Breathlessness and Anxiety: what it is and how to manage it

Breathlessness and anxiety

Breathlessness and anxiety are very closely linked. When people experience breathlessness, a common reaction is to become anxious. Unfortunately, becoming anxious also leads to more breathlessness. For this reason, some people can find themselves entering into a vicious circle of ever-increasing anxiety and breathlessness. Breathlessness may occur suddenly or may gradually develop over weeks or months. It can often be a challenging symptom to control. Basic daily activities (e.g. washing and dressing) or types of emotional distress (e.g. anger) can trigger breathlessness. There are things that you can do to prevent or reduce breathlessness; including coping strategies, relaxation and breathing techniques. These can all help to reduce the distress of breathlessness and make your breathing easier.

Some things that can help

1) Check your caffeine intake
Consider avoiding drinking too much tea, coffee or cola. Caffeine can increase anxiety levels.

2) Check your alcohol intake
People who are anxious may try to cope with the anxiety by drinking more alcohol. This can makes things worse.

3) Consider giving up smoking
Regular intake of nicotine can increase anxiety levels. Long term smoking can also, of course, compromise lung function.

4) Try physical exercise
Aerobic exercise is the form of exercise most consistently shown to reduce anxiety. The duration should ideally be of more than twenty minutes.

5) Dealing with worries and problems
If you find that you are worrying about different problems in your head, try putting your worry to a useful purpose. Pick out one or two problems that seem really important and make a decision to target them. Use friends or family to help you with this.

If you have noticed that you have periods when you breath too quickly, try to identify what it was you were doing or thinking about that may have made you feel anxious. Talking about the trigger of your anxiety with friends and relatives may be especially helpful.
If you notice that you are regularly getting anxious, upset or irritated by situations that don’t seem to bother others, reflect on whether it is possible to change your perspective. Why do others not get so worked up? Is there a way of seeing the funny side of things (humour is a great antidote to stress)? Is what’s upsetting really worth bothering about (sometimes we can get worked up about relatively trivial concerns)? Is it something that is unchangeable and thus may be best to reach a sense of acceptance about?

If your anxiety is at such a level that it feels hard to tolerate and you are finding it difficult to change things for the better, you may want to consider professional help. Your GP may be able to refer you on to specialist help or prescribe medication.

6) Learn controlled breathing
Breathing too quickly (also known as over-breathing or hyperventilation) can itself bring on anxiety. Breathing too quickly lowers the amount of carbon dioxide in your lungs. By a complicated process this can cause the physical symptoms of anxiety. Other important things to note are:

- You can get physical anxiety by slightly over breathing for a long time. So, over breathing does not have to be obvious to you or to others.
- If you slightly over breathe, even a yawn or sigh can trigger a panic attack or physical symptoms of anxiety.
- Changing the way you breathe can be useful for managing anxiety.

When you get physical symptoms of anxiety (e.g. breathlessness) it may feel like you are not breathing enough. The natural response is to breathe in more. However, if you do try to get more air by breathing in more, it just makes the problem worse. The best solution is to slow down your breathing even though you may feel that you should speed it up.

7) Getting to know your breathing habit
The following checklist will help you learn more about your breathing habits. First check to see if you have any of the following symptoms of over breathing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symptoms</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Not Sure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You breathe more than 10-12 breaths a minute at rest</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your chest sometimes feels over-expanded or tight</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You or others have noticed that you sigh or yawn quite a bit</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You often gasp or take deep breaths, particularly in situations that make you anxious</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
If you are positive to any of these, then it is possible that you over breathe.

8) Controlling your breathing
Often, breathlessness can lead a person to breathe with their upper chest and shoulders in a rapid and shallow manner. This type of breathing uses a lot of energy and causes considerable fatigue. Over time it will result in you having too much oxygen in your blood and getting rid of too much carbon dioxide. When this imbalance passes a certain threshold, it can cause a range of unpleasant sensations, such as anxiety, numbness or tingling in the fingers, chest pains or aches, headaches, and/or dizziness (you may also wish to have a look at our information sheet on Hyperventilation Syndrome).

Breathing control can produce a more relaxed and gentle breathing pattern. It involves relaxing the upper chest and shoulders and breathing at a normal rate, using the lower chest. It is helpful to sit upright whilst doing these exercises rather than leaning forward.

- Find a quiet place to do the exercises
- Sit in a comfortable position with your neck, shoulders and back well supported. Relax your shoulders by resting your hands on your thighs and sighing out. This allows your shoulders to fall naturally.
- Place your hand flat on your abdomen (belly) and give a little cough. The muscle you feel under your hand is your diaphragm.
- Breathe in gently. Feel your abdomen move out under your hand as the air is drawn into the lower area of your lungs.
- As you do this, try breathing in through your nose and gently out through your mouth. Make your breath out twice as long as the breath in.
- Remember your belly goes out as you breathe in, and in as you breathe out.

Practise this exercise several times a day (aim to do 5–10 breaths each time you practise).

9) Relaxation techniques
Simple exercises can help to reduce the anxiety that can make the breathlessness worse. They can give you a sense of control over what can be a difficult and frustrating symptom to live with. It can be helpful to find a quiet and peaceful environment in which to do these exercises. Make sure that you are in a comfortable position with your shoulders, neck and back well supported, with your arms by your sides or hands cradled on your lap. This technique can take practice. Consider using it for perhaps 5–10 minutes once a day to start off with.

- Close your eyes gently.
- Begin by breathing out first and then breathe in, just as much as you need. Then breathe out slowly with a slight sigh, like a balloon slowly deflating. Do this once more, as slowly as you can. As you
breath out feel any tension in your body begin to drain away. Then try to keep your breathing at an even, steady pace.

- Once you feel comfortable doing this, you can move on to the next stage:
- Think of different parts of your body in turn.
- Start with your toes and check they are relaxed, comfortable and still.
- Now think about your legs and allow your thighs to relax and roll outwards.
- Next, let your abdominal muscles become soft and relaxed.
- Think about your fingers and let them become limp and still. Allow this feeling of relaxation to spread up your arms to your shoulders.
- Let your shoulders relax and drop easily.
- Your neck muscles will relax if your head is held upright, resting easily balanced on top of your spine. Or if supported against the back of the chair.
- Allow your face and expression to relax. Make sure your teeth are not clenched and let your jaw rest in a relaxed position.
- Now, instead of being aware of parts of your body, become aware of the all-over sensation of letting go. Of quiet, calm, restfulness and stillness. Stay like this, listening to your breathing if it helps. If you find your mind becoming busy again, check up where your muscles have tensed and relax them. Get up slowly once you have finished.

Once you feel comfortable doing the above exercises, it can help to imagine pleasant or tranquil surroundings or to listen to some relaxing music. There are many types of relaxation technique and you may want to experiment with several in order find out which one works best for you. Relaxation tapes or CDs can be purchased from some shops or borrowed from public libraries.

Health Psychology Service
April 2012

Compliments, comments, concerns or complaints?
If you have any comments, concerns or complaints and you would like to speak to somebody about them please telephone 01773 525119

Are we accessible to you? This publication is available on request in other formats (for example, large print, easy read, Braille or audio version) and languages. For free translation and/or other format please call 01773 525099 extension 5587, or email us communications@dchs.nhs.uk