

214: Using Meditation to Stay Calm During COVID-19 (with Patricia Karpas)



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Jen Riday

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Jen Riday: You're listening to the *Vibrant Happy Women Podcast*. Episode number 214. We're talking about using meditation to help you stay calm during the COVID-19 pandemic. Stay tuned.

Hi, I'm Jen Riday. This podcast is for women who want to feel more vibrant, happy, aligned, and alive. You'll gain the emotional, physical, and spiritual tools you need to get your sparkle back and ensure that depression, anxiety, and struggle don't rule your life. Welcome to the *Vibrant Happy Women Podcast*.

Hey, there, my friends. How are you handling this COVID-19 pandemic? All the emotions come up. Am I right? Anxiety, fear, stress, sadness, overwhelm, frustration, all the things that have become our norms in our lives are different right now, and your brain is working really hard to figure it all out.

It can make you feel tired. You might be sick like I was over the past couple of weeks. You might know someone else who is sick. The fact is all of us have experienced a range of emotions, and thoughts, and feelings that can be somewhat overwhelming.

Well, that's why I love our guest today, Patricia Karpas, who is going to talk about how meditation and breath work can help us stay calm during those moments of high anxiety. So, if you've struggled with that and you want to feel more grounded and centered, this is a great episode. Let's go ahead and dive in.

Hey, everyone. I'm with Patricia Karpas today, and she is the head of content for Muse and the co-founder of Meditation Studio, the five-star app.

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She splits her time between New York City and Boulder, Colorado, and she's a dog lover waiting to get a new dog.

In her free time, she enjoys yoga, hiking, and mindfulness training. I am so glad you're here, Patricia, because we have a lot to talk about, especially in terms of what's happening in the world right now. Welcome to *Vibrant Happy Women*.

Patricia Karpas: Yeah, thanks so much. It's a pleasure to be here with you.

Jen Riday: I am so excited to talk about this because I've noticed a lot of emotions swirling, and I think people want tools to bring themselves back to that state of calm. So, talking about mindfulness, and meditation, and the Muse headband, all some amazing tools. Tell us, first off how, you're coping with any emotions, what you've experienced emotionally in terms of the COVID-19 virus that's happening right now.

Patricia Karpas: It's a really good question because when this all first started happening, I immediately went into business mode, and we all started brainstorming, how can we help everyone, and should we write articles? Should we provide meditations for free? Should we be providing a discount on the Muse headband? How can we help as many people as possible?

I wasn't thinking exactly about what I was doing because my head was in how can we manage this for all of our customers and for all of the consumers out there that are really dealing with so much anxiety, panic and uncertainty. But then I started thinking, "Okay, Patricia, you need to stay home. You need to be isolated."

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It really kicked in how much I really needed to do a lot of the things that I was talking about. So, what am I doing? One of the biggest challenges for me is not being able to do yoga in a studio or to go out with friends and to be socializing.

I know this is a challenge for everyone, but what I've really tried to do is, first of all, when I wake up in the morning, I listen to some of our meditations on Meditation Studio and Muse, and we created this, what we're calling an SOS Calm Collection where we curated the meditations that we think are really best for this time.

I picked those because they're the ones that I listen to. So, the one I listened to this morning was about equanimity, and that's really about how do we not get thrown by the highs and lows that happen in our life all the time.

Another one that's in the collection that I listened to probably twice a day, it's called Let Things Be, which is really about radical acceptance and how we have to really settle in and be with what is happening, but find ways to accept and problem solve at the same time. The other one that I really love is this meditation called Faced with Bad News.

I start my day with these meditations, and then I really put myself on a schedule because I feel like when we're working from home and we're not dealing with a lot of other people, it's really good to put yourself on a schedule, and it helps to prioritize, for me, what's most important.

Do I want to do an online exercise class, or an online yoga class, or do I want to set aside some time to read or to write, or how much time do I want to set aside to work? So, really finding that balance of how we want to spend our days.

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Also, what I've done is really, I try really hard not to listen to a lot of news because I feel like when we're on social media and we're listening to the news, it almost exaggerates our ruminating mind's ability to just take something and go down a deep rabbit hole, and I feel like that level of stress is not good for people right now because we all know we're living in a new reality, but to keep pounding into us what's happening, I think, can be really difficult. So, I try to do that too. Those are just some of the things that I'm doing that have been really helpful for me.

Jen Riday: Are you completely alone, or do you have people you kind of see?

Patricia Karpas: Well, I live in a condo complex, so I see some of my neighbors, and I actually do borrow the dog of one of my neighbors to go hiking with, and I do hike with other people. We go on wide trails, and there's a lot of distance, but no, I actually am fairly sequestered. My daughter lives somewhere else right now, and yeah, I'm pretty sequestered, but I'm socializing with people.

We're doing Zoom book clubs, and I connect with all of my closest friends every day. So, I think there are ways for us to stay connected and to really ask for what we need. I think this is a really important time to be in touch with what we each need individually and to ask for that from our friends, and our family, and our community.

I also live in a community, I'm in Boulder, Colorado, where people are really trying to help one another, and if someone is in need, how can we bring them food or do things for them? So, I think that's a really nice thing right now too. Are you living by yourself or with other people? What's your situation?

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Jen Riday: Oh, yeah. I am in Wisconsin, Madison, outside of Madison, and so we have about a 2-acre property, and that's really nice because we can always get outside on our property. I have five of my six kids here. Funny story. My daughter, who is six, Cora, made a sign that says, "What does the fox say?" I don't know if you remember that song when it was popular.

We pulled out my big speaker from my Vibrant Happy Women retreat, and we all went out on the deck because you've seen the videos of people in Spain and Italy out on their balconies. So, we blasted "What Does the Fox Say" off of our deck and had a big dance party. No one would've heard us, but we thought it was hilarious.

Patricia Karpas: I love that, and you bring up something really interesting, which I think people are just starting to realize, is that we need to have fun. I talk about meditation all the time. I think it's really critical, but at the same time, I think it would be really helpful to watch comedy movies. A friend of mine sent around a video.

You've probably seen these talking pet apps, and she sent around this video of someone's dog talking about what to do, and not to do, and why it's no big deal because it's really great to be able to stay home, and just cuddle, and you can always go chew on socks. It was just hilarious. Then she was telling me, this friend, that she was dancing by herself in her living room yesterday. It'd be really great for everybody to talk about all the silly things that we're doing to stay sane right now.

Jen Riday: I agree. We left the speaker out. We're going to do it every day, we decided, a new song. We have neighbors across the way, I imagine they could have heard it. They're much older. I wonder what they're thinking of it. They're probably just as bored as us and might find a good laugh out of it.

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Patricia Karpas: That's so funny. That is really funny. Well, it's a really good time to examine your habits. We talk about the habits that the CDC is asking us to change, to not touch our face and to stand six feet away from each other, but there are other habits that I think in this time in isolation, it really helps us to examine our relationship with ourselves, and how we handle bad news, and how we deal with disappointment, and how we even talk to ourselves in times where we really need a little bit of self-compassion or compassion for our kids who are going stir crazy.

I think there's a lot of things we can learn. I do think that some of our behaviors are going to change for the positive after all of this because of this time we have to really examine who we are, and how we live our lives, and the choices that we make.

The other thing that this time has really helped me to examine is what are my priorities? What are my work priorities? What are my people priorities? What are my love priorities, and what are the things that are most important to you? Because that's really what you have to, I think, focus on right now.

Jen Riday: I agree. It's a funny thing. I was just talking to a few friends over Zoom, and many of them are feeling conflicted about their kids' schooling. Some schools are just rolling out the online learning, others are stumbling in a big way, and she's feeling anxiety about his academics.

Then we started to talk about, well, this actually becomes a really cool time for children to learn resilience and emotional intelligence because if you think about it, we all know people who survived "the great depression" way back when in the '20s, I believe it was. We know they're strong, and resourceful, and they have unique traits, and I'm fascinated to think about the children and the teens that come out of the great pandemic.

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What kind of emotional resilience will they have? I think they'll have a lot. I think they'll have a unique cohort effect that will be studied for years and years to come. So, I feel like this is a great time to prioritize emotional intelligence more than academic intelligence, and then prioritize the connection because we don't get a lot of that. What an amazing thing to reprioritize those things.

Patricia Karpas: Well, I like it what you're saying about reprioritizing, and also this idea of practicing because right now because of what's happening, and daily, there's just more of a barrage of news about it, our amygdalas are on overdrive, and when our amygdalas are overdrive, it impacts our immune systems, and it impacts our ability to be able to fight illness, and bacteria, and all of the things that we might become susceptible to.

So, idea that children and adults might be able to learn to pause when we get triggered, to react in a way that is more thoughtful versus having autopilot reaction, which takes us into panic, to what you were saying earlier, here are some ways that we can really emotionally regulate.

I'm just sure you remember this. It doesn't matter what religion or what spiritual background, everyone has probably heard the serenity prayer, which asks us to really look at accepting the things over which we have no control. I think for the last 20 plus years, everything has been so accessible to our kids and our teenagers.

This may be the first time for many of them that they're going through, and the reality is, yes, I hope that they will learn and that we'll all learn how to be more calm, and grounded, and use these stress relieving tools to handle all of life's difficult situations of which we all have many. This one just is on such a different scale.

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We're not used to being isolated. We're not used to looking at this number of people being out of work and having to feel like what can we do, really, to help people in this kind of a situation. Everybody is feeling it in some way. So, I really hope that the tools that we gain from dealing with the situation, especially for our children right now, will be super helpful as they grow older.

Jen Riday: I couldn't agree more. Let's get into the mind of someone whose amygdala is totally on overdrive, like you mentioned. I'll just mention that I was there probably. I was really at a fear-based place in a way I've never been before. I've never really faced anxiety in my life, luckily. First off, it made me have compassion for my husband who does battle with that. I'm like, "Oh, this is what you've been feeling. Gosh, I wish I had known," because I wasn't always very compassionate with him when it would throw a wrench into plans and stuff.

I finally was having a hard time bringing it down using all my normal tools. So, I had got in the bath, and I actually stayed there for four hours. Don't worry, I reheated the water, but it was a funny thing. It was a form of meditation really, and just the place of being in the bath made me be still enough to start focusing on what I was feeling and letting it move through.

I felt like by the end of that four hours, the anxiety was almost gone. So, tell us a little more about why being still and be mindful of our feelings is really essentially an act of meditation, and what happens to us when we meditate to slow down that amygdala.

Patricia Karpas: I'm glad you mentioned the warm bath because that is also part of my evening routine now because I feel like it is so calming, and I think everyone should create a list of the things that are calming for them. There's certain music that I like to listen to. I love the warm bath as well.

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So, I think all of those things will be really important right now. But when we talk about meditation, when you are able to sit with what we call focused awareness breath meditation, just the act of being able, even if it's just 5 or 10 minutes a day, to turn your attention to your breath, and to just sit and let yourself be still.

As I said, focusing on your breath can have a really great impact on your immune system. So, when you learn to meditate using your breath, and then we can talk about guided meditation as well because I think right now guided meditation can be super helpful for a lot of people that aren't trained in meditation. But when you focus on your breath in your meditation practice, it trains you to be able to take that same skill when you're outside of your meditation practice, or we like to say off the cushion.

So, when something happens and triggers you, you know you can always go back to focus on your breath. You can take a pause so that you can respond versus react to things, and this gives your amygdala that time and space to calm and get back into a non-hysterical mode.

So, that can be super helpful. A lot of people are saying now this kind of a situation is exactly why we meditate. We have our mindfulness and meditation practices so that we have the tools available to us when things like this happen. It doesn't have to be as extreme as this. We'll use our practice for having difficult conversations for dealing with work, trauma, for dealing with families.

There's a million different things that we can use this kind of a practice for, but it impacts also a part of our brain. Often, our brains, we have what's called the default mode network. There is different areas in our brain that become so habituated, so that anytime something happens, you, in some ways, go on to autopilot because this is what your brain does in these

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situations. What meditation and mindfulness practice helps us do is intercept that default mode network.

If you just take a moment and have that moment of choice where you can make a different decision about how you're going to behave, it's almost like your prefrontal cortex, which is the part of your brain that is that wise part that can take over in this kind of a situation and remind your amygdala that it's all going to be okay, and that you have another choice in how to act in this very moment. That's so helpful with meditation and your meditation practice, to cultivate that capacity to be able to activate that part of your brain.

Jen Riday: Yeah, and for me, I feel like meditation is the place where I connect with my calmest and most authentic self where I'm not reacting, and I feel like it's a place where I've really gotten to know who I am and feel this really deep piece. Then you mentioned off the cushion. When we're all at home, we're not only coping with the stress of COVID-19, but a lot of together time. It's such an emotional growth time.

I find the more time I spend on the cushion or in my bath where I meditated the other day, the more I notice when I'm into that less authentic place, and it feels uncomfortable because my nervous system is more and more used to this place of centered, grounded, calm, that when I shift out, I notice it faster. So, I think it helps.

Patricia Karpas: Jen, that's exactly what you want. That word, just saying that you notice, people talk about noticing, or observing, or witnessing. Just that ability to step back from your autopilot reaction and say, "I'm getting annoyed right now because the kids are getting crazy," or, "I am really scared because I don't know when this Coronavirus situation is going to end."

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Just to be able to notice, observe, but not get the undertow that takes you into this dark, ruminating place. You want to be able to just create some space between that normal or autopilot reaction and a new behavior that you might be able to create so that you don't go down. I always think of it as this ruminating rabbit hole.

The other point I wanted to make about meditation, which is why we're putting out so many guided meditations for free now too, is if you haven't had a practice for a while, you're not really trained to do breath focus meditation or open awareness meditation, it's really helpful to be guided.

The meditations that I mentioned earlier, these meditations on equanimity, or on radical acceptance of the way things are, or even how to be with bad news. I love those because I don't even feel like I have to be sitting in a meditation posture or even lying down. I feel like I can be having a cup of coffee, or cleaning my apartment, or going through folders and reorganizing things, and listening to these types of meditations reminds me that there's another way to look at things. For me, that's extremely inspiring.

Jen Riday: If our listeners want to check out these meditations, where would they go?

Patricia Karpas: choosemuse.com and download the Muse app in the app store, or download Meditation Studio app, but on the Muse app, there's what's called a stress less challenge, and in that, there are 20 free meditations that are all designed to help you reduce stress. Meditation Studio has what we're calling, as I said, the SOS Calm Meditations, which include those that I've been talking about here.

We're also doing daily meditations on Choose Muse on Instagram, and if people want to, the Muse headband. Let's talk about what is Muse. Muse is

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what's called a brain sensing headband that you put on your head, and it helps you learn to meditate. It's great if you are just beginning to meditate, or if you have a practice, it provides you with biofeedback on your meditation practice.

So, you're wearing the headband, you're connected to the Muse app, and as you're meditating, it's giving you feedback on what's happening in your brain. It's almost like having a little portable EEG. Then you look at your dashboard on the app when you're finished, and it shows you your levels of calm throughout your meditation.

You can think back to what thoughts were most triggering for you, and while you're meditating with the headband, it's either when something triggers you, you have a thought that, let's say, triggers your amygdala. It will give you feedback in the form of sound. So, if it's the storming weather sound, it will get stormier.

The more you can bring your attention back to your breath, where you can focus, and it takes you into a calmer place, almost like the ocean under the waves. You will hear bird sounds, and the bird sounds will tell you that you've reregulated. So, it gives you this great feedback on how you can emotionally regulate, and that you can really have a big impact on your levels of calm and groundedness. It's so clear when you've got the headband.

Those of us that have meditated for a long, long time, we can tell you anecdotally that meditation has changed our lives, and we react differently, and it helps us with emotional regulation, and self-inquiry, and all of these other things. But when you have the headband, it gives you that moment to moment feedback that really validates the impact of meditation.

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Jen Riday: And who wouldn't want to hear birds chirping?

Patricia Karpas: You probably hear lots of them.

Jen Riday: We do. That's one of my kid's chores right now. Yeah, the filler bird feeder.

Patricia Karpas: Oh, nice. That's so great. Let me just bring up one other thing that I think can be really helpful for people, and many people have written in about this. They suggest each morning doing a gratitude practice, which includes the five things you were most grateful for the day before.

It can be something as simple as, "I had a cup of coffee that was really good. I'm healthy today. I was able to walk a few miles. I'm with my family," or, "I spoke to my family," whatever it is. Just to remember the things that you're really grateful for can have a really great effect on your nervous system and on your mental health.

Jen Riday: I feel like my morning routine needs to change right now, and it's a little surprising to me. With the kids here, I feel like there's an adjustment that needs to be made. So, if you were to tell people your top three things you would recommend in a morning routine, what would those be?

Patricia Karpas: I want to talk about the kid thing afterwards for a second, but what I really recommend is as soon as you wake up, listen to a meditation. I would suggest either do your own meditation, or listen to a guided meditation that really resonates with you because that just wakes up your heart, I think, which is really important.

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Then I would take your journal and write down the five things that you're most grateful for, and I would also write down what do I want to focus on today. That's almost a little bit of an intention for how you want your day to go. I would also write down how can I be the best version of myself today because this is going to look different every day.

Then I would choose your exercise program for the day. If you're stuck at home, we have a ton of research on meditation, but let's just say 4,000 studies. So, not a ton, but a little bit, but there are over 25,000 studies that suggest the importance of exercise on our mental and physical health.

Jen Riday: Totally.

Patricia Karpas: We can't forget that right now. So, I would plan what your exercise is going to be, and then maybe just do like five yoga exercises, just stretches. I feel like it's really nice to have a morning routine. The other thing I like to do, and I don't know if this will appeal to everyone, but I'm a writer, so I love to write, but I really enjoy reading poetry. Something from Mary Oliver, or something from David White. Just something that really takes you out of mainstream, what's going on. I don't know how many those were, Jen. Maybe I did too much.

Jen Riday: No, no, it's good, it's good. I love it.

Patricia Karpas: Good, good. The thing about kids, I've had people mention this to me. On Meditation Studio, for example, we have a whole section for kids, and then we also have a section called Good Night Kiddo. Those are all sleepy time meditations, but what people have suggested to me is that families together do the kids' meditations.

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I think it might be different with your teenagers, but you mentioned you had a six-year-old, and I do think if you can do some meditations together with the family, that that can be really helpful, and that can bring people together.

Jen Riday: That's a great idea. We used to do that, and I think we've let our practice lapse, but I'm going to do it again. Thank you.

Patricia Karpas: It's easy to let any of these practices lapse, and I think it's okay to not be so precious about things, and to let ourselves go because this is a really complicated situation, but I do believe with all my heart that it is important to practice these things that make you feel sane, and more joyful, and calmer right now because I feel like that will have a reverberating effect on all of the people that you speak with.

The other thing that some people have suggested is that you have a choice about your thoughts, and if you can shift any kind of negative thinking into positive thinking. I know that sounds sometimes easier said than done, but if you can sort of shift that, and just notice your negative thoughts, and then shift that into a positive thought, that can be really helpful.

When you're talking to people, to listen to your language and listen to whether you're promoting negative thinking or you're helping to uplift people. I think that's a really important thing to be aware of as well.

Jen Riday: I think when I was feeling panicked, I backed up and realized, "Okay, every feeling is caused by a thought. What have I been thinking?" I had been asking myself a question, "How are we not going to get infected?" That generated immediate fear because that's somewhat controllable, but not perfectly controllable.

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So, I decided, “Okay, I need a new thought or a new question,” and so I changed to kind of a mantra in my mind of, “How can I bring more love and fun to the situation right now?” That generates way better feelings for me. So, that’s self-talk, creating a mantra.

Patricia Karpas: Isn’t that interesting? Also, you’re a tribe leader, you’re a mom. So, if you were to be visibly anxious and negative, that would have an impact on your entire family. So, it’s so great that you are able to notice the negative thinking because it’s so hard.

You can’t really say stop feeling your emotions. What you want to be able to do is to be able to be with your emotions, to have a relationship with your emotions. You want to be able to relate to the uncertainty in a way that is the healthiest way for your body, for yourself, and then for your family and community.

I like how on my podcast, *Untangle*, I interviewed a pediatrician named Dr. Mark Bertin, and that’s something people may listen to only because he talks a lot about mindfulness and resilience from a medical perspective. One of the things that he really talked about was find for yourself that tipping point between problem solving and panic because everyone has a different little tipping point there.

So, I think right now we have to do the things that we can do. Going back to this serenity prayer. We have to do the things that we can do. Listen to meditations, exercise, take care of your family. If you can listen to meditations, listen to meditations, do yoga, stretching.

Be grateful for the good things that are in your life right now. The things that are working instead of thinking about the things that aren’t working. I really do think that that will have a good, positive impact all the way around.

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Jen Riday: Yes. I feel like we've given people a good collection of tools. Let's say someone is going to finish listening to this podcast and wants to just try out a really quick and easy three-minute meditation.

Patricia Karpas: Some suggestions for meditating. I would download the Muse app. The nice thing about using meditations that have already been curated for you is exactly that. They've already been curated for you, so if you want to download that app, you'll get a popup that says, "Do you want to take the Stress Less Challenge?"

It doesn't have to be a challenge, but there are 20 meditations. They will all be very supportive of you right now, and so I think that's a really great way to start using these guided meditations. Same thing with if you download Meditation Studio.

By Monday, there will be this SOS collection of meditations that are available, and these are the ones that I hand-picked, and they're the ones I've been talking about here that are, as I said, free and available for you that are really particular to this situation, I think.

Then we also have the *Untangle Podcast*, and if people have never meditated, and they want to do this in their homes and with their families, I would look at [choosemuse.com](https://www.choosemuse.com) and see if you want to try buying a Muse headband, and if that's something that would be fun and interesting for you and your family to focus on right now because that's a great, great way to teach meditation to everybody. There are discounts now on that device for everyone.

Jen Riday: Meditate till you hear the birds. Shift your brain. Shift your brain waves. I love that. This has been amazing. I definitely recommend that

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people meditate. It's a powerful tool. Everyone listening, if you haven't tried it, give it a shot.

Patricia Karpas: And guided meditations are so easy, right? Like we were saying, if you want to just have a cup of coffee and listen to something, if you don't feel like sitting, that's cool too. And try to have some fun. Try to have some fun too.

Jen Riday: Yup, perfect. Well, Patricia, I appreciate you doing this work. I think it's beautiful that you shifted and decided to bring people what they need right now. I love that. Thank you.

Patricia Karpas: Thank you, Jen, and thanks so much for having me today. It's been such a pleasure talking to you.

Jen Riday: Yeah, enjoy your solitude.

Patricia Karpas: Thank you.

Jen Riday: I prefer that word to isolation. So, there you go.

Patricia Karpas: I know.

Jen Riday: All right. Have a good day? Thank you so much, Patricia.

All right, my friends. I hope you took away some wisdom that will help you to stay calm, and if all else fails, just pull out a guided meditation of some sort. I even have a free one on my website at jenriday.com and do some breathing. Allow someone's voice to guide you into a state of calm.

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Remember, when we breathe deeply, we signal to our bodies to return to that parasympathetic calm state of mind and get out of the fight or flight. So, breathing is your friend, and you've got this. You can totally breathe. I know you can do it. I'm sending you my love, and my support, and all the positive vibes I can for you, and I will see you again next week. Until then, make it a vibrant and happy weekend, and do your breathing. You've got this. Take care.

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