

breathing exercises for driving anxiety

breathing exercises for driving anxiety are a powerful and accessible tool for reclaiming the road and transforming a stressful experience into one of calm control. For many, the mere thought of getting behind the wheel can trigger a cascade of physical and mental distress, manifesting as racing hearts, shallow breaths, and intrusive thoughts. This article delves into a variety of effective breathing techniques specifically designed to alleviate driving anxiety, providing practical strategies to manage panic and promote relaxation. We will explore the physiological impact of stress on our bodies during driving and how targeted breathwork can counteract these responses. Understanding these methods can empower individuals to approach driving with newfound confidence and peace of mind, making every journey more enjoyable.

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Understanding Driving Anxiety

Driving anxiety, also known as amaxophobia, is a common phobia that can significantly impact an individual's quality of life. It encompasses a range of fears, from the general act of driving to specific triggers such as highways, tunnels, heavy traffic, or the fear of losing control. The psychological distress associated with this phobia often translates into intense physical symptoms, making the prospect of driving a daunting challenge. Recognizing the manifestations of driving anxiety is the first step towards effective management.

Symptoms of driving anxiety can vary widely from person to person. Some individuals may experience a heightened sense of alertness and hypervigilance, constantly scanning their surroundings for potential threats. Others might feel a sense of dread and apprehension even before they begin their journey, leading to avoidance behaviors. Physically, common reactions include a racing heart, sweating, trembling, shortness of breath, dizziness, nausea, and a feeling of being trapped. These physiological responses are the body's natural fight-or-flight reaction to perceived danger, even when the danger is not objectively present.

Common Triggers for Driving Anxiety

Several factors can contribute to or exacerbate driving anxiety. Understanding these

triggers is crucial for developing personalized coping strategies. For some, the fear stems from a past traumatic driving experience, such as an accident or witnessing one. Others might have a general predisposition to anxiety disorders, which can make stressful situations like driving particularly challenging. Specific scenarios that often provoke anxiety include:

- Navigating heavy traffic or rush hour.
- Driving on highways or at high speeds.
- Encountering narrow roads or challenging terrain.
- Driving at night or in adverse weather conditions.
- The fear of getting lost or being unable to reach a destination.
- Concerns about the vehicle's mechanical reliability.
- Fear of other drivers' behavior.
- Claustrophobia related to being inside a vehicle.

These triggers can activate the sympathetic nervous system, initiating the stress response. Without effective coping mechanisms, this cycle can perpetuate and worsen the anxiety over time, leading to a significant limitation in personal freedom and independence.

The Science Behind Breathing and Anxiety

The connection between our breath and our emotional state is profound and scientifically supported. When we experience anxiety, our breathing patterns often change, becoming shallow, rapid, and erratic. This type of breathing, known as hyperventilation, signals to the brain that there is a threat, further amplifying the feeling of panic. Conversely, by consciously controlling our breath, we can send a signal to the parasympathetic nervous system, activating the body's natural relaxation response.

The autonomic nervous system, which controls involuntary bodily functions like breathing and heart rate, has two main branches: the sympathetic nervous system and the parasympathetic nervous system. The sympathetic system is responsible for the "fight or flight" response, preparing the body for action by increasing heart rate, blood pressure, and respiration. The parasympathetic system, on the other hand, is the "rest and digest" system, promoting calm, slowing heart rate, and reducing blood pressure. Deep, slow breathing stimulates the vagus nerve, a key component of the parasympathetic nervous system, which helps to counteract the effects of stress.

How Deep Breathing Calms the Nervous System

Deep, diaphragmatic breathing, also known as belly breathing, is particularly effective in combating anxiety. This technique involves drawing air deep into the lungs, allowing the diaphragm to contract and push the abdominal organs outward. This fuller expansion of the lungs leads to increased oxygen intake and a more efficient exchange of carbon dioxide. More importantly, this slow, controlled breathing directly influences the vagus nerve. The vagus nerve plays a crucial role in regulating heart rate, and by stimulating it, we can actively lower our heart rate and blood pressure, reducing the physical symptoms of anxiety. This physiological shift helps to break the cycle of panic, allowing for a return to a more balanced state.

The mindful focus required for deep breathing exercises also serves as a powerful distraction from anxious thoughts. When you are concentrating on the sensation of your breath entering and leaving your body, there is less mental space available for intrusive worries and catastrophic thinking. This mindful engagement with the present moment, facilitated by the act of breathing, helps to ground individuals and pull them away from the distressing mental loops often associated with driving anxiety.

Key Breathing Exercises for Driving Anxiety

Several specific breathing techniques are highly effective for managing driving anxiety. These exercises are simple to learn and can be practiced both before and during a drive. Consistency is key to building confidence and a reliable toolkit for managing stressful situations on the road.

Diaphragmatic Breathing (Belly Breathing)

Diaphragmatic breathing is considered the cornerstone of breathwork for anxiety relief. It is fundamental because it directly engages the diaphragm and promotes a relaxed breathing pattern. Practicing this regularly can retrain your breathing habits, making you less prone to shallow, anxious breaths even outside of driving situations.

To practice diaphragmatic breathing:

- Find a comfortable seated or lying position.
- Place one hand on your chest and the other on your abdomen, just below your rib cage.
- Inhale slowly through your nose, allowing your abdomen to rise outward. Your chest hand should remain relatively still.

- Exhale slowly through your mouth, gently contracting your abdominal muscles to push the air out. Your abdomen should fall inward.
- Aim for a longer exhale than inhale, which further promotes relaxation.
- Continue for several minutes, focusing on the sensation of your breath.

4-7-8 Breathing Technique

The 4-7-8 breathing technique, popularized by Dr. Andrew Weil, is designed to promote relaxation and aid in falling asleep, but its calming effects are equally beneficial for acute anxiety situations like driving. The specific ratio of inhale, hold, and exhale creates a powerful calming effect on the nervous system.

To perform the 4-7-8 technique:

- Sit or lie down in a comfortable position.
- Exhale completely through your mouth, making a gentle "whoosh" sound.
- Close your mouth and inhale quietly through your nose to a mental count of **four**.
- Hold your breath for a count of **seven**.
- Exhale completely through your mouth, making another "whoosh" sound, to a count of **eight**.
- This completes one breath cycle. Repeat the cycle three more times for a total of four breaths.

It is important to note that the hold should not be uncomfortable; if you feel breathless, exhale sooner. Over time, you can increase the number of repetitions.

Box Breathing (Four-Square Breathing)

Box breathing, also known as four-square breathing, is a simple yet effective technique for regaining control during moments of stress. Its structured rhythm helps to focus the mind and regulate the breath, bringing a sense of order to chaotic anxious feelings. This technique is easily remembered and can be applied discreetly.

To practice box breathing:

- Find a comfortable seated position.
- Exhale completely.
- Inhale slowly through your nose for a count of **four**.
- Hold your breath for a count of **four**.
- Exhale slowly through your mouth for a count of **four**.
- Hold your breath again for a count of **four**.
- Repeat this four-count cycle for several minutes until you feel calmer.

The predictability of the counts in box breathing can be very grounding. The visual of a box with equal sides can also be a helpful mental anchor while you are practicing.

Preparing for Your Drive with Breathwork

The moments leading up to getting into your car can significantly influence your driving experience. Proactive use of breathing exercises before you even start the engine can create a foundation of calm that carries you through your journey. This preparatory phase allows you to engage your relaxation response before the stressors of the road have a chance to take hold.

Pre-Drive Relaxation Routine

Establishing a short pre-drive ritual that incorporates breathing exercises can make a substantial difference. This routine signals to your body that it's time to transition into a state of readiness and calm, rather than immediate anxiety. Dedicating just five to ten minutes to this practice can prime your mind and body for a more peaceful drive.

A simple pre-drive relaxation routine might include:

- Finding a quiet space, perhaps even in your parked car before you begin your journey, or at home before you leave.
- Closing your eyes gently.
- Taking a few moments to notice your current physical sensations and mental state without judgment.

- Practicing a few cycles of diaphragmatic breathing, focusing on deep, slow inhalations and exhalations.
- Incorporating a few rounds of 4-7-8 breathing or box breathing, if those feel most effective for you.
- Before opening your eyes or starting the car, set a positive intention for your drive, such as "I am calm and in control" or "I will focus on the road ahead."

This intentional preparation helps to shift your focus away from potential anxieties and towards a more grounded, positive mindset. It's an investment in a less stressful driving experience.

Mindful Arrival and Ignition

The transition from being a passenger to being the driver can also be a trigger. Approaching your vehicle with mindfulness and integrating breathwork during this transition can further mitigate anxiety. Rather than rushing into the car and immediately starting the engine, take a moment to pause.

When approaching your car:

- Take a few conscious breaths as you walk towards it.
- As you get into the driver's seat, before inserting the key or pressing the start button, take a moment to settle.
- Perform a few deep breaths, perhaps using the box breathing technique, to center yourself.
- Adjust your mirrors and seat, using these actions as physical anchors to the present moment.
- With each breath, consciously release any tension you are holding in your shoulders, neck, or jaw.

This deliberate, mindful approach to starting your journey sets a tone of control and presence, which can significantly reduce the onset of driving-related anxiety before it has a chance to escalate.

Techniques to Use While Driving

Even with the best preparation, challenging driving situations can arise. Fortunately, several breathing techniques can be discreetly and effectively employed while you are behind the wheel, allowing you to manage anxiety in the moment without compromising your focus on the road.

Subtle Diaphragmatic Breathing in Traffic

When stuck in traffic or facing other stressful driving scenarios, subtle diaphragmatic breathing can be a lifesaver. The goal is to engage your diaphragm without it being obvious to others, maintaining a steady and calming breath. This practice can help to reduce the feeling of being overwhelmed and trapped.

To practice subtle diaphragmatic breathing while driving:

- Ensure your posture is relaxed but upright.
- Gently press your hands on your lower abdomen or lap.
- As you inhale through your nose, feel your abdomen gently expand outwards, as if you were filling a balloon in your stomach.
- As you exhale through your mouth (or nose, if more comfortable), feel your abdomen gently contract.
- Focus on making your exhalations slightly longer than your inhalations.
- Keep your chest relatively still.

This technique allows you to access the calming benefits of deep breathing without drawing attention. It helps to lower your heart rate and reduce the physical symptoms of anxiety, enabling you to remain more composed.

Counting Breaths for Focus

Counting your breaths can serve as a powerful anchor, drawing your attention away from anxious thoughts and onto a simple, manageable task. This method is particularly useful when your mind starts to race with "what if" scenarios or worries about the driving ahead. It's a form of mindfulness that can be applied without taking your eyes off the road.

To use counting breaths for focus:

- Start by taking a few deep, centering breaths.
- Begin counting each exhale. For example, exhale and think "one." Inhale. Exhale and think "two."
- Continue counting up to a certain number, such as ten, then start again at one.
- If you lose count or your mind wanders, gently bring your focus back to your breath and start counting again from one.

This practice helps to quiet the mental chatter and provides a tangible sense of progress and control. It transforms the act of breathing into a purposeful, calming activity.

Using Extended Exhalations

When feeling overwhelmed, elongating your exhales is one of the most potent ways to activate your parasympathetic nervous system and induce a state of relaxation. The longer exhale signals to your brain that it is safe to calm down, effectively overriding the fight-or-flight response.

To utilize extended exhalations:

- Begin by taking a comfortable, relaxed inhale through your nose.
- As you exhale through your mouth or nose, deliberately make the exhale longer than your inhale. Aim for an exhale that is twice as long as your inhale (e.g., inhale for 4 counts, exhale for 8 counts).
- Focus on the sensation of the air leaving your body, allowing any tension to release with each outward breath.
- Repeat this process for several breaths until you feel a sense of calm returning.

This technique is highly effective in de-escalating panic symptoms quickly. The physical act of extending the exhale directly counteracts the rapid, shallow breathing associated with anxiety.

Long-Term Strategies for Managing Driving Anxiety

While breathing exercises are invaluable for immediate relief, a comprehensive approach to managing driving anxiety involves long-term strategies that build resilience and foster a more positive relationship with driving. These strategies work synergistically with breathwork to provide lasting peace of mind on the road.

Gradual Exposure Therapy

For persistent driving anxiety, gradual exposure therapy, often guided by a therapist, is a highly effective method. This involves slowly and systematically exposing yourself to driving situations that trigger your anxiety, starting with the least frightening and gradually progressing to more challenging scenarios. This process helps to desensitize you to the triggers and build confidence.

Key elements of gradual exposure include:

- Starting with very short, simple drives in familiar, low-traffic areas during off-peak hours.
- Gradually increasing the duration and complexity of drives.
- Introducing slightly more challenging situations, such as driving during busier times or on slightly busier roads.
- Incorporating practice of breathing exercises and other coping mechanisms during each stage of exposure.
- Celebrating small successes to reinforce positive progress.

The aim is to learn that you can cope with these situations and that your anxious predictions do not come true, all while utilizing your learned breathing techniques to manage any emergent anxiety.

Mindfulness and Cognitive Behavioral Techniques

Beyond breathwork, incorporating mindfulness and cognitive behavioral techniques (CBT) can address the underlying thought patterns that fuel driving anxiety. Mindfulness involves paying attention to the present moment without judgment, which can help in recognizing and detaching from anxious thoughts.

Mindfulness practices relevant to driving anxiety include:

- **Body Scan Meditations:** Regularly scanning your body for tension and consciously releasing it.
- **Present Moment Awareness:** Focusing on sensory details during your drive – the feel of the steering wheel, the sounds of the road, the sights outside your window – rather than getting lost in worries.
- **Thought Challenging:** Using CBT principles to identify negative or catastrophic thoughts related to driving (e.g., "I'm going to crash") and then questioning their validity and replacing them with more balanced, realistic thoughts.

Combining these mental strategies with your breathing exercises creates a powerful, multi-faceted approach to overcoming driving anxiety for good. It empowers you to manage your thoughts and reactions, leading to more enjoyable and confident driving experiences.

FAQ

Q: How quickly can breathing exercises help with driving anxiety?

A: Breathing exercises can offer immediate relief. You may feel a sense of calm within a few minutes of practicing techniques like diaphragmatic breathing or 4-7-8 breathing. For some, the effect is noticeable right away, while for others, it may take consistent practice to experience its full benefits during stressful driving situations.

Q: Can I do breathing exercises while actively driving?

A: Yes, many breathing exercises can be done discreetly while driving. Techniques like subtle diaphragmatic breathing, counting breaths, or focusing on extended exhales are designed to be performed without taking your attention away from the road or being noticeable to others.

Q: How often should I practice breathing exercises for driving anxiety?

A: For optimal results, it is beneficial to practice breathing exercises regularly, not just when you are driving. Aim for daily practice of a few minutes to build resilience. In addition, use them proactively before driving and reactively whenever you feel anxiety rising.

Q: Are there any specific breathing exercises that are better for panic attacks while driving?

A: During a panic attack, rapid, shallow breathing is common. Techniques that focus on slowing down the breath and engaging the diaphragm are particularly effective. The 4-7-8 breathing technique and prolonged exhales can help to quickly activate the body's relaxation response and reduce the intensity of a panic attack.

Q: What if I still feel anxious after trying breathing exercises while driving?

A: If breathing exercises alone are not sufficient, it may indicate a more significant underlying anxiety. Consider combining breathing techniques with other strategies like mindfulness, cognitive restructuring, or seeking professional help from a therapist specializing in anxiety disorders or phobias, who can guide you through gradual exposure therapy.

Q: How do breathing exercises differ from simply taking deep breaths?

A: While both involve inhaling and exhaling, breathing exercises are structured techniques designed to intentionally regulate the nervous system. Simple deep breaths might provide temporary relief, but exercises like diaphragmatic breathing, 4-7-8, or box breathing systematically engage the parasympathetic nervous system to promote relaxation and counteract anxiety more effectively.

Q: Can children benefit from breathing exercises for anxiety related to car rides?

A: Absolutely. Children can learn simplified versions of these breathing techniques to manage anxiety during car rides. Techniques like "smelling the flower" (inhaling deeply) and "blowing out the candle" (exhaling slowly) are great ways to teach diaphragmatic breathing to younger children.

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understanding and managing the emotions that arise while driving. From dealing with aggressive drivers to learning calming techniques, this book offers actionable strategies for staying composed, patient, and safe on the road. Whether you're a daily commuter or an occasional driver, you'll learn how to turn road rage into road zen and enjoy driving again.

breathing exercises for driving anxiety: Connecting: Person-Centered Therapy and Life Edenilson Brandl, 2025-06-19 This book is a compilation of studies and reflections on Person-Centered Therapy, a humanistic approach to psychotherapy that places the patient at the center of the therapeutic process. Person-Centered Therapy focuses on the whole person, considering their emotions, experiences and values, rather than simply treating specific symptoms. In this book, we explore how Person-Centered Therapy can be applied in a variety of clinical situations, from Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) to parental relationship issues and workplace conflicts. Each chapter addresses a specific area of therapy application, providing an overview of the topic, exploring concrete examples, and offering practical guidance. The aim of this book is to provide a deeper understanding of Person-Centered Therapy and its application in different contexts. Our authors are experienced practitioners who work with Person-Centered Therapy on a daily basis, and their work is based on years of research and practice. We hope this book will be useful for psychologists, therapists, and mental health professionals in general, as well as for patients seeking a deeper understanding of therapy and how it can help them to cope with their own challenges.

breathing exercises for driving anxiety: Powerful Habits for Overcoming Anxiety Editors of Fair Winds Press, 2025-08-19 Transform your life with Powerful Habits for Overcoming Anxiety, your go-to guide for easy, actionable tips and exercises to help you heal your anxiety right away. This book provides a deep, personal understanding of your anxiety issues and triggers. Through engaging exercises, you'll explore the underlying causes of your anxiety, identify what triggers these causes, and learn how to effectively cope with your emotions. With a light clinical touch and attractive packaging, you'll feel like you're treating yourself to self-care, not addressing an illness. Powerful Habits for Overcoming Anxiety delves into the emotional and interpersonal facets of anxiety. This empowering workbook offers: Habits for avoiding and coping with anxiety, clearly laid out in short spreads that you can read in minutes and implement immediately. A variety of exercises, including worksheets, reflective questions, and meditations, designed to help you uncover the root causes of your anxiety. A dip-in, dip-out format that allows you to select the practices that fit your needs at any moment. Straightforward, easy-to-understand language. Open the book, read a spread, and apply the advice to your life. Your calmer self is just 5 minutes away. Powerful Habits for Overcoming Anxiety equips you with the practices to live a more peaceful, balanced life.

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breathing exercises for driving anxiety: The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook Edmund J. Bourne, 2011-01-02 Relieve Your Anxiety and Start Living Without Fear The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook has already helped over one million readers make a full and lasting recovery from generalized anxiety disorder, social anxiety, specific phobias, panic attacks, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and other anxiety-related issues. Packed with the most effective skills for assessing and treating anxiety, this workbook can be used alone or as a supplement to therapy to help you develop a full arsenal of skills for quieting worried thoughts and putting yourself back in control. This new edition has been thoroughly updated with the latest anxiety research and medications, and also includes new therapeutic techniques that have been proven effective for the treatment of anxiety and anxiety-related conditions. Each worksheet in this book will help you learn the skills you need to manage your anxiety and start living more freely than you ever thought possible. With this workbook, you'll learn a range of proven methods for overcoming anxiety: Relaxation and breathing techniques Challenging negative self-talk and mistaken beliefs Imagery and real-life desensitization Making lifestyle, nutrition, and exercise changes Acceptance and commitment therapy Skills for preventing and coping with panic attacks

breathing exercises for driving anxiety: Driving Success: Coaching Golf for All Ages Phil Locke, The world of golf coaching is evolving. It's no longer enough to simply teach the mechanics of a swing; successful coaching necessitates a holistic approach, one that integrates technical expertise with a deep understanding of the mental, emotional, and interpersonal aspects of the game. Driving Success: Coaching Golf for All Ages provides a comprehensive framework for coaches working with players across the lifespan. Whether you're coaching young beginners, seasoned amateurs, or aspiring professionals, the principles discussed here will empower you to maximize your players' potential. This book is designed to be both practical and inspirational, providing you with readily applicable strategies and techniques while also emphasizing the importance of creating a supportive and motivational coaching environment. We will delve into crucial aspects such as effective communication tailored to different age groups and learning styles, course management strategies, detailed swing analysis, and techniques for addressing the mental game challenges that often hinder performance. Furthermore, we'll explore the importance of building strong relationships with your players, fostering trust, and providing constructive feedback that promotes growth and confidence. The examples and case studies throughout the book illustrate real-world applications of these principles, demonstrating how to adapt your coaching style to diverse personalities and skill levels. This journey will equip you with the tools to develop not only exceptional golfers but also well-rounded individuals who thrive both on and off the course. Ultimately, the goal is to help you become the kind of coach that inspires players to not just play their best golf but to find fulfillment and personal growth within the game.

breathing exercises for driving anxiety: Breathe for Calm Jenny Smith, AI, 2025-02-14 Breathe for Calm explores the profound connection between breathing techniques and their impact on stress reduction and mental clarity. This book unveils how conscious breath control acts as a potent tool for self-regulation, offering a pathway to improved well-being. The book highlights that mastering controlled breathing is accessible to everyone, enabling individuals to manage stress

responses and improve focus. The book explains the physiological mechanisms connecting breath to the nervous system, especially the vagus nerve, the body's internal brake. It details various breathing exercises, such as diaphragmatic breathing and box breathing, explaining the science behind these practices, translating esoteric knowledge into practical, evidence-based methods. The book emphasizes the mind-body connection. Breathe for Calm progresses systematically, first introducing the science of breath and its influence on the autonomic nervous system. It then focuses on specific breathing techniques with step-by-step instructions, before finally exploring applications in real-world scenarios like managing anxiety and improving sleep. This approach makes it a valuable resource for those seeking natural stress management techniques and a deeper understanding of the mind-body connection.

breathing exercises for driving anxiety: Psychotherapy for the Advanced Practice Psychiatric Nurse, Second Edition Kathleen Wheeler, 2013-12-11 Dr. Wheeler has skillfully crafted a text that covers basic psychiatric principles and skills from developing a therapeutic relationship and assessing and diagnosing the client to providing evidence-based psychotherapy for a variety of patient populations... This text is an excellent primer for teaching therapy skills and, although targeting graduate psychiatric nursing students, would prove equally valuable for students of any mental health discipline. It is also a resource for experienced clinicians wanting to expand their understanding of trauma and how adaptive information processing might be used as an organizing framework for all psychotherapy. --Linda Mabey, Journal of EMDR Practice and Research

DESCRIPTION This is a how-to compendium of evidence-based approaches to practicing psychotherapy for both the experienced and neophyte advanced practice psychiatric nurse. This book integrates neuroscience with relationship science and unites disparate psychotherapeutic approaches into a model that is concise and straightforward, yet sufficiently comprehensive to provide a framework for practice. The most useful therapeutic models are highlighted with principles, and techniques of treatment for nurse psychotherapists and those with prescriptive authority. This second edition expands the award-winning first edition, providing guidelines, forms, and case studies to assist APPNs in deciding which treatment to use based on psychotherapy outcome studies and practice guidelines. New Chapters in the Second Edition: Motivational Interviewing Dialectical Behavior Therapy Group Therapy Family Therapy Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) Therapeutic Approaches for Addictions New CPT Codes & Reimbursement Awards and Reviews for the First Edition: APNA Media Award AJN Book of the Year Award 5 Star Amazon Reviews 4 Star Doody Review Lays out a holistic paradigm for advanced psychiatric nursing (APN) practice by drawing upon a neuroscience of information processing, human development, attachment theory, and trauma. . . (and) explains the essentials of psychotherapy by melding principles underlying the therapeutic alliance, adaptive information processing (AIP), change, and a hierarchically arranged treatment format that fosters healing through the resolution of dysfunctional memory this important text holds true to the historical basis for psychiatric nursing being organized around phases and principles of the nurse-patient relationship. Margaret England, PhD, RN, CNS, Perspectives in Psychiatric Care Wheeler offers the field a scholarly training manual. . . grounded in Shapiro's (2001) adaptive information processing paradigm . . . (where) the brain is viewed as an information processing system with innate self-healing mechanisms that regulate its internal environment to survive and to maintain a stable, constant condition through dynamic regulation. Robert M. Greenfield, PhD, Journal of Trauma & Dissociation

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