

Patient information factsheet

Anxiety and breathing difficulties

Breathing is something that we all automatically do and we often take this for granted. Some chronic health conditions, for example asthma or cystic fibrosis, can affect your breathing. This can make people feel anxious as they start to think that they cannot breathe.

This information leaflet aims to give you some simple advice on how to help you manage your anxiety around breathing. By using some simple techniques, you can start to feel calm quickly, which will help your breathing.

Anxiety

Anxiety is the body's natural way of dealing with what we think is a danger or a threat. When your body thinks it is in danger, you start to feel changes happening in your body. You might feel that the muscles in your body are tense, you are breathing faster, your heart is racing and you are beginning to sweat. These are all ways that anxiety affects your body.

Feeling anxious is a normal part of life. Everyone experiences feelings of anxiety. For example, if you are taking an exam or if you have an interview you might feel anxious. It is when the anxiety starts to interfere with your life that it can become a problem.

Causes of anxiety

There are different reasons why people feel anxious, and anxiety affects people in different ways.

Living with an illness can add stress to people's lives. Stress can build up over a long period of time. This can make it easier for anxiety and panic to break through.

Breathing difficulties can trigger anxiety in many ways:

- The sensation of not being able to breathe
- Worry that you might not be able to breathe or that you could die
- Worrying about the future
- Worrying about whether you will be able to do the things that you want to or used to be able to do
- Worry that your oxygen will run out
- Not feeling in control of certain aspects of your life.

Symptoms of anxiety

Two of the main physical symptoms of anxiety are:

- Quick, shallow breathing, or difficulty breathing
- Tightness in the chest or chest pain.

This is why anxiety can make your breathing worse.

You may have other symptoms that show that anxiety is around.

Physical symptoms of anxiety on the body

- Rapid or pounding heart
- Tight or aching muscles
- Headaches, dizziness or feeling faint
- Excessive sweating
- Shaking or trembling
- Pins and needles, especially in the hands or around the mouth
- Butterflies or a churning feeling in stomach or nausea
- Loss of appetite
- Passing urine frequently or diarrhoea.

Effects of anxiety on thoughts and feelings

- Constant worrying, fearing the worst or that the problem is permanent
- Feeling on edge all the time
- Thinking negatively
- A sense of fear
- Unable to concentrate
- Feeling irritable and less patient than you were
- Feeling preoccupied or obsessed with what you are worried about
- Not noticing other things.

Anxiety and breathing

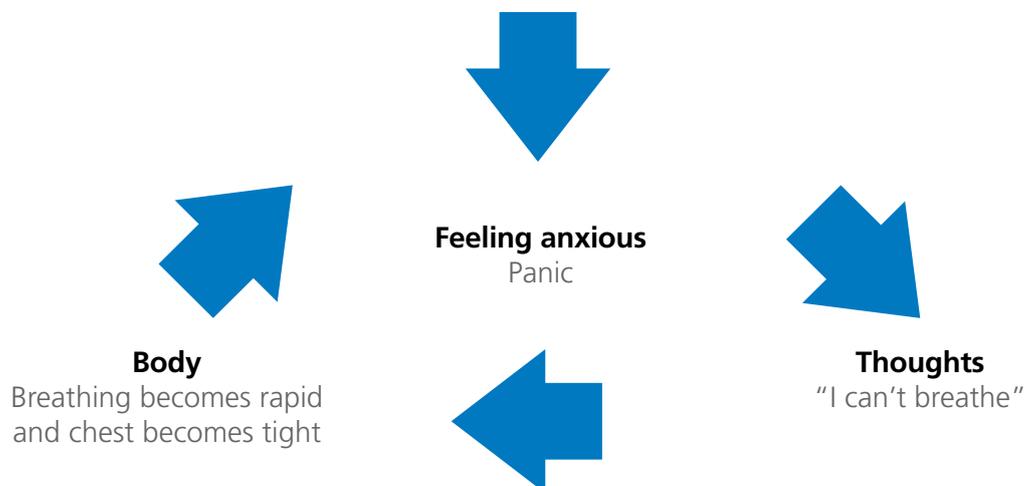
Some people experience panic attacks when they are feeling anxious. This is when the feelings of anxiety become overwhelming and take over. You may feel like you might faint, be sick, you are breathing rapidly or that you are finding it difficult to breathe.

Rapid breathing is known as hyperventilating. Hyperventilation can be a normal response when you are anxious. Having a panic attack can be a very frightening and intense experience. The symptoms you experience can be distressing. This often causes more anxiety, making things worse, which can be quite uncomfortable and unpleasant. If you have difficulties breathing anyway, this is really scary as it feeds into your real worries about not being able to breathe.

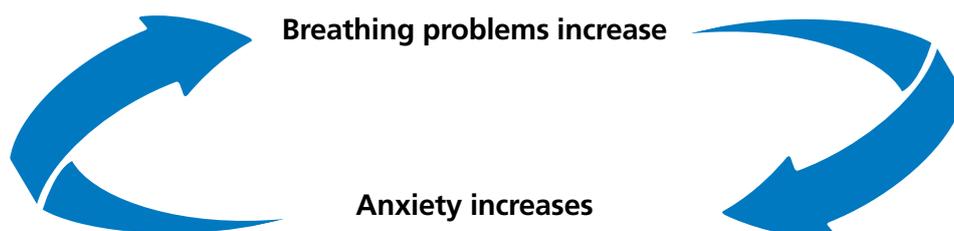
This diagram shows how a panic attack may be triggered when people start to feel short of breath and it scares them. They begin to have thoughts about not being able to breathe. Their body responds by breathing more quickly and this can make their chest feel more restricted. This in turn, makes the person feel even more panicky and really believe that they will not be able to breathe or that they might collapse.

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Trigger
For example, pushing yourself to go for a long walk and starting to feel more short of breath



This is what we call a vicious circle as the more anxious people get, the more they feel as if they cannot breathe.



You can break this cycle and reduce your anxiety by learning what helps you to cope or manage your anxiety.

Learning to breathe properly can help with the panic attacks and reduce hyperventilating.

How to cope with and manage anxiety

Getting to know your anxiety

Anxiety affects people in different ways. You need to understand your own anxiety and then you can use different techniques to help manage it. Initially, it is useful to ask yourself the following questions:

- What things or situations trigger my anxiety? For example, it might be a physical sensation, or doing exercise, or thinking "is my breathing getting worse?"
- What are my feelings and thoughts when I am anxious?
- What do I tend to do when I am anxious?
- What helps me to cope or lessen my anxiety?

It might also be helpful to keep a record of when you are feeling anxious and make a note of how you feel, think and what you do in the situation. Once you have started to notice what invites anxiety in for you or lessens it, here are some ideas that might help.

Relaxing your breathing

Some people find that their breathing becomes difficult when they are feeling anxious. Breathing techniques can help to overcome feelings of breathlessness and manage anxiety. The tips below may be useful when your breathing becomes difficult:

- If you starting to feel anxious, and you are beginning to have worrying thoughts, start by **breathing out** and empty your lungs as much as you can.
- **Breathing through your nose** automatically slows your breathing down and helps to avoid hyperventilating.
- **Breathing into your abdomen** by putting one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach. As you breathe in and out through your nose, the hand on your stomach should move, while the one on your chest should keep as still as possible. By breathing into your abdomen, your diaphragm is stretched and you relax the muscles that become tight that make it seem like it is difficult to breathe.
- You could try:
 - **Counting while you breathe**, for example, by counting one and two for breathing in and three and four for breathing out. You may like to increase your counting, for example, three, four and five to breathe out longer, to see if that helps. The counting helps to avoid rapid, panicky breathing.
 - **Saying “re – lax” in your mind when you breathe**, breathing in through your nose when saying “re” and out through your mouth when you say “lax”.

For more information about breathing exercises, you can speak to the physiotherapists.

Learning to relax your body

When people start to feel anxious their body often starts to tense and their breathing quickens. Learning controlled breathing and muscle relaxation techniques can be really effective in decreasing anxiety. Relaxation involves sitting quietly and breathing slowly while relaxing the muscles in the body and clearing your mind of all thoughts.

- Here is an example of a **quick relaxation technique** you might like to try:
 1. Lie or sit down in a comfortable position, making sure your clothes are not too tight
 2. Try to breathe deeply and slowly, through your nose
 3. Starting from your toes, tighten the muscles as hard as you can and hold for a count of ten
 4. Relax and enjoy the feeling of release from the tension
 5. Spread out the muscles in your feet, hold for a count of ten and relax
 6. Repeat steps three to five, moving up through your body (legs, back, stomach, chest, hands, arms, shoulders, neck, face). Tighten and relax the muscles as you go
 7. You may find listening to some relaxing music will help as well.
- **Using imagery** – Some people find it useful to think about a time when they felt really good and calm. For example, it could be imagining your favourite walk or a scene which you find calming, such as a quiet country scene, a beach or the sound of the sea. If you create a picture of this in your head and remember all the feelings you had in your body, the smells that were around, the sounds you heard, anything you could feel at the time and the thoughts you had it can make you feel calmer and more relaxed.

You can get more information about this from the physiotherapists or psychologists. There are lots of relaxation tapes and books available; you can ask at your local library or bookshop.

Using distraction (thinking about something else)

Worrying about your breathing can make things seem worse and may lead to it becoming worse. Trying to relax or distracting yourself may help to ease your breathing problems. Distraction techniques are when you do something else or focus on something else rather than worrying. This can really help you feel less anxious if you decide to use it as a strategy, rather than other people trying to distract you.

Some examples could be:

- Listening to music
- Reading a book or magazine
- Watching TV
- Going outside in the fresh air or opening a window.

Reassuring yourself and checking out what you are thinking

Anxious thoughts often focus on difficulties that people are experiencing at the time (e.g. "My chest is really tight") but then become more negative and catastrophic as the person becomes more anxious (such as "I cannot breathe").

As well as using the strategies above to calm your body, you can use some of the ideas below to help calm your thoughts and mind.

- Have I been in this situation before? What happened? Is there anything different between this situation and previous ones like it?
- When I have felt this way in the past, what did I think about or do that helped me feel better?
- Have I had any experiences (or is there anything at this moment in time) that shows me that this thought is not completely true?
- If my best friend or someone I loved had this thought, what would I tell them?
- If my best friend or someone who loves me knew I was thinking this thought what would they say to me? What evidence might they point out to me to suggest that the thought is not 100% true?
- Are there any strengths or positives in me or the situation that I am ignoring?
- Am I...
 - catastrophising (thinking the worst),
 - fortunetelling (predicting the future),
 - constantly asking "what if" (which never offers a satisfactory answer)
 - or only noticing the negatives (focusing only on what you cannot do)?

If you find it is certain situations that make you feel anxious, you could use these questions to think about how to respond to the anxiety next time. Some people like to write down either questions or reassuring statements to help them when they get panicky.

For example, you could write down some **positive statements** to help keep calm:

- I have experienced panic before and have survived
- I have skills to reduce my anxiety
- I can calm my breathing really quickly if I concentrate on my breathing
- I can cope.

Checking out with the medical team

Sometimes people notice that certain situations make them anxious (such as walking a long way) or thoughts about what they are able to do (“can I manage this?” or “will I collapse?”).

Sometimes these anxious thoughts can exaggerate people’s problems but sometimes they can highlight to people that their body is struggling and that they need to go slower. Therefore, it is really important to remember that the multi-disciplinary team are available for you to check out any medical concerns. This can give you a realistic opinion about what you might be able to manage and help you balance any anxious thoughts.

Talking to someone

You may find that talking to someone about your problems can make them seem more manageable. It might help to talk to someone who you are close to and can trust, for example a friend or a member of your family, or you may prefer to speak to a member of the multi-disciplinary team.

Conclusion

Anxiety is a common problem and everyone experiences it at some point in their lives. If this is happening to you and you find you are feeling anxious don’t be afraid to ask for help. There are different ways of managing anxiety and many people who can help you.

More help and information

If you would like to know more about these ideas and how to become more confident about your anxiety and breathing difficulties, please contact your GP in the first instance.

Additional references

You may find the following website helpful:

British Lung Foundation, Breathe Easy www.lunguk.org/supporting-you/breathe-easy

You can also contact the physiotherapy team for additional resources, including a leaflet on controlling hyperventilation.

If you need a translation of this document, an interpreter or a version in large print, Braille or on audiotope, please telephone 023 8120 4688.