

The effect of breathing on emotions

Gaining control of breathing

After a disaster, people tend to feel more tense and anxious than they did before. There is a close link between these feelings and the way we breathe. For example, when we are upset or tense, our breathing becomes more rapid and shallow.

When you take in a breath of air, oxygen is taken into the lungs and into the blood. When you breathe out, carbon dioxide is exhaled. Our bodies need the right balance of oxygen and carbon dioxide to function properly.

By controlling our breathing, we can effectively deal with tension and strong emotions as they arise. Controlled breathing helps to reduce distressing emotions by restoring the balance of carbon dioxide and oxygen in our bodies, which in turn reduces the physical stress in the body.

Fast/tense breathing

When we are stressed or tense we tend to breathe faster than usual. When we breathe too fast we take in more oxygen than the body needs and breathe out too much carbon dioxide. This means the concentration of carbon dioxide in the blood goes down which can make you feel light-headed, sweaty, tense, more anxious and even panicky.

Controlled breathing

During controlled breathing we inhale just the right amount of oxygen for our body's needs and the body is able to produce the right amount of carbon dioxide. This means there is a balance between carbon dioxide and oxygen in the blood, which can help you to feel more calm and relaxed. By relaxing our breathing, we can relax tension in our bodies, which in turn helps to improve our mood.

Controlled breathing exercise

With practice, breathing exercises can help you to quickly achieve a state of relaxation.

Before you practise controlled breathing, write down your subjective units of distress scale (SUDS), then practise the exercise for two minutes.

Completely relaxed										Completely stressed out
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Controlled breathing

1. Sit comfortably in a chair with your feet on the floor.
2. Take a normal breath (not too deep) through the nose for four seconds.
3. Pause for two seconds.
4. Breathe out slowly for the count of six seconds. Pause.
5. Continue to breathe slowly, inhaling for 4 seconds and then exhaling for 6 seconds.

This breathing exercise is particularly useful for helping you to feel calm and relaxed. By directing your focus onto your breathing, you will be able to notice how tension in your body is affecting your breathing. You will also experience the influence of the body on the mind: as your body relaxes, your thoughts will slow down. This breathing technique is a good way to relax and manage your emotions.

After you are finished, record your SUDS rating again.

Completely relaxed										Completely stressed out
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Notice if your SUDS have changed and also pay attention to any physical changes that occurred in your body.

Practise regularly

Remember that successfully controlling your breathing takes practice. By practising this exercise regularly, you will be able to calm your breathing more easily when you need to. Find a quiet and relaxing place at home to practise – choose a comfortable chair in a place that is free from noise and interruptions. You may need to explain to your family what you are doing so that they will not disturb you.

Try your breathing exercise for at least 5 minutes. At first, practise controlled breathing when you're not feeling stressed. As you become more comfortable with controlled breathing, you'll be able to use this technique at times when you are feeling upset or distressed.