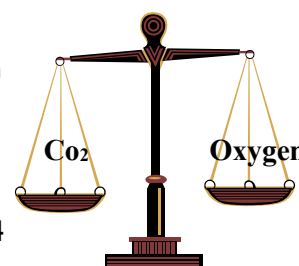


Calming Technique - Breathing & Relaxation

In order to appreciate the role of breathing in anxiety, it is important to first understand the fundamentals of breathing. We won't go into too much detail here but basically (as you probably know already), the human body needs oxygen to survive. When you take in a breath of air, the lungs take in oxygen, where it is used by the body, and then produce carbon dioxide (CO₂) which we breathe out.

In order for the body to run efficiently, there needs to be a **balance between oxygen and CO²**. This balance is maintained chiefly through the rate and depth of breathing. Breathing too much will increase levels of oxygen in the blood and decrease levels of CO², because the oxygen is not used at the same rate that it is taken in. Breathing too little will decrease levels of oxygen and increase levels of CO². The appropriate rate of breathing when calm and relaxed is around 10 - 14 breaths per minute. *How does this compare to your rate of breathing?*



Check your breathing rate

If you're interested in understanding more about your breathing pattern could check your breathing rate. Count your breathing rate for one minute, where each breath in and out counts as one breath.

Most of the body's mechanisms, including breathing, are 'automatically' controlled, but breathing can also be put under voluntary control. For example, it is quite easy for us to hold our breath when swimming or speed up breathing when blowing up a balloon. Factors such as stress and our general mood can also change our breathing. Being able to voluntarily alter our breathing is good news for people who experience high anxiety symptoms. **By learning how to maintain a calm and relaxed rate of breathing it is possible to reduce many of the unpleasant symptoms that would otherwise follow on from 'anxious' breathing.**

More on how to do this later.

Effects of Overbreathing

So how does breathing cause all of those unpleasant physical symptoms? Quite simply, our body uses the amount of CO² as a marker for breathing rates. When we overbreathe (or hyperventilate), the level of CO² drops in relation to the level of oxygen and when this drop in CO² is detected, the body responds with a number of chemical changes that show up in two broad categories of symptoms:

- symptoms produced by the slight reduction in oxygen to certain parts of the *brain* (including dizziness, light-headedness, confusion, breathlessness, blurred vision, unreality);
- symptoms produced by the slight reduction in oxygen to certain parts of the *body* (including an increase in heart rate to pump more blood around, numbness and tingling in the extremities, cold, clammy hands and muscle stiffness).



There are also some other effects of overbreathing. After periods of stress and anxiety, have you ever felt tired and exhausted? Well, overbreathing for extended periods of time requires more energy and effort– it's like you've been constantly walking uphill! Perhaps you've felt hot, flushed and sweaty from overbreathing. Also, because you might breathe from your chest rather than your diaphragm (the large muscle underneath the lungs) you might have felt some tightness in your chest or actually felt chest pains, all because the chest muscles are overworked. Finally, this overbreathing might have led you to sigh or yawn a lot. As you can see, how we breathe certainly has a large impact on how our body functions.

As with the other symptoms associated with anxiety, these changes are NOT HARMFUL. In fact, hyperventilation is sometimes used as a medical test.

Facts about Hyperventilation

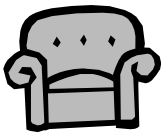
- ◆ When people are overbreathing, they tend to feel as if they are choking or experience a smothering sensation, as though they are not getting enough air. In fact, this is the opposite of what is happening - as the person is actually getting too much oxygen!
- ◆ Breathing patterns are an important part of the body's emergency response (fight/flight) and are intended to protect the body from danger. If faced with a fight or flight situation, a state of overbreathing would not develop because the oxygen would be used at the rate it is taken in.
- ◆ Sometimes people are concerned that if they overbreathe for too long, they may eventually collapse or faint. Fainting almost never occurs as a result of overbreathing. When it does happen, it usually happens with people who have a history of fainting because there is often some other part of their biological make up that makes them more likely to faint.
- ◆ You might recognise many of the symptoms described here but it doesn't feel like you're hyperventilating. Sometimes hyperventilation can be very subtle so that you're breathing just a little more rapidly throughout a whole day or over an extended period of time. There might not be a dramatic drop in CO₂ so that you experience those intense symptoms constantly, but when your CO₂ levels are lowered, all it takes is a sigh, or a yawn, or an anxious thought, and then all of a sudden it seems you're lightheaded, your heart's pounding, or you have a full blown panic attack.

Gaining Control Over Your Breathing

Gaining control over your breathing is an important skill to develop. It is essentially a calming technique and as such the technique must be practiced consistently in order for you to benefit fully. This calming technique will enable you to

- (1) reduce some of the physical effects of overbreathing that we just described
- (2) facilitate general relaxation through breathing.

It's probably best, when you start, to practice in safe, low stress situations such as in the lounge room at home, or when you're waiting for a bus. Once you've mastered the technique you can try to use it to reduce feelings of intense anxiety or panic. It's a bit like sport's practice – you really want to have mastered your skills before you get to the finals. For now, just become as well practiced as you can.



When you do the exercise, try to find a comfortable chair and eliminate any potential interruptions. As you do the breathing be sure to keep count in your head, as this is an important aspect of the calming technique. You will find that your mind wanders and you forget to count, this is quite natural and to be expected. Simply allow yourself the thought and then return to the counting. Do not try to take in deep breaths - just stick to your own natural depth of breath. Aim for smooth, easy breathing. It is a good idea to try and breathe exclusively through your nose as this facilitates control.

Calming Technique

- 1. Ensure that you are sitting on a comfortable chair or laying down 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 nose if possible).**