



Abdominal Breathing

HOW DOES BREATHING RELATE TO STRESS AND ANXIETY?

When stressed and anxious, people tend to breathe in a more rapid and shallow way. This “over-breathing” can help produce a variety of physical symptoms that prompt or worsen anxiety. Shallow and rapid breathing results in a decreased proportion of carbon dioxide to oxygen in the blood. In turn, the acidity of the blood is altered. This can cause a rush of calcium to the muscles and nerves, leaving people feeling tense and shaky. “Over-breathing” also contributes to a constriction of blood vessels leading to the brain and extremities, helping to produce dizziness, lightheadedness, tingling sensations in the hands and feet, blurry vision and clammy hands. Further, when anxious, the body’s autonomic nervous system produces physical changes such as increased heart rate, sweating, dry mouth and upset stomach. Many of these unpleasant physical symptoms are directly connected to rapid and shallow breathing.

HOW DO I KNOW IF I AM OVERBREATHING?

Find a clock with a second hand. Breathing normally, count the number of times you inhale during a minute. If this number is higher than 12 or 13, you are probably breathing in a rapid manner (Beckfield, 1994).

Place your right hand on your upper chest (near the base of your throat) and your left hand on your abdomen (slightly below your belly button). Take in several deep breaths. Which hand rises and falls with your breathing? If it is your right hand, chances are your breathing is shallow.

HOW DO I ABDOMINAL BREATHE?

1. Lean back in a sitting position.
2. Place one hand on your upper chest and the other on your abdomen.
3. Imagine that you want to fill your stomach with air.
4. Take a long slow breath through your nose as if to fully inflate your stomach. Take four full seconds to inhale. The hand on your abdomen, not your chest, should rise.
5. Hold for one second.
6. Exhale slowly and gently through your mouth. Take four full seconds to exhale. The hand on your abdomen, not your chest, should fall. Continue this process for at least four minutes to achieve a benefit. Practise twice daily.

Beckfield (1994)

Abdominal breathing helps reverse the uncomfortable physical symptoms of anxiety. It also lowers susceptibility to stress and tension by decreasing overall levels of physiological arousal.

Beckfield (1994); Wilson (2000)

Beckfield, D. (1994). *Master Your Panic and Take Back Your Life: Twelve Treatment Sessions to Overcome High Anxiety*. San Luis

Obispo, Impact Publishers.

Bourne, E. (2000). *The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook*. Oakland: New Harbinger Publications.

Wilson, R. (1996). *Don't Panic: Taking Control of Anxiety Attacks*. New York: Harper Perennial.

WHAT IS THE “RELAXATION RESPONSE”?

Relaxation helps reduce or eliminate the physical sensations associated with stress and anxiety. A “relaxation response” occurs when your respiration rate drops, your heart rate slows and your muscles relax.

There are many benefits to practising relaxation (i.e., using techniques such as abdominal breathing, meditation and guided imagery) on a regular basis. These benefits include the following:

- reduction of anxiety and stress
- increased energy level
- increased productivity
- improved concentration and memory
- increased self-confidence

Bourne (2000)

HOW DO I USE BREATHING TO RELAX?

- Find a quiet time and place away from friends, the phone and the T.V.
- Play music you find relaxing.
- Close your eyes or focus on an object in the room.
- Before you begin, notice how you feel.
- Begin to use abdominal breathing. Remember to take four full seconds to inhale and four full seconds to exhale. Continue this until you find your respiration rate has slowed and you are comfortably breathing in a slow and relaxed way.
- If negative or anxious thoughts (e.g. “I blew the exam”, “I should be studying”) come to your mind, acknowledge them and let them go. Try to refocus on your breathing.
- When you are done, notice how you feel.
- With practice, becoming more relaxed will happen more easily.
- Take time to relax even when you’re not especially tense; this helps lower overall susceptibility to stress.

Beckfield (1994); Bourne (2000)

WHERE CAN I GET HELP?

If you think that you may be experiencing problems with stress or anxiety, and require professional assistance, call Student Counselling Services (966-4920) or speak to your family doctor or a physician at Student Health Services (966-5768).