

Calming Technique

Breathing is an essential part of life, and it plays an important role in anxiety as well! The information here will guide you through a relaxation technique that uses breathing patterns to calm you down.

The quality of your breathing is a powerful determinant of your physical and emotional state of being. When our breathing rate becomes rapid, a number of physiological changes begin to occur. You may have experienced it yourself when you have a shock; you might suddenly gasp, feel a little breathless and dizzy, and maybe some tingling sensations around your body. These sensations are particularly noticeable when we are anxious, which are mainly caused by how we breathe.

Anxious Breathing

We breathe in oxygen, and breathe out carbon dioxide. For the body to work efficiently we need to maintain a balance between the amount of oxygen and carbon dioxide, this is determined by how fast and how deeply we breathe. Depending on our level of activity, our body would require different amounts of oxygen. For example, when we exercise, there is an increase in both the need for oxygen and the production of carbon dioxide. While we are relaxing, there is a decrease in both the need for oxygen and the production of carbon dioxide. The balance between both gases is maintained.

When we become anxious, this balance is disrupted. We will take in more oxygen than we really need, meaning we hyperventilate. When our body detects this imbalance, it responds with a number of chemical changes that produce symptoms such as confusion, light-headedness, breathlessness, dizziness, blurred vision, muscle stiffness, numbness in the extremities, cold clammy hands and an increase in heart rate to pump more blood around.

Quick Fact

The normal breathing rate is 10 – 12 breaths per minute. What's yours?

The Calming Technique

Although hyperventilation or over-breathing is not specifically dangerous, sustained hyperventilation can make you feel exhausted or agitated, such that you are more prone to respond to stressful situations with intense panic and anxiety.

To gain control over your breathing, you need to slow down the rate of breathing and change your breathing style. Follow the steps below to develop a better breathing habit.

1. Ensure that you are sitting on a comfortable seat or laying on a bed
2. Take a breath for 4 seconds, through the nose
3. Hold the breath for 2 seconds
4. Release the breath slowly for 6 seconds, through the nose, then pause slightly before breathing in again
5. Practise!

By using this technique, you can slow your breathing down and reduce your general anxiety level. With sufficient practice, it can also help to reduce your anxiety when you are in an anxious situation.

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 starting with a 3-in, 1-hold, 4-out breathing rate.
- When doing breathing exercises, make sure you are using your stomach rather than your chest. You can check this by placing one hand on your stomach and the other hand on your chest. The hand on your stomach should rise when you breathe in.
- Try to practice at least once or twice a day at a time and place where you can relax. This will help to develop a more relaxed breathing habit. Practise means progress!