

## Relaxed Breathing

Breathing is something we do without thinking most of the time, but it is also one of the body's functions that we can take charge of and change if we choose.



Changing our breathing pattern can be helpful in easing our anxiety and tension both physically and mentally. Physically, by slowing down and making our breathing more regular, we can help the body to switch off the 'fight/flight' response that keeps our tension and anxiety going. Mentally, by concentrating our thoughts and attention on our breathing we can distract ourselves from our anxious thoughts and worries (see also separate leaflet on 'Distraction').

When we are tense or anxious our breathing pattern often changes. It isn't always easy to notice the difference, either because we are too busy thinking about whatever it is that is making us anxious, or because we are in the habit of breathing in the shallow, rapid way that often goes with tension even when we are not tense. We all breathe rapidly when we are tense or anxious or doing exercise and this is called 'hyperventilation'. We hyperventilate to provide our muscles with oxygen to burn during activity. Continuous over-breathing causes oxygen levels to rise and carbon dioxide levels to fall causing an imbalance. This chemical imbalance produces many of the physical symptoms of anxiety described in the leaflet 'The Physical Effects of Anxiety' – ask your guide for a copy.

Some people who have been stressed for a long time develop a habit of over-breathing. This is called chronic hyperventilation. The breathing exercise on the other side of this leaflet helps to restore the balance of oxygen and carbon dioxide thereby combating the physical symptoms of anxiety.

What happens to your breathing pattern when you are anxious or tense?

The breathing exercise on the other side of this leaflet can help you to identify your usual breathing pattern and change it if necessary. Try the 'RELAXED BREATHING' exercise now with your guide – what does it tell you about your breathing pattern?

Your guide can also give you a leaflet on Relaxation, as Relaxed Breathing and Relaxation are very closely linked.

Remember though, that change may only happen gradually and it may take a lot of time and practice before you notice much difference, particularly if you have been breathing in a tense or anxious way for a long time. The good thing about this breathing exercise is that, once you have got used to practicing it, you can do it anywhere at any time for as long as you can concentrate on what you are doing to your breathing pattern. The more frequently you remind yourself to practice, the better you will get at changing your breathing pattern. Some people remind themselves to check their breathing regularly by, for example, putting a small dot on their watch glass – no doubt you can find a way of reminding yourself that suits you.

*Exercise overleaf...*

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### RELAXED BREATHING EXERCISE

1. Breathe out fully. Place your hands across your stomach with your middle fingers just touching each other in the area just above your belly button. Breathe in fully. What happens? If your shoulders move up a lot or your middle fingers do not separate then your breathing pattern may be adding to your anxiety or tension.
2. You can practice Diaphragm Breathing by sitting with your back straight or lying on the floor or bed with a pillow under your head and one under your knees if you need them.
3. Place your hands on your stomach with your middle fingers just touching and deliberately breathe in as far down as your breath will go and try to get the middle fingers to separate by pushing out your stomach with your breath.
4. As you breathe out again, tighten the muscles in your stomach and push down gently with your hands to get as much air out as possible and bring your middle fingers back touching again.
5. Practice this bellowing out and deflating while keeping the shoulders as still as you can, allowing the diaphragm muscle to do as much of the work of breathing as possible.
6. Continue to practice for as long as you want, from a few breaths to several minutes.
7. If at any time during the breathing exercise you begin to feel dizzy or light-headed, then STOP the exercise and allow your breathing to return to its accustomed pattern, before attempting to stand or get up.

While doing your relaxed breathing, try to build up a steady, regular rhythm where the breath out is as long, or a little longer than, the breath in and there is a slight pause at the end of each breath in and each breath out. You can do this by imagining a pendulum in a clock. As the pendulum reaches the full sweep at one side of its swing (breath in) there is a slight pause before it starts to swing back. When it reaches the other end of its swing (breath out) there is another slight pause, and so on. Try to make the length of each swing the same, so if you breathe in for three seconds, try to breathe out for three seconds. Don't worry about whether you are doing it 'right' or 'wrong', just notice what is happening and try to breathe in a relaxed, rhythmic way. At first the constant 'swish, swish' of air going in and out of your lungs may seem strange and even a little uncomfortable or scary, but with practice your breathing pattern will change and you will feel the benefit, both physically and mentally.