

Adult Mental Health Services
Stabilisation Workbook 5

Breathing and relaxation: Learning to calm my body





Introduction

What is the function of breathing?

Breathing is vital for life. Inhaling air supplies our body with oxygen, and allows our organs, muscles and tissues to function. Exhaling rids our body of waste products and toxins. Breathing happens automatically – the average person will take 17,000 to 23,000 breaths every day.

Breathing and feelings

Breathing is very much linked to how we are feeling. When we feel scared, anxious or emotionally overwhelmed our breathing rate becomes faster. In contrast, when we are feeling relaxed and calm our breathing is slower and deeper.

When we feel under threat, our body has been designed to respond quickly and effectively to manage this. An increase in our rate of breathing in response to the perception of threat means that more oxygen is getting to our organs and muscles to allow us to face that threat – either to fight or run away. This is known as the **fight-flight response**. Other physiological (bodily) changes associated with the fight-flight response include increased heart rate, shakiness, nausea or loss of appetite, and muscle tension.

Activation of the fight-flight response is helpful if our emotional distress is being triggered by a very real and current threat – e.g. a burglar has broken into our house. However, often emotional distress is not triggered by current threat but by events from the past (e.g. frightening memories coming into our minds) or worries and concerns about the future. In these circumstances, it is unhelpful for the fight-flight response to be activated, and an increase in our breathing will lead us to feel more emotionally overwhelmed and find it harder to think – and as a result our actions may become more impulsive and less helpful.

By learning exercises and techniques to slow down our breathing, we can counteract the fight-flight response, and communicate to our body that we are not under threat. This will enable our body to relax, our emotions to calm and our thinking to become clearer.

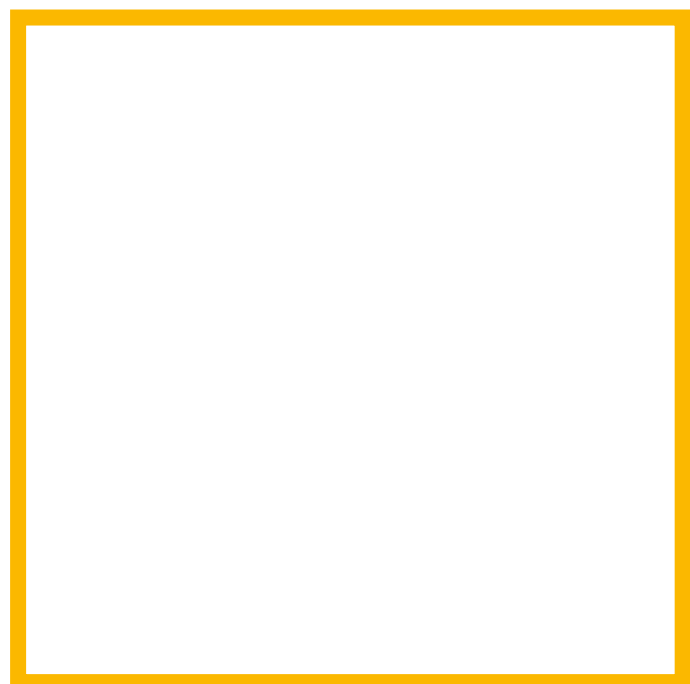


Square breathing exercise

This is a simple breathing exercise, which uses the visualisation of a square to support the slowing down of our breathing rate.

You can use the outline of a real square to support you with this exercise, e.g. using the square picture below, the outline of a picture frame on the wall or a square tile on the floor. Any object that is square shaped will work. Alternatively, you can close your eyes and visualise a square in your mind.

- 1.** Focus on the square. Start at the bottom left hand corner of the square, and visualise breathing in through your nose up the left hand side of the square for 1-2-3 seconds.
- 2.** By now your attention should have reached the top left hand corner of the square. Hold your breath for 1-2-3 seconds as you move your attention along the top of the square, from left to right.
- 3.** Next move your attention from top to bottom of the right hand side of the square, as you breathe slowly out through your mouth for 1-2-3 seconds.
- 4.** You should now have reached the bottom right hand corner of the square. Hold your breath again for 1-2-3 seconds, this time moving your attention from the bottom right hand corner across to the bottom left hand corner of the square.
- 5.** You should now be back to point of the square where you began this exercise.
- 6.** Repeat as necessary until you feel calmer and more relaxed in your body.



Progressive muscle relaxation exercise

Get into a comfortable position. Your entire body, including your head, should be supported. Sitting up is better than lying down if you are feeling tired and sleepy, because you need to stay awake for this exercise. If you feel comfortable to do so close your eyes. If you would prefer to keep your eyes open, focus your gaze on a fixed point in the room, to prevent you from becoming distracted.

Give yourself permission to put aside the concerns of the day. And don't worry about how well you are performing the technique – there is no right way to do it. Concentrate only on your muscles.

When you are ready:

- 1.** Start at the bottom of your body with your feet. Tense and squeeze all of the muscles in your feet and hold for about 10 seconds. Then very gradually and very slowly, on your out breath, release and relax all of the muscles in your feet, feeling them go floppy and heavy, as you release the stress and tension from this part of your body.
- 2.** Take a moment to relax and move your attention to your breath, slowly breathing in and out for 15 to 20 seconds. Notice how the muscles in your feet feel now they are relaxed compared to when they were tensed.
- 3.** Repeat the above two steps, and gradually work up your body, moving from your feet to your calves, then thighs, your bottom, then belly and chest area, your hands, then arms, neck and shoulders, and finally your face. Tense and release each body part in turn, remembering to pause and bring your attention back to the breath for a moment before moving up to the next part of the body.
- 4.** It can be helpful to try and get an image in your head of the muscles tightening and relaxing as you are moving through this exercise.
- 5.** Once you have moved all the way up your body, tensing and then releasing your muscles, and your body is feeling relaxed and calm, bring your attention back to your breathing one final time. Focus on the in and then the out breath, calmly moving through your body.
- 6.** When you are ready, open your eyes, and bring yourself back into the room and the present. Take a moment to look around the room and re-orient yourself to your surroundings. Remember to stay connected to the feeling of inner calmness and relaxation in your body.

Balloon breathing exercise

This breathing exercise uses the visualisation of a balloon, to support slower, calmer and deeper breathing.

Before starting the exercise, find a comfortable position. Seated may be easier but if that's not possible, standing is also fine. Place both hands on your belly and close your eyes. Imagine that there is a balloon sitting in your belly, directly beneath your hands. Take a moment to visualise the balloon and imagine what it looks like.

Now that you have visualised your balloon, imagine trying to inflate it with your breathing. Slowly breathing in through the nose for 1-2-3 seconds, holding the breath for 1-2-3 seconds, and then slowly breathing back out through the mouth for 1-2-3-4 seconds.

With every breath in, imagine you are inflating the balloon as big as it will go in your belly. But you must be careful, as the balloon is delicate, and you don't want it to pop. You must breathe slowly and evenly, to get as much air into the balloon without damaging it.

With every out breath, imagine that you are deflating the balloon, and trying to get as much air back out of the balloon as possible. Again, breathe out slowly and gently, so as not to damage or pop the balloon. Keep your hands on your belly as you are visualising gently inflating and deflating the balloon, and feel the air coming in and out of your belly as you breathe.

Keep going until you are feeling calm and relaxed in your body.



Five finger breathing exercise

This is a simple breathing exercise, which requires you to trace the outline of your fingers whilst breathing in and out, to instill a sense of calmness and relaxation in the body and mind.

1. Stretch one hand out so that you have space between your fingers.
2. Hold up your pointer from the other hand.
3. Start at the bottom of your thumb. Use your pointer finger to trace up your thumb as you slowly breathe in through your mouth.
4. When you get to the top of your thumb slowly breathe out through your nose as you trace down the other side.
5. Repeat for all fingers until you have traced your whole hand.
6. Pay attention to the sensations in your hand as you trace around your fingers.
7. Pay attention to the feelings in your body as you slowly and calmly breathe in and out.
8. Once you have traced your whole hand, take a moment to pause and check in on how you are feeling now.
9. Repeat as necessary.



Useful links and resources

Mind relaxation

Information, tips and exercises.

www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/relaxation/#.XRy13cuWzcs

CNWL Recovery College

Check out our Recovery College timetable for upcoming workshops.

www.cnwl.nhs.uk/patients-and-carers/recovery-and-wellbeing-college

NHS

Breathing exercises for stress.

www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/ways-relieve-stress

Progressive muscle relaxation

The following website contains a range of audio tracks, which guide the listener through progressive muscle relaxation techniques. This involves tensing and relaxing each body part in turn, to relieve the physical aches and pains that can often accompany feelings of stress and anxiety.

wellbeing-glasgow.org.uk/audio-resources





