

calming technique

Everyone knows that breathing is an essential part of life, but did you know that breathing plays an essential role in anxiety? This information sheet will briefly discuss the role of breathing in anxiety and guide you through a simple calming technique that uses breathing patterns to help you relax.

Breathing is a powerful determinant of physical state. When our breathing rate becomes elevated, a number of physiological changes begin to occur. Perhaps you've noticed this yourself when you've had a fright; you might suddenly gasp, feel a little breathless and a little light-headed, as well as feeling some tingling sensations around your body. Believe it or not, the way we breathe is a major factor in producing these and other sensations that are noticeable when we are anxious.

Anxious breathing

You might already know that we breathe in oxygen – which is used by the body – and we breathe out carbon dioxide. In order for the body to run efficiently, there needs to be a balance between oxygen and carbon dioxide, and this balance is maintained through how fast and how deeply we breathe. Of course, the body needs different amounts of oxygen depending on our level of activity. When we exercise, there is an *increase* in both oxygen and carbon dioxide; in relaxation there is a *decrease* in both oxygen and carbon dioxide. In both cases the balance is maintained.

When we are anxious though, this balance is disrupted. Essentially, we take in more oxygen than the body needs – in other words we overbreathe, or *hyperventilate*. When this imbalance is detected, the body responds with a number of chemical changes that produce symptoms such as dizziness, light-headedness, confusion, breathlessness, blurred vision, increase in heart rate to pump more blood around, numbness and tingling in the extremities, cold clammy hands and muscle stiffness.

The normal rate of breathing is 10-12 breaths per minute – what's your breathing rate?

The Calming Technique

While overbreathing and hyperventilation are not specifically dangerous (it's even used in medical testing!), continued overbreathing can leave you feeling exhausted or "on edge" so that you're more likely to respond to stressful situations with intense anxiety and panic.



Gaining control over your breathing involves both slowing your rate of breathing and changing your breathing style. Use the calming technique by following these steps and you'll be on your way to developing a better breathing habit.

- 1 Ensure that you are sitting on a comfortable chair or laying on a bed
- 2 Take a breath in for 4 seconds (through the nose if possible)
- 3 Hold the breath for 2 seconds
- 4 Release the breath taking 6 seconds (through the nose if possible), then pause slightly before breathing in again.
- 5 Practise, practise, practise!

Breathing tips

- When you first begin changing your breathing, it may be difficult to slow your breathing down to this rate. You may wish to try using a 3-in, 1-hold, 4-out breathing rate to start off with.
- When you are doing your breathing exercises, make sure that you are using a stomach breathing style rather than a chest breathing style. You can check this by placing one hand on your stomach and one hand on your chest. The hand on your stomach should rise when you breathe in.
- Try to practise at least once or twice a day at a time when you can relax, relatively free from distraction. This will help to develop a more relaxed breathing habit. The key to progress really is practise, so try to set aside some time each day.

By using the calming technique, you can slow your breathing down and reduce your general level anxiety. With enough practice, it can even help to reduce your anxiety when you are in an anxious situation.

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Deep Breathing exercise

- 1. Get comfortable.** If possible, lie down on your back on a blanket or rug placed on the floor. Bend your knees and move your feet about eight inches apart, with your toes turned slightly outward. Make sure your spine is straight. If sitting, sit straight in chair with your arms relaxed at your side. Your hands can rest in your lap. Have your head centered and balanced so you do not cause any strain on your neck muscles.
- 2. Check tension.** Check your body for any tension.
- 3. Place hands.** Place one hand on your stomach and one hand on your chest.
- 4. Inhale through your nose.** Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose. You may count to four while you inhale. Inhale into your stomach to push up your hand as much as is comfortable. Your chest should move only a little and only when your stomach does.
- 5. Hold.** Hold your breath for a count of two.
- 6. Exhale through your mouth.** When you are at ease with step 4, smile slightly and exhale through your mouth, making a quiet, relaxing whooshing sound like the wind as you blow gently out. Your mouth, tongue, and jaw will be relaxed. You may count to four as you exhale slowly, and your stomach is gradually lowered. Focus on the sound and the breathing as you become more relaxed.
- 7. Repeat.** Keep deep breathing for about 5-10 minutes at a time. Do this twice a day.
- 8. Recheck tension.** At the end of each session, check for tension levels. Are you less tense than you were before you began?
Remember, mastering this relaxation skill will take time. That is why it is called a skill. Do not be concerned if the first session did not relieve all of your stress. As you keep practicing, your body will learn and you can have increased periods of stress relief.

Relaxation Tip: Practice deep breathing twice a day to reduce your overall stress.

3 Minute Breathing Space

STEP 1: AWARENESS

Bring yourself to the present moment by deliberately adopting an erect and dignified posture. If possible, close your eyes. Then take stock of yourself in this moment by asking:

“What is my experience right now...what are my thoughts...my feelings...my bodily sensations?”

Acknowledge and register your experience, even if it is unwanted.

STEP 2: GATHERING

Gently redirect your full attention to your breathing, noticing each inbreath and each outbreath as they follow one after the other. Do this by focusing on the physical sensation of breathing in your lower abdomen, noticing that the skin on your abdomen stretches and rises slightly with each inbreath, and falls with each outbreath. It may help to lay your hand on your abdomen until you can sense the movement without your hand.

This step is teaching you to use your breath as an anchor to bring you into the present and help you tune into a state of awareness and stillness, no matter what is going on around you.

STEP 3: EXPANDING

Expand the field of your awareness back out and around your breathing, so that it includes a sense of your body as a whole, including your posture, and facial expression.

When you are ready, open your eyes and resume your daily activities with a more grounded and peaceful presence -- or not!

The breathing space practice is a tool to help you step out of the automatic pilot mode and reconnect with the present moment. Mindfulness means maintaining awareness in the present moment, without judgment. It's that simple!