

CALM BREATHING

What is “calm breathing”?

Calm breathing (sometimes called “diaphragmatic breathing”) is a technique that helps you slow down your breathing when feeling stressed or anxious. Newborn babies naturally breathe this way, and singers, wind instrument players and yoga practitioners use this type of breathing.

Why is calm breathing important?

◆ Our breathing changes when we are feeling anxious. We tend to take short, quick, shallow breaths, or even hyperventilate; this is called “overbreathing”.

◆ It is a good idea to learn techniques for managing “overbreathing”, because this type of breathing can actually make you feel even more anxious (e.g., due to a racing heart, dizziness, or headaches)!

◆ Calm breathing is a great portable tool that you can use whenever you are feeling anxious. However, it does require some practice.

Key point: Like other anxiety-management skills, the purpose of calm breathing is not to avoid anxiety at all costs, but just to take the edge off it or to help you “ride out” the feelings.

How to Do It

Calm breathing involves taking smooth, slow, and regular breaths. Sitting upright is usually better than lying down or slouching, because it can increase the capacity of your lungs to fill with air. It is best to 'take the weight' off your shoulders by supporting your arms on the side-arms of a chair, or on your lap.

1. Take a slow breath in through the nose, breathing into your lower belly (for about 4 seconds)
2. Hold your breath for 1 or 2 seconds
3. Exhale slowly through the mouth (for about 4 seconds)
4. Wait a few seconds before taking another breath

About 6-8 breathing cycles per minute is often helpful to decrease anxiety, but find your own comfortable breathing rhythm. These cycles regulate the amount of oxygen you take in so that you do not experience the fainting, tingling, and giddy sensations that are sometimes associated with overbreathing.

Helpful Hints:

- ✚ Make sure that you aren't hyperventilating; it is important to pause for a few seconds after each breath.
- ✚ Try to breathe from your diaphragm or abdomen. Your shoulders and chest area should be fairly relaxed and still. If this is challenging at first, it can be helpful to first try this exercise by lying down on the floor with one hand on your heart, the other hand on your abdomen. Watch the hand on your abdomen rise as you fill your lungs with air, expanding your chest. (The hand over your heart should barely move, if at all.)

Rules of practice:

Try calm breathing for at least five minutes twice a day.

You do not need to be feeling anxious to practice – in fact, at first you should practice while feeling relatively calm. You need to be comfortable breathing this way when feeling calm, before you can feel comfortable doing it when anxious. You'll gradually master this skill and feel the benefits!

Once you are comfortable with this technique, you can start using it in situations that cause anxiety.