

Controlled breathing technique

Practice it when you are relaxed so that you can do it whenever you need to.

1. Sit upright, if possible

Sitting upright is usually better than lying down, or 'slouching', as it can increase the capacity of your lungs to fill with air.

2. Control the rate of your breathing

If possible, breath in through your nose and out through your mouth in a steady rhythm. Try to make your breath out twice as long as your breath in. This helps to empty your lungs of old air, and to make as much room in your lungs for fresh oxygen-rich air. To do this you may find it helpful to count "one" as you breath in, and "two, three" as you breathe out.

3. If possible, mainly use your diaphragm (lower chest muscle) to breathe

Your diaphragm is the big muscle under the lungs. It pulls the lungs downwards which expands the airways to allow air to flow in. When we become breathless we tend to forget to use this muscle, and often use the muscles at the top of the chest and our shoulders instead. Each breath is more shallow if you use these upper chest muscles. So, you tend to breathe faster and feel more breathless if you use your upper chest muscles rather than your diaphragm.

You can check if you are using your diaphragm by feeling just below your breastbone (sternum) at the top of your abdomen. If you give a little cough, you can feel the diaphragm push out here. If you hold your hand here you should feel it move in and out as you breathe.

4. Try to relax your shoulders and upper chest muscles when you breathe

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. Gentle massage of your shoulders by a friend or relative may help you to relax. They can stand behind your chair and gently rub your shoulders and encourage you to relax.

5. Try to relax your mind too

Anxiety can make breathing problems worse. So, if possible, try to distract your mind when you are short of breath. For example, shut your eyes and try to concentrate on pleasant, peaceful thoughts. Some people find it easier to distract their mind by watching TV, or listening to music. If persistent anxiety is a problem which you think is making your breathing worse, then see your doctor. He or she may be able to advise on relaxation exercises or other treatments for anxiety.