbate before partnered sex.

Performance anxiety usually centers around fears about sexual ability, the hardness of boners, or lasting long enough in bed. Masturbating before sexual play with a partner can help you get some of that “energy” out. This may help you last longer and feel more grounded. If you know you’ve already climaxed, the pressure comes off. Plus, orgasms release oxytocin and dopamine, which help to calm anxiety naturally.

HOW TO DO IT: About an hour before you plan to engage in sex (penetrative or otherwise), have a masturbation session. It’s OK if you want to use pornography, but keep in mind that erotic films are always more intense than partnered sex, and if you have unrealistic expectations about sex and sexual performance, it can really impact your confidence. If you’re working on beating performance anxiety, it might be better to use your imagination.

Exercise 2:

Do kegel exercises.

The Kegels are the group of muscles that make up the pelvic floor. They are responsible for many things, including holding in your pelvic organs and aiding in proper sexual function. Isn’t that fun? A weak pelvic floor can cause erectile difficulties because the PC muscles (another name for the Kegels) put pressure on the penile veins. The pressure prevents blood from leaving the area, making an erection possible. A lax pelvic floor can lead to issues with blood flow.

HOW TO DO IT: Squeeze the pelvic floor muscles in. It should feel like you’re stopping the flow of urine (but don’t actually stop your flow of urine while taking a wee) and pulling the muscles up into your belly button. Hold for 5-10 seconds, then release. Repeat this 3-5 times daily. You can work your way up to holding for 30 seconds, as your muscles get stronger.

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Exercise 3:

Practice sensation focus.

The goal here is to explore different sensations and become more in-touch with your body. It's essentially a partnered mindfulness exercise, without genital stimulation. When you feel safe to enjoy sensation without the pressure to "perform" during sex, you'll feel less anxiety and build confidence.

HOW TO DO IT: Make "a list of types of touch that you would enjoy," Moali says. "If you like kissing, include that. If you would like a massage, light stroking, for your partner to bathe you, or even skin-to-skin cuddling, include those as well." Spend 20 minutes massaging, caressing, and touching your partner. Then switch places and have your partner massage and caress you. This exercise should be done without talking. All focus should be on sensations in the body.

WEEK 4

Exercise 1:

Bring in sex toys for penises (solo).

Sex toys allow you to experience a broader range of sensations, which helps you to become more acquainted with your body. The more you understand what you like and don't like, the more control you'll have over your body. The more control you have, the less anxious you'll be about your erections.

HOW TO DO IT: Choose a penis-centric sex toy that seems appealing to you. If you're looking for a place to start, check out Tenga, Fleshlight, and Autoblow, or visit our list of the best sex toys for men: bit.ly/36E9oXD. All these toys come in discreet packaging. Be sure to use lots of lube.

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Exercise 2:

Try partnered edging.

Only once you master edging alone should you bring in a partner. When we're with another person, we can become anxious about being judged, not performing well enough, etc. Once you feel confident and in control on your own, it makes making the jump to partnered practice much more manageable for your anxiety.

HOW TO DO IT: Have your partner stimulate you (orally or manually) until you feel intense sensation. Ask them to stop. You can choose to use non-verbal cues like tapping on their shoulder or head, if that's easier for you. Start again. Once you're coming to the "edge," stop again. Try to do this as many times as you can handle. This will take lots of practice, so give yourself plenty of grace.

Exercise 3:

Bring in sex toys for penises (partnered).

Once you've enjoyed sex toys alone, it's time to give them a go with your partner. Remember, toys are not sexual replacements; they are sexual teammates. Confidence is a huge part of relieving performance anxiety, and sex toys can help you boost that confidence.

HOW TO DO IT: You can either use the toy on yourself while your partner watches or have them use it on you. This should be fun; it's a sexual adventure where you're taking control of your pleasure. Be sure to invite your partner to bring in their favorite sex toy as well. Everyone should feel free to express themselves sexually.

Performance anxiety is incredibly common and nothing to be ashamed of. We hope we've been able to help you decrease stress and increase confidence. You deserve the amazing, fulfilling sex life of your dreams.

You've got this.