



Breathing & Relaxation Techniques

a resource from:



APOSTOLIC CHRISTIAN

Counseling and Family Services

Breathing & Relaxation Techniques

Directions: Read the breathing & relaxation skills below and find several that fit you. Practice them regularly whether you feel anxious or not so that when times of higher tension occur you already know how to use the skills effectively. Remember that when you are anxious it will take time for the anxiety to go down. You may need to use several skills and go through them multiple times before you notice that you feel less anxious.

1) Natural Breathing

1. Gently and slowly inhale a normal amount of air through your nose, filling only your lower lungs (keep your upper chest still as your stomach moves in and out).
2. Exhale easily.
3. Continue this slow, gentle breathing with a relaxed attitude, concentrating on filling the lower lungs.

USES: This should be adopted as your normal daily breathing pattern whenever you are not physically active.

2) The Calming Breath

1. Exhale all the way.
2. Take a deep breath, filling first your lower lungs, then your upper lungs. Hold for count of three.
3. Slowly exhale, saying “relax” (or a similar word) under your breath.
4. Let your muscles go limp; loosen your face and jaw muscles.
5. Remain in this “resting” position physically and mentally for a few seconds, or for a couple of natural breaths.

USES: Incorporate this brief experience into your daily life. Use it six to eight times a day to reduce the buildup of normal tensions, to encourage the calming response, and during panic or during panic-provoking times.

3) Calming Counts

1. Close your eyes and take a long, deep breath. Exhale slowly while saying the word “relax” silently.
2. Take ten natural, easy breaths. Count down with each exhale, starting with “10.”
3. While you are breathing comfortably, notice any tensions, perhaps in your jaw or forehead or stomach. Imagine those tensions loosening.
4. When you reach “one,” open your eyes again.

USES: Any time that you want to encourage your body’s calming response, to interrupt negative thoughts, to quiet the mind during meditation or relaxation, or during panic or panic-provoking times.

4) Brief Muscle Relaxation

1. Close your eyes and sit quietly, letting go of any distracting thoughts (20 seconds).
2. Bend your arms, then cross them in front of your chest. Tighten your fists, arms, shoulders, chest and back, and lift your shoulders up to your ears while you’re breathing (10 seconds). Now relax (15-20 seconds).
3. Crunch your face up, wrinkle your nose, squint your eyes, purse your lips and bite down on your teeth (10 seconds). Now relax (15-20 seconds).
4. Take a deep breath, pull in your stomach and tense your lower back. Hold your breath while counting to “six.” Then exhale SLOWLY. Now relax (15-20 seconds).
5. Extend your legs and tense them, while pointing your toes toward your head (10 seconds). Now relax (15-20 seconds).
6. Repeat Steps 2-5.
7. Sit quietly, clearing your mind and focusing on your gentle breathing or on a pleasant scene in your mind as you invite your body to feel relaxed, warm and heavy (1 minute).
8. Open your eyes, feeling refreshed and at ease.

USES: Anytime you want to release muscle tensions and quiet your mind.

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5) Write Down Your Worries

1. When your mind begins to focus on your noisy worries, decide to either let them go or to write them down.
2. If you choose to continue your worries, then take out your pen and pad. Write down every single repetition of every single worried thought until you decide to let go of those thoughts.

USES: To interrupt recurring negative thoughts and worries.

6) Shift Your Negative Thoughts

1. Listen for your worried, self-critical, or hopeless thoughts.
2. Decide that you want to stop them. "Are these thoughts helping me?"
3. Reinforce your decision through supportive comments. "I can let go of these thoughts."
4. Mentally yell, "Shift!" It may help you to actually move to a new position, room, etc.
5. Begin Calming Counts.

USES: To interrupt recurring negative thoughts and worries.

7) Postpone Your Worries

1. Mentally agree to pay attention to your worries.
2. Choose a specific time in the future when you will return to them.
3. As that time arrives, either start worrying or consider postponing the worries to another specified time. Whenever possible, choose to postpone.

USES: To interrupt recurring negative thoughts and worries.

8) Sing Your Worries

1. When your mind begins to focus on your noisy worries, decide to either let them go or to sing them.
2. If you choose to continue your worries, then pick up a short phrase or several themes that summarize your worries.
3. Ignore the meaning of the words. Begin to repeat the words within some simple tune. Continue for several minutes until you are less emotionally involved with the thoughts.

USES: To interrupt recurring negative thoughts and worries.

9) Create a Worry Time

1. Set aside two daily worry times of 10 minutes each.
2. Spend this entire time thinking only about your worries regarding one issue. You can sub-vocalize, speak into a recorder, or talk to a "coach."
3. Do not think about any positive alternatives, only the negative ones. And do not convince yourself that your worries are irrational.
4. Attempt to become as anxious as possible while worrying.
5. Continue to the end of each worry period, even if you run out of ideas and have to repeat the same worries over again.
6. At the end of 10 minutes, let go of those worries with some Calming Breaths. Then return to other activities.

USES: To interrupt recurring negative thoughts and worries.

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10) The Ten-Second Grip

1. Cross your arms in front of you, or grab and squeeze the arm rests of your chair, tensing your upper and lower arms. Tense your stomach and leg muscles as well. Hold that position about 10 seconds while you continue to breathe.
2. Let go and take a Calming Breath.
3. Repeat that two more times.
4. Then shift around in your seat, shaking loose your arms, shoulders and legs and gently rolling your head a few times.
5. Close your eyes and breathe gently for about 30 seconds. Let your body feel warm, relaxed and heavy during that time.

USES: Anytime you want to release muscle tensions and quiet your mind.

11) Try to Increase Your Symptoms

1. Take a Calming Breath, and then begin Natural Breathing. Don't fight your physical symptoms and don't run away. Decide if you want to use paradox.
2. Observe your most uncomfortable physical symptom at this moment. Say to yourself, "I want to take voluntary control of these symptoms. I'm going to try to increase my (name of the predominant symptom)."
3. Consciously attempt to increase that symptom.
4. Now attempt to increase all the other symptoms you notice. Examples: try to perspire more, become even more dizzy, make your legs feel like jelly, right now.
5. Continue natural breathing, while you consciously and fully attempt to increase all your symptoms of panic. Do not get trapped in worried, critical, or hopeless comments, such as, "This better start working soon! I certainly must be doing this wrong. It'll never work."

USES: During panic.

12) Find Something Neutral/Pleasant To Do

POSSIBLE ACTIONS (use as examples to create your own):

- Begin gently concentrating on some simple repetitive task. Don't bother trying to do the task well. Instead concentrate on doing it slowly. At work, for instance, open your file drawer and begin slowly counting the file folders. Or take out a piece of paper and write a few simple lists of any kind, slowly. Simultaneously, maintain slow, gentle breaths. If you are operating machinery, apply your breathing and counting to some basic rhythm in your work.
- If you are walking down the street, begin slowly looking around while you continue to walk or as you stop and lean against a wall. Give yourself a minute or two of easy Observing, such as deciding what color is predominant in the clothing of the people on that street, or any other simple task. At the same time, maintain slow, gentle breaths. Or, pace your walking with your breathing: two steps while inhaling, three steps while exhaling, or any other easy rhythm.
- Take out your wallet or purse and reorganize your pictures and cards. Or, pull out all your dollar bills and order them by serial numbers. Simultaneously, maintain slow, gentle breaths.
- If you are at home, peel an apple or orange slowly and with concentration. Watch the light mist spray out each time you pull off a wedge of orange. Count each piece as it breaks off. Or, reorganize the books on one shelf. Or, make up a bed "army style," with attention to detail. Simultaneously, maintain slow, gentle breaths.
- If you are at an event or a concert, begin studying the program in detail. Simultaneously, maintain slow, gentle breaths.
- If you can concentrate, read a book or magazine or start a conversation.
- Take a walk.

USES: Anytime you are feeling anxious or panicky.

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13) Supportive Comments

- When your mind begins to focus on your worries, use the following statements to coach yourself through the moment.
- “It’s OK to take a chance here – this is a place to practice my skills.”
- “I can be a little anxious and still perform my task.”
- “I don’t have to let these feelings stop me.”
- “I can handle these symptoms.”
- “This will pass.”
- “I am free to come and go according to my comfort.”
- “I always have options, no matter what.”
- “This is not an emergency; I can think about what I need.”
- “Anxiety is uncomfortable, but it won’t hurt me.”
- “I can slow down and think.”

USES: Prior to and during any Task practice or whenever you are feeling anxious or panicky.

14) Focus on Pictures/Video while Taking Deep Breaths

- Assemble some of your favorite pictures (in an album, on your smartphone, etc.) and slowly look at them while taking regular, deep breaths for 10 minutes. When your mind wanders, gently bring your focus back to the pictures and the colors and sights you are observing.
- Find a video online (e.g., YouTube) of beautiful scenery and watch it while taking regular, deep breaths for 10 minutes. When your mind wanders, gently bring your focus back to the video and the sights and sounds you are observing.

ADAPTED FROM:

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

Wilson, Reid. *The Don't Panic Self-Help Kit*. Chapel Hill: Pathway Systems, 1996.

More Info at: www.anxieties.com

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