

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.

progressive muscle **relaxation**

One of the body's reactions to fear and anxiety is muscle tension. This can result in feeling "tense", or can lead to muscle aches and pains, as well as leaving some people feeling exhausted. Think about how you respond to anxiety. Do you "tense up" when you're feeling anxious? Muscle relaxation can be particularly helpful in cases where anxiety is especially associated to muscle tension. This information sheet will guide you through a common form of relaxation designed to reduce muscle tension.

Muscle tension

Muscle tension is commonly associated with stress, anxiety and fear as part of a process that helps our bodies prepare for potentially dangerous situations. Even though some of those situations may not actually be dangerous, our bodies respond in the same way. Sometimes we don't even notice how our muscles become tense, but perhaps you clench your teeth slightly so your jaw feels tight, or maybe your shoulders become. Muscle tension can also be associated with backaches and tension headaches.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

One method of reducing muscle tension that people have found helpful is through a technique called Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR). In progressive muscle relaxation exercises, you tense up particular muscles and then relax them, and then you practise this technique consistently.

preparing for relaxation

When you are beginning to practice progressive muscle relaxation exercises keep in mind the following points.

- **Physical injuries.** If you have any injuries, or a history of physical problems that may cause muscle pain, always consult your doctor before you start.
- **Select your surroundings.** Minimise the distraction to your five senses. Such as turning off the TV and radio, and using soft lighting.
- **Make yourself comfortable.** Use a chair that comfortably seats your body, including your head. Wear loose clothing, and take off your shoes.
- **Internal mechanics.** Avoid practicing after big, heavy meals, and do not practice after consuming any intoxicants, such as alcohol.

general procedure

- 1 Once you've set aside the time and place for relaxation, slow down your breathing and give yourself permission to relax.
- 2 When you are ready to begin, tense the muscle group described. Make sure you can feel the tension, but not so much that you feel a great deal of pain. Keep the muscle tensed for approximately 5 seconds.
- 3 Relax the muscles and keep it relaxed for approximately 10 seconds. It may be helpful to say something like "Relax" as you relax the muscle.
- 4 When you have finished the relaxation procedure, remain seated for a few moments allowing yourself to become alert.

Relaxation sequence

1. **Right hand and forearm.** Make a fist with your right hand.
2. **Right upper arm.** Bring your right forearm up to your shoulder to "make a muscle".
3. **Left hand and forearm.**
4. **Left upper arm.**
5. **Forehead.** Raise your eyebrows as high as they will go, as though you were surprised by something.
6. **Eyes and cheeks.** Squeeze your eyes tight shut.
7. **Mouth and jaw.** Open your mouth as wide as you can, as you might when you're yawning.
8. **Neck. !!!** Be careful as you tense these muscles. Face forward and then pull your head back slowly, as though you are looking up to the ceiling.
9. **Shoulders.** Tense the muscles in your shoulders as you bring your shoulders up towards your ears.
10. **Shoulder blades/Back.** Push your shoulder blades back, trying to almost touch them together, so that your chest is pushed forward.
11. **Chest and stomach.** Breathe in deeply, filling up your lungs and chest with air.
12. **Hips and buttocks.** Squeeze your buttock muscles
13. **Right upper leg.** Tighten your right thigh.
14. **Right lower leg. !!!** Do this slowly and carefully to avoid cramps. Pull your toes towards you to stretch the calf muscle.
15. **Right foot.** Curl your toes downwards.
16. **Left upper leg.** Repeat as for right upper leg.
17. **Left lower leg.** Repeat as for right lower leg.
18. **Left foot.** Repeat as for right foot.

Practice means progress. Only through practice can you become more aware of your muscles, how they respond with tension, and how you can relax them. Training your body to respond differently to stress is like any training – practising consistently is the key.