



Your guide to...

Relaxation & breathing techniques

Supporting wellbeing and health management



How to use this guide:

This guide forms part of a series. Each guide provides information, tips and strategies for coping with physical health symptoms that are impacting on daily life. Physical health symptoms can be personally challenging on both a practical and emotional level; with this in mind, these guides have been edited and co-developed by specialists from both physical and mental healthcare teams, with guidance from experts with lived experiences.

All information in these guides are intended to advise and benefit the individuals who intend to use them. The information described can be used as a supplement but does not replace any advice provided by your healthcare specialist(s). The authors do not accept responsibility for use of the information contained in the guides for any other purpose than has been described. If you are concerned about your physical health symptoms or condition(s) then you should seek qualified medical advice from your GP or your healthcare specialist(s).

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Part 1: Relaxation techniques

What is relaxation?

Deep relaxation is letting go of tension in body and mind. Being relaxed produces the opposite effect on the body to a fight or flight response. In other words, when we are relaxed our breathing and heart rate slows down, our muscles relax and we feel calmer and more in control.



Being tense is harder work for muscles compared to being relaxed and requires more oxygen which can increase demands on breathing. Even when sitting in a chair not moving, tense shoulder and neck muscles are working hard and can increase demands on breathing and increase pain.

Relaxation is a skill that takes practice for it to become a natural response. It may be that you have developed a habit of tensing up in certain situations such as if you are expecting your breathing to be worse. It is important to practice relaxation to help with these times to reduce tension and adrenaline.

Part of being relaxed is looking and acting relaxed. It is much easier to deal with other people if you are more relaxed and they will also react to you better. There are various ways to relax the body such as doing deep muscle relaxation and diaphragmatic breathing. In the same way we need to relax the mind. This is important because if we try and relax physically and our mind is not relaxing as well, then worries or even everyday thoughts, will undo any relaxation. Relaxing the mind will help reduce worries associated with breathlessness, fatigue and other symptoms.

Relaxation practices

The relaxation instructions throughout this guide talk you through how to relax by giving you simple relaxation techniques. You will need to be in a quiet, warm room where you are unlikely to be disturbed to practice relaxation.

Selecting a practice to follow and do this twice a day will give optimum benefit

The practices can last between 15 and 30 minutes. It is okay if you prefer just one of the relaxation practices from the instructions. The important thing is to get the relaxation effect from whichever method helps you the most! Try not to completely fall asleep during the practices as you will miss the benefits of the whole practice and lose the learning.

Getting into a comfortable position

It is important to find a position in which you feel as little tension as possible for relaxation. The following points may help you find a position which suits you. You can do relaxation in either position so decide which is most comfortable for you.



Lying Down

Do not lie on anything too squashy, otherwise you may be tensing muscles you don't mean to.

Make a slope with 3 or 4 pillows so you are raised up.

Support your neck and knees for greater comfort.

If lying on your side, lie with the whole of your side supported.

If lying on your back have your arms by your side and let your palms roll gently outwards with your elbows out and fingers apart.

Sitting

Any comfortable, supportive armchair can be used when relaxing

Make sure your head and neck are well supported.

Have your legs and arms uncrossed.

Place your feet flat on the floor.

Let your arms and shoulders relax and drop down.

Top tips for becoming more relaxed

- **Think about relaxation.** For example, when having a cup of tea, waiting in traffic or queuing in a shop.
- **Use the natural routines of the day** to keep a routine of simple relaxation going. Doing things like diaphragmatic breathing every time you do certain things, e.g. every time you sit down or make a cup of tea.
- **PACE** yourself and take rest breaks.
- If your **mind is full of worries and problems** that are stopping your mind from concentrating, or you are finding it difficult to let go of tension, you may want to speak to a friend or relative or ask your GP for help.
- If your feelings are getting on top of you, **STOP** and **RELAX**. It may help to **unload worries by writing them down, challenging thoughts or talking to someone who will listen.**
- Everybody should allow themselves the opportunity to **use and enjoy relaxation.**
- Remember that **preventing an adrenaline response** (which can lead to panic/ anxiety) is the most important; it is much harder to deal with once anxiety has reached a peak.
- **Relaxation is a skill.** Practice as with any other skill, improves your ability to use it.

Time to begin!

Deep muscle relaxation

Most people are not aware of tension in their muscles, particularly the shoulders and neck muscles. Deep muscle relaxation will help you become more aware of tensed muscles and will help you to relax them. This is done by getting you to tense and relax different muscles of the body. Take a deep breath out as you relax each muscle. Try and focus on doing lower chest (diaphragmatic) breathing (see page 11) during this practice.

This deep muscle relaxation practice lasts approximately 20 minutes and can be done seated or lying down. Below is an example of how to tense and relax the different muscles of the body.

If you choose to practice deep muscle relaxation then you may find it helpful to combine this with breathing control exercises like lower chest (diaphragmatic) breathing. Remember to select a practice to do twice a day.

Muscle	Instruction
Hands and forearms	Make a fist...and let go
Arms - biceps	Bend your arms at the elbows...and let go
Arms - triceps	Straighten your arms as hard as you can...and let go
Shoulders	Shrug your shoulders up as if trying to make them touch your ears...and let go
Neck	Arch your neck back...and let go
Forehead	Raise your eyebrows...and let go
Brows and eyelids	Squeeze your eyes tightly shut...and let go
Jaw	Clench your teeth together...and let go
Tongue and throat	Push your tongue hard against the roof of your mouth...and let go
Hips and lower back	Arch your back and clench your buttocks...and let go
Stomach	Tense your stomach...and let go
Legs	Straighten out your legs and point your toes...and let go

Simple body focused relaxation – a slow countdown

This is a simple relaxation practice that brings your awareness to different parts of your body by counting down from 10 to 1. By each count backwards, the aim is to notice becoming more and more relaxed so that by the time it gets to 1 you feel completely relaxed. The practice then takes you back up to 10 to help you feel alert and refreshed.

Remember to combine this with practising breathing control as well. Don't forget to select a practice to do twice a day.

Below is an example of a countdown.

Stepping down....

From 10 to 9: Allow your head to sink back comfortably in the chair.

From 9 to 8: Allow any tightness in your eyes, forehead, across your face, round your mouth, chin and jaw to just soothe away.

From 8 to 7: Feel any tension in the back of your neck release.

From 7 to 6: Let your shoulders drop back and down as you feel the tension flow away.

From 6 to 5: Allow your arms to sink heavily against the chair, letting go of tension all the way to your fingertips.

From 5 to 4: Allow your back to be supported by the chair and imagine the tension releasing.

From 4 to 3: Let your legs sink heavily against the chair, letting go of tension all the way to the tips of your toes.

From 3 to 2 and from 2 to 1: Let your whole body feel more and more relaxed, comfortable and calm. Enjoy the feeling of complete relaxation for a few moments.

Stepping up:

Focus on working up the body from **1 to 10**, releasing tension and heaviness and finishing with a sense of peace and tranquillity.

Autogenic relaxation

Physiological experiments have shown that we can learn to influence body systems that are normally controlled automatically, simply by concentrating on them.

Autogenic relaxation involves using the mind to influence the body. It does this by concentrating on two things we experience when relaxing - **warmth** as more blood gets to the extremities such as the arms, legs, hands and feet and **heaviness** as the muscles feel more relaxed.

Remember to combine this with practising breathing control as well. Don't forget to select a practice to do twice a day.

Take some time to enjoy the sensations of relaxation.

PHRASES TO FOCUS RELAXATION

Say these phrases to yourself 3 times. Pause and take a deep breath after each repetition.

"I am at peace with myself and fully relaxed"

"I feel calm and relaxed"

"My right arm is heavy"

"My left arm is heavy"

"My right leg is heavy"

"My left leg is heavy"

"My neck and shoulders are heavy"

"My right arm is warm"

"My left arm is warm"

"My neck and shoulders are warm"

"My heartbeat is calm"

"My stomach is warm and calm"

"My forehead is cool and calm"

Relaxing the mind

What we are thinking plays an important part in anxiety and equally in relaxation. As well as relaxing the body using practices like deep muscle relaxation, it is also important to relax the mind. If the mind is not relaxing, then worries or every day thoughts may undo any relaxation.

Relaxing the mind involves using your imagination to induce the relaxation response. It can reduce physical discomfort, tension, pain and feelings of breathlessness. It can also make you feel calmer and in control. Here are some ways of relaxing the mind...

Remember to combine relaxing the mind with practising breathing control as well. Don't forget to select a practice to do twice a day.

Relaxing the mind – techniques

1. *Another place, another time*

When you are physically comfortable, imagine an experience or place that has made you feel relaxed and happy in the past.



Your favourite place in the countryside

A holiday lying on the beach in the sun

Sitting by a stream or river just listening to the sound of water

A comfortable chair looking out on a favourite view

Lying in front of an open log fire

Whatever you choose, recall memories from all your senses.

Look at the colours, experience the feeling on your face and body – warmth? Breeze?
Spray? Notice the sounds and the smells

2. A slow count down

Count down slowly from 200 to 1 to focus your mind. You could also imagine yourself on a slowly moving escalator taking you gently into deep relaxation. Perhaps at the end you will arrive at the peaceful place you have remembered in your head.

200...199...198...197

3. Bubbles

Imagine your worries as bubbles in a glass of fizzy water. Let yourself relax as you see the bubbles rise to the surface and burst.



Continue practicing relaxation regularly (whichever practices you prefer) to help you manage your health and wellbeing.

You may notice feeling more refreshed, relaxed and alert as a result of your practices.

Part 2: Breathing techniques

Lower chest or diaphragmatic breathing

There are a number of breathing methods that can be used to help manage the breathlessness, discomfort and tension that can come when you have a health problem.

When you get short of breath, you may find you automatically use your shoulders, neck and upper chest muscles. Using these muscles is not helpful and can make breathing feel worse. This is why...



The shoulders, neck and upper chest muscles are not designed to work for long periods of time and get tired easily. Overworking these muscles requires more oxygen which can make people feel more out of breath and lead to tense muscles.

It is also natural to breathe faster when short of breath; however this can also make breathlessness feel worse. This is because it takes more effort to breathe air in quickly. It also means the air does not get deep enough to make the most of each breath as it does not reach the alveoli (air sacs) of the lungs.

Lower chest or diaphragmatic breathing...

is breathing slowly and deeply using the lower chest or diaphragm.
This is the most effective way to breathe.

It can also help us feel calmer and relaxed.

We naturally breathe this way as babies, but with the stresses and strains of modern life, we often get into a bad habit of breathing more from the upper chest.

How to do lower chest or diaphragmatic breathing



Reproduced with permission from The
Institute of Cancer Research (2000)

Sit in a comfortable chair and make sure you are in a comfortable position, with your feet on the floor. Place one hand on your upper chest and the other hand on your stomach. Carry on breathing as normal.

Which hand do you notice moves the most?

Most people at this point people say they notice their top hand moving the most. This means they are breathing from their upper chest, which is less effective. The aim is to feel the hand on the stomach moving, whilst the upper chest and shoulders remain still.

Try this...

Relax your shoulders down. As you breathe in, feel your stomach go out (like a balloon inflating) as you are drawing the air down into your stomach. As you breathe out, feel your stomach go in again (like a balloon deflating).

As you breathe in count 1 and 2 and as you breathe out count 1 and 2 and 3. Focus on the out breath being longer. Say to yourself "*I am relaxed*", "*I am calm*". As you breathe out use pursed lips (like breathing through a straw).

Try breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth (nose breathing moistens the air and acts as a filter before the air reaches the lungs).

With each out breath, look out for any change in the tension in your body. You might notice your arms and legs feeling more relaxed, or any tightness in your chest easing, or a feeling of calm in your body. Keep practising this technique at different times during the day, both when feeling short of breath and when feeling relaxed. See here for a diaphragmatic breathing exercise practice:

<https://youtu.be/F0jvwQ9vURg>

Before reading on, try this way of breathing for 5-10 breaths at a time.

Helpful positions to get into when short of breath

Have you found that when you are breathless, there are certain positions that you automatically adopt to help ease your breathing?

If you get breathless, there are several positions that can help you get control of your breathing with minimum effort. These are often referred to as positions of ease and allow your diaphragm muscle to work more effectively allowing you to use your breathing control to reduce your breathlessness.

Next time you get breathless try the following positions. Everyone will find different positions helpful so use the one that gives you the most benefit.

High Lying

If you are lying down, make a slope with 3 or 4 pillows, placing an extra pillow to fill the gap between your armpit and your waist. Lie high up on the pillows with the whole of your side supported.



Forward Lean Sitting

Pile a number of pillows on a table and sit leaning forward with your upper chest and head supported on the pillows. Lean forward from your hips and relax onto the pillows **OR** Sit leaning forward from the hips, forearms resting on your thighs with wrists relaxed.



Forward Lean Standing

Stand leaning forward from the hips and support your forearms on a structure of suitable height e.g. a window-sill.



Relaxed Standing

Lean back against a wall with your feet placed a little way from the wall and your arms and shoulders relaxed. Your arms can hang loosely by your side.

Pacing Yourself

Some of your normal daily activities such as walking, stairs, getting dressed and hanging laundry out may now present themselves as a struggle and cause breathlessness.

Combine breathing control and positions of ease when you are feeling breathless. If you are carrying out a task such as making a bed, simply stop and adopt a position of ease. Continue the task when your breathing has returned to normal. Never rush to complete a task as this will make the breathlessness worse. Should you become breathless while walking upstairs or a hill, try to breathe rhythmically in time with your steps.

Things to think about...

Can you relax your shoulders a bit more? *Let them slump down*

Is your breathing fast and shallow or slower and calm? *Relax your breathing and focus on the out breath being longer*

Active cycle of breathing: clearing phlegm off the chest

What is the active cycle of breathing technique (ACBT)?



This is a simple pattern of breathing that can be used by people who have problems with sputum, also known as mucus, that is coughed up. This breathing pattern is designed to **loosen secretions and improve ventilation**.

It can be performed in any position including sitting, lying or postural drainage positions.

There are 4 components to ACBT:

- 1. Breathing control (diaphragmatic breathing)** – This is normal gentle breathing using the lower chest, with relaxation of the upper chest and shoulders. It helps you to relax between deep breathing and huffing.
- 2. Deep breathing (thoracic expansion exercises)** – These assist in getting air to the bottom of your lungs and moving secretions.
- 3. Huff (forced expiratory technique)** - This will move secretions along the airways to a point where you can cough them up. Huffing is a less tiring way of clearing your secretions than coughing.
- 4. Cough**

Why use the active cycle of breathing?

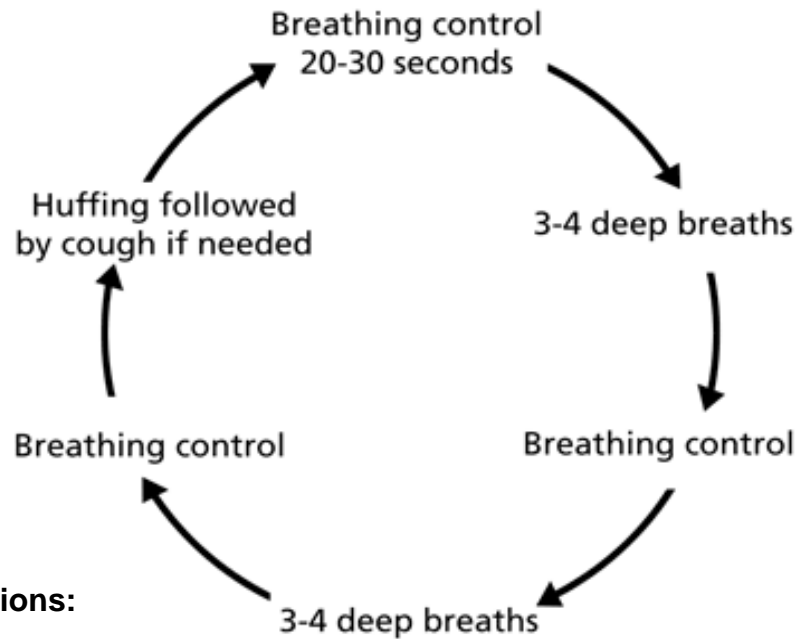
Continual coughing alone can be very tiring and ineffective. Active cycle of breathing uses an alternating depth of breathing to move phlegm from the small airways at the bottom of your lungs to larger airways near the top where they can be cleared more easily with huffing/coughing.

How often should I do this?

Three deep breaths every half hour is a good way to check for secretions and improve ventilation. If you have an infection you will need to do the cycle several times a day to clear the secretions.

How to do the active cycle of breathing technique

This is a typical cycle



Follow these instructions:

1. Breathing Control:

- Rest one hand on your abdomen so that you can feel it rise and fall with your breathing.
- Breathe in gently feeling your hand rise and your lower chest expand.
- Breathe out gently allowing your shoulders to relax down.
- Aim to do this for 1 minute.

2. Deep Breathing:

- Take 3 – 4 deep breaths in, allowing the lower chest to expand.
- Try to ensure neck and shoulders remain relaxed.
- Let the air out gently.

3. Huff:

- Take a medium sized breath in.
- This is followed by a fast breath out through an open mouth, using the muscles of the chest and stomach to force the breath out.

4. Cough:

- Following a huff a small cough should now be sufficient to clear any secretions.
- Try not to cough unless secretions are ready to be cleared.

The ACBT is a flexible tool. You can do more than one set of deep breaths before huffing. Remember to use breathing control in between.

Top tips for controlling breathing:

- Stop and rest
- Get into a relaxed breathing position (see our guide on this). Relax the shoulders, unclench fists
- Use relaxed breathing and use it regularly. Blow out using pursed lips
- Learn how to relax and practice this regularly as part of your daily routine
- Distract yourself so you are not focusing on your breathing. Count backwards from 200 to 1.
- Focus on an object - describe it to yourself.
- Imagine yourself somewhere you find relaxing. Think about the scenery and the colours, smells and sounds.
- Listen to music, TV or radio.
- Plan and pace yourself so you don't take on too much or get bored

Other breathing methods that you might find helpful

There are several websites that describe techniques about how to cope with breathlessness if you have a health condition. You can access these using the links below:

Association of Chartered Physiotherapists in Respiratory Care website:

<https://www.acprc.org.uk/publications/patient-information-leaflets/>

British Lung Foundation: <https://www.blf.org.uk/support-for-you/breathlessness/how-to-manage-breathlessness>

British Heart Foundation: <https://www.bhf.org.uk/information-support/heart-matters-magazine/wellbeing/meditation-and-mindfulness>

Your COVID recovery NHS website: <https://www.yourcovidrecovery.nhs.uk/managing-the-effects/effects-on-your-body/breathlessness/>

Macmillan's managing breathlessness booklet for people with breathlessness as a result of cancer or cancer treatments: <https://www.macmillan.org.uk/cancer-information-and-support/stories-and-media/booklets/managing-breathlessness>

Diaphragmatic breathing exercise practice: <https://youtu.be/F0jvwQ9vURg>