

Patient information

Anxiety and relaxation

Anxiety

Anxiety can be described as a feeling of worry, nervousness or unease about something with an uncertain outcome.

It occurs when someone's reaction to something is out of proportion to what would be expected in that given situation.

In its mild form it can be described as a vague feeling that can make us feel unsettled. However, severe anxiety can be debilitating and have a huge impact on a person's daily life.

People that have an underlying lung condition or who struggle with breathlessness, due to another condition, will often experience periods of anxiety.

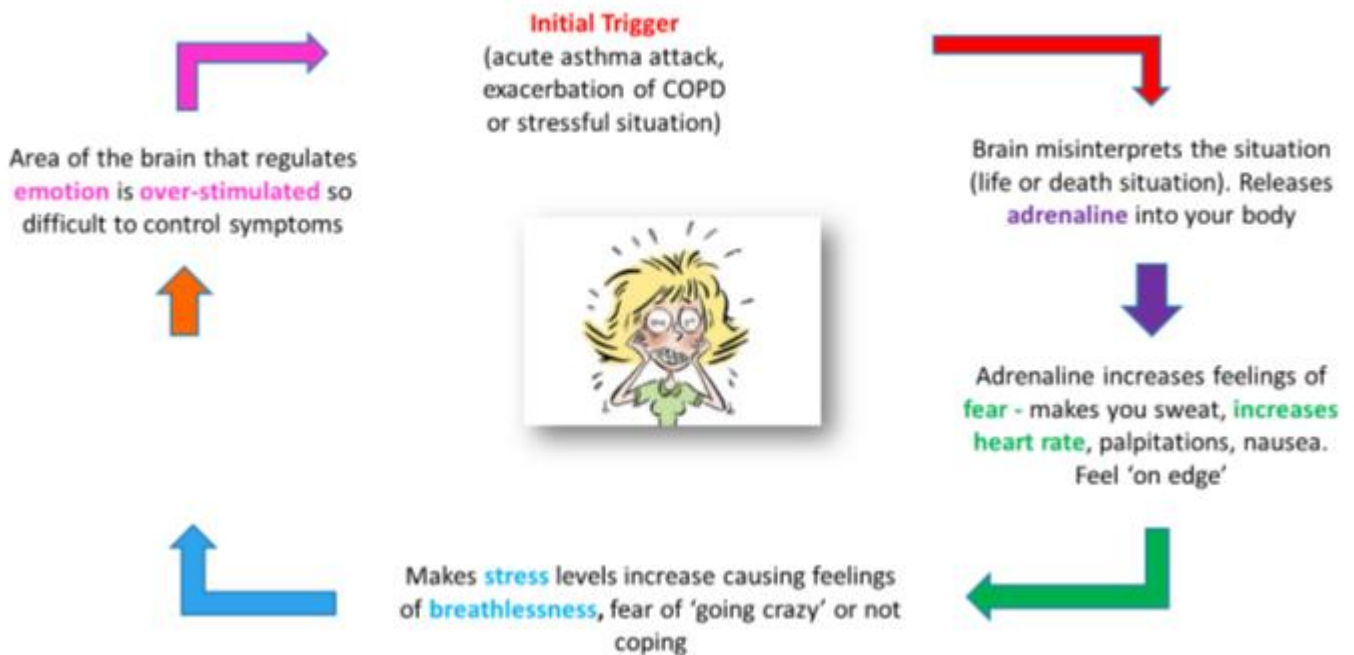
Equally, however, those people who struggle with anxiety and stress will, at some point, experience periods of breathlessness or 'hyperventilation'.

Therefore breathlessness and anxiety very much go 'hand-in-hand'.



It is OK to be anxious, but it is what we do with the anxiety that is important.

What happens when we are anxious



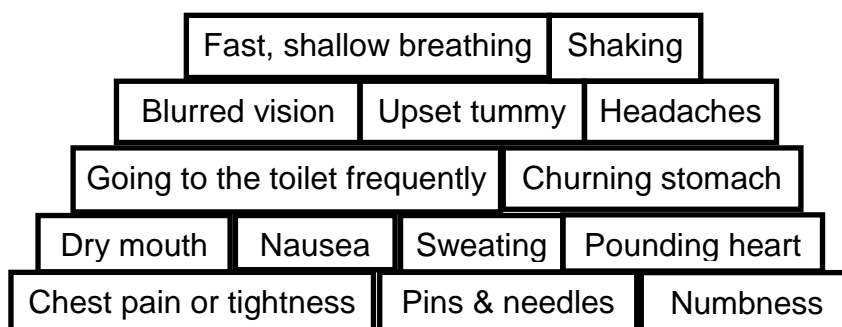
Cycle of breathlessness and anxiety

The human body has a built-in survival mechanism which helps us to deal with stressful situations. This is called our '**flight**' or '**fight**' response, where we react to the situation either by running away from it or by staying and tackling it.

This is a normal, usually controllable, reaction and once we have been introduced to the new experience then the nervousness and trepidation will settle down.

However, sometimes this normal reaction, and the feelings associated with it, are triggered frequently and can become out of control, turning into a vicious cycle of ever-increasing breathlessness and anxiety, each problem very much feeding the other.

The physical sensations (or symptoms) of anxiety are not harmful but can be very frightening if you do not know what caused them or how to control them.



Some people experience just one of these symptoms whereas others experience more than one.

How can anxiety affect my breathing?

Quite often the symptoms of anxiety are very similar to those of breathlessness and it can be very difficult to distinguish between the two.

It is therefore good to recognize how anxiety can affect you:

- Being anxious can make you think less clearly. This can make planning tasks and pacing yourself more difficult and so can increase breathlessness.
- If you are anxious it is harder to spot the triggers that cause your breathlessness. This makes you slower to use your coping techniques to help reduce your breathlessness.
- Being anxious generally makes people more uptight or tense and can make the muscles around their chest feel tight. This in turn can increase breathlessness.
- Anxiety can make someone focus more on their inability to breathe and 'get the air in', increasing breathlessness.
- Being anxious makes your breathing faster and shallower and so can give the feeling of being more breathless.

How can I help myself?

If you start to feel anxious:

- Stop what you are doing.
- Try to break the cycle by removing yourself from the situation.
- Try to manage negative thoughts.
- Relax your shoulders or change position (use your positions of ease).
- Breathing control (tummy breathing).
- Self - talk.
- Relaxation techniques - relaxation CD, window breathing, hand-held fan, calming hand technique.



- Mindfulness - phone apps, colouring books, CD's.

Friends and family

For some people, feeling breathless or anxious when they are with other people can be embarrassing and make them feel awkward.

However, for family and friends it can be scary to watch someone they care about struggling to breathe, and they can feel helpless, so:

- Sit down and educate them on your lung condition
- Explain to them what makes your breathing/anxiety worse.
- Make a plan on how they can help you when you are breathless - get them involved!

Techniques to manage anxiety

Hand-held fan



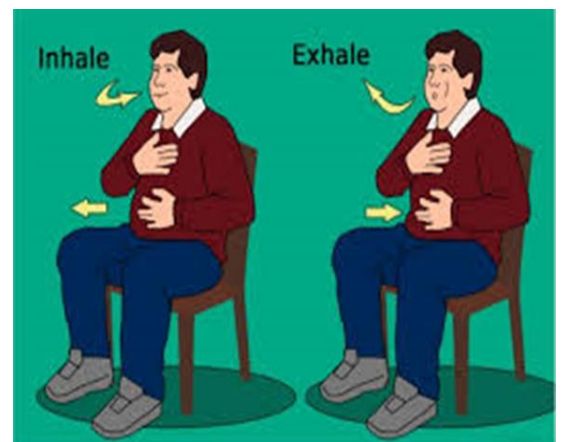
This technique can help to reduce the feelings of anxiety and breathlessness and give the sensation of getting more air in, thus aiding relaxation.

The air produced by the fan stimulates small nerve receptors in the face which in turn stimulate the brain to slow down the rate of breathing.

The fan should be held approximately 15cm (6 inches) from the face.

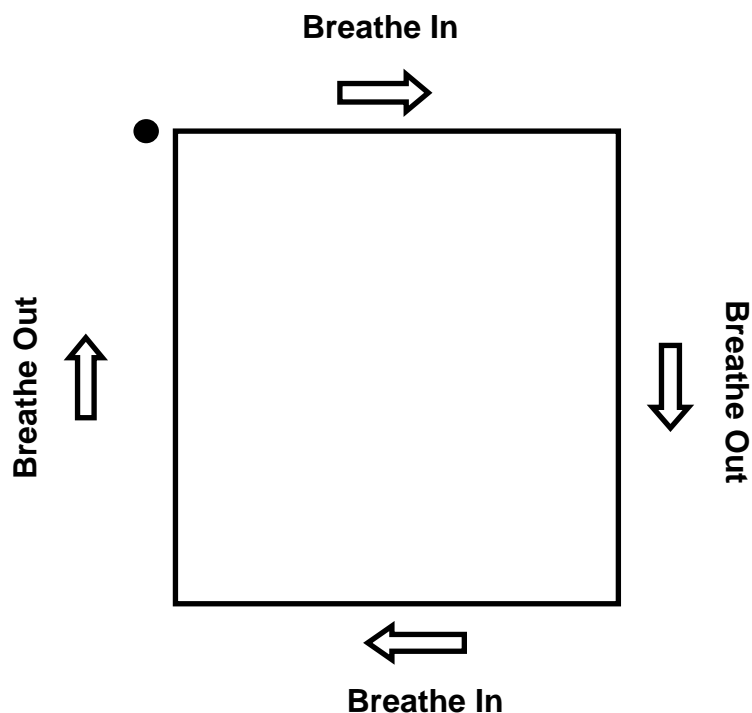
Breathing control (tummy breathing)

1. Find somewhere comfortable to sit.
2. Either sit in a reclined or upright position - with your back well supported.
3. Place a hand gently on your tummy just beneath your ribs - don't press too hard.
4. Try to concentrate on your tummy rising and falling as you breathe. This will be more difficult if you are anxious, but try to persevere.
5. This is a good technique to help get your breathing back in a good pattern and is also a good distraction technique.



Window breathing

- Place your finger on the 'dot' in the top left of the rectangle.
- Breathe in as you follow the line in the direction of the arrow to the next corner.
- Then breathe out along the next side.
- Continue around the rectangle following the instructions.

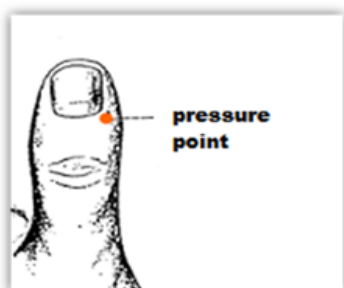
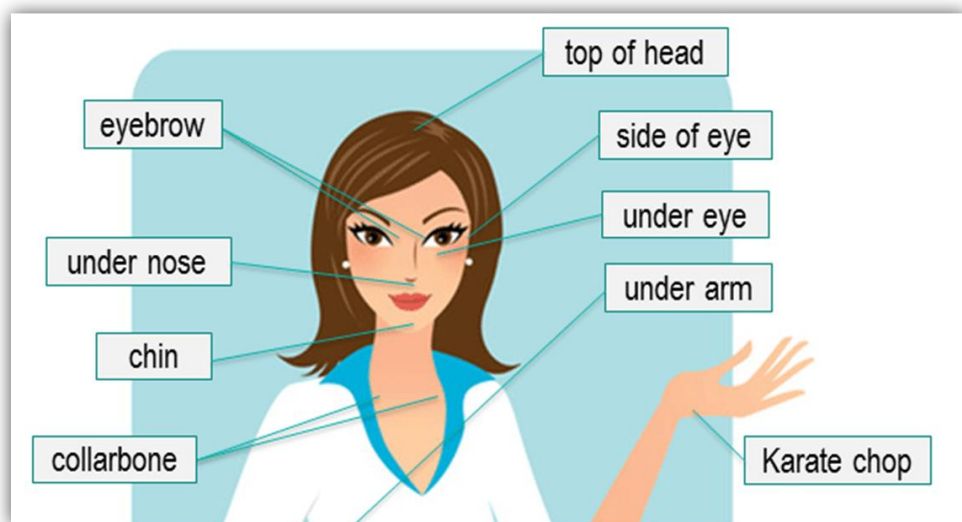


This breathing technique is helpful for getting your breathing into a more rhythmical pattern (breath in slightly shorter than your breath out).

It is also very helpful as a distraction technique for when you have an episode of breathlessness or anxiety.

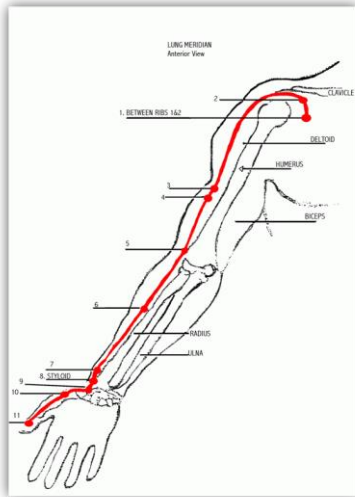
Tapping technique

Use the pads of your fingers to tap on the various energy meridians (above) to help ease tension and anxiety.



Thumb hold

Applying pressure to the base of the thumb nail is thought to help relieve acute anxiety and breathlessness.



Stroking technique

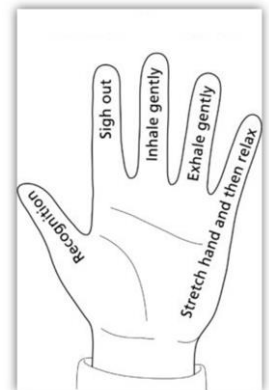
- Make sure the person is sitting in a comfortable chair with their back supported.
- Place their arm on a pillow on their lap.
- Using the palm of the hand, firmly stroke down the arm and off the thumb to help calm.
- This is often best carried out by a carer in times of anxiety.

The 'calming hand' technique

This is an easy technique and can be used at any time as we always have our hands with us.

- 1 Hold your thumb firmly and recognise the signs of your anxiety
- 2 Hold your index finger, relax your shoulders and sigh out.
- 3 Hold your middle finger and take a slow deep breath in.
- 4 Hold your fourth finger and gently breathe out.
- 5 Stretch your hand and relax.

Repeat as necessary.



Anxiety Action Plan

My Anxiety Action Plan

When I feel anxious I will:

Let my friends or family know how I am feeling

- 1) Go and sit somewhere quiet
- 2) Sit down in a chair (making sure my shoulders are not raised) **or** use my positions of ease
- 3) Take my reliever (blue) inhaler - if I feel I need it

I will then try one of the following:

- Smell the rose, blow the candle technique

- Tummy breathing
- Window breathing technique
- Hand-held fan
- Calming hand technique
- Use my relaxation CD
- Mindfulness colouring book

Don't be afraid to try a different technique if the first one does not work.

Remember, it can take a while for things to settle down.

Other useful contacts

For anxiety and stress management courses you can self-refer to the:

Suffolk Wellbeing Service
0300 123 1781

Physiotherapy Department

West Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust, Hardwick Lane, Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk,
IP33 2QZ
Tel: 01284 713300

Suffolk Community Healthcare Care Co-ordination Centre (CCC)

Tel: 0300 123 2425

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