Breathing
Retraining

Everyone knows that breathing is an essential part of life, but did you know that breathing plays an essential role in anxiety? This information sheet will briefly discuss the role of breathing in anxiety and guide you through a simple breathing retraining technique that uses breathing patterns to help deal with anxiety.

Breathing is a powerful determinant of physical state. When our breathing rate becomes elevated, a number of physiological changes begin to occur. Perhaps you've noticed this yourself when you've had a fright; you might suddenly gasp, feel a little breathless and a little light-headed, as well as feeling some tingling sensations around your body. Believe it or not, the way we breathe is a major factor in producing these and other sensations that are noticeable when we are anxious.

Anxious breathing

You probably already know that we breathe in to obtain oxygen and we breathe out to expel carbon dioxide. The body naturally maintains optimal levels of oxygen and carbon dioxide, and this balance is in part maintained through how fast and how deeply we breathe. When we exercise, for example, we breathe faster and more deeply in order to replace the oxygen being used and expel the extra carbon dioxide produced by metabolic changes.

Anxiety causes an increase in our breathing rate, as part of the physical fight or flight response to a perceived threat. However, when our breathing rate increases without any physical exertion, we breathe out too much carbon dioxide. If the body cannot quickly return carbon dioxide levels to the optimal range, we experience further symptoms such as dizziness, light-headedness, headache, weakness and tingling in the extremities and muscle stiffness.

The normal rate of breathing is 10-14 breaths per minute – what's your breathing rate?

Breathing Retraining

While temporary overbreathing and hyperventilation are not specifically dangerous (it's even used in medical testing!), continued overbreathing can leave you feeling exhausted or "on edge" so that you're more likely to respond to stressful situations with intense anxiety and panic.

Gaining control over your breathing involves both slowing your rate of breathing and changing your breathing style. Use the following steps to be well on your way to developing a better breathing habit.

1   Ensure that you are sitting on a comfortable chair or laying on a bed
2   Take a breath in for 4 seconds (through the nose if possible
3   Hold the breath for 2 seconds
4   Release the breath taking 6 seconds (through the nose if possible)., then pause slightly before breathing in again.
5   Practise, practise, practise!

Breathing tips

- When you first begin changing your breathing, it may be difficult to slow your breathing down to this rate. You may wish to try using a 3-in, 1-hold, 4-out breathing rate to start off with.

- When you are doing your breathing exercises, make sure that you are using a stomach breathing style rather than a chest breathing style. You can check this by placing one hand on your stomach and one hand on your chest. The hand on your stomach should rise when you breathe in.

- Try to practise at least once or twice a day at a time when you can relax, relatively free from distraction. This will help to develop a more relaxed breathing habit. The key to progress really is practise, so try to set aside some time each day.

By using breathing retraining you can slow your breathing down and reduce your general level anxiety. With enough practice, it can even help to better cope with anxiety when you are in an anxious situation.

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