



STEFFEN
COUNSELING SERVICES

Managing Anxiety While Driving

A practical handout from Steffen Counseling Services | Seattle, Washington

Driving anxiety can show up as worry, physical symptoms, panic, or an urge to avoid the road. The goal is not to force yourself to feel perfectly calm. Instead, you can learn to notice anxiety, respond safely, and gradually build confidence.

1. Identify Your Triggers

Get specific about when anxiety tends to increase. Common triggers may include:

- Freeways such as I-5 or I-405
- Merging or changing lanes
- Bridges, including SR-520 or I-90
- Heavy traffic or rush hour
- Driving in rain or reduced visibility
- Driving alone or in unfamiliar areas
- Driving at night

My biggest driving triggers:

2. Notice the Anxiety Cycle

Anxiety often involves a loop: a situation triggers a fearful prediction, your body reacts, and you feel an urge to escape or avoid. Avoidance can bring short-term relief while teaching your brain that the situation was dangerous.

Try noticing: What am I afraid will happen? What sensations am I noticing? What am I doing to feel safer? Is that strategy helping me move toward my goals, or keeping the fear going?

3. Practice Grounding

If you notice anxiety building, gently bring your attention back to the present rather than repeatedly predicting what might happen next. Notice what you can see, hear, and physically feel right now.

Safety first: Do not try to manage intense anxiety while continuing to drive if you do not feel able to operate the vehicle safely. Pull over in a safe location before focusing on coping exercises.

4. Work With Anxious Thoughts

Anxiety can turn possibilities into certainties. When you notice a fearful thought, try asking:

- What evidence supports this thought?
- What evidence does not support it?
- Am I predicting a possibility or a certainty?
- What would I say to a friend experiencing this fear?

A more balanced response I can practice:

5. Take Small, Manageable Steps

If avoidance has become part of your anxiety, gradual practice may help. You do not have to start with your most frightening driving situation. Consider discussing a step-by-step plan with a therapist and choosing goals that are realistic and safe for you.

A small next step I would like to work toward:

6. When Therapy May Help

Consider professional support if driving anxiety causes panic, keeps you from driving, leads you to avoid work or activities, significantly limits where you go, or continues to become more restrictive. Therapy can help address anxiety, panic, avoidance, and trauma-related responses.

Remember

You do not have to eliminate every anxious feeling before you can move forward. With appropriate support and practice, you can learn to respond to anxiety differently and build greater confidence over time.

Steffen Counseling Services

Seattle, Washington

For therapy support with anxiety, panic, and related concerns, contact Steffen Counseling Services to learn more about counseling options.