

#### **MODULE 4: PHYSICAL SENSATIONS: What Can Help You Manage the Physical Effects of Your Anxiety?**

As well as effecting your thoughts and behaviours anxiety as I'm sure most of you are aware, can affect you physically too. Anxiety can cause you to have a tight chest, a churning stomach, irregular breathing, sweating, trembling and a racing heart.

These sensations are all part of our 'fight or flight' response and all have a function but as mentioned at the start of the pack, anxiety can feel uncomfortable or confusing when is experienced in the absence of real danger. If these feelings become very intense, with shaking, feelings of unreality and thoughts such as 'I'm going to die', 'I'm losing control', 'I'm going to have a heart attack', you may be experiencing panic attacks and therapy would be advised.

I'm going to talk about three things which can help settle your physical anxiety symptoms; these are breathing techniques, relaxation and mindfulness:

##### **a) Belly breathing.**

If we breath in the right way it is possible for us to slow down the effects of our 'fight or flight' response if we need to. When we feel we are in danger the body breathes from the chest to gasp air quickly, this helps send oxygenated blood to our muscles faster so we can fight or have more energy to run away. This is really helpful if we're under attack but not as helpful if we are sitting at home thinking about things.






If you want to settle your fight or flight response you can practice slow, deep belly breathing. This prevents you from breathing from your chest. Most of us breath from our chests when we are anxious to take in extra air.

**\*SELF HELP\*** To try belly breathing, put both fingers on your belly button, take a deep breath in until your tummy is sucked in and then slowly breath in. Then breath out through your belly, make sure your tummy has expanded like a little balloon and try to separate your fingers with the force of your tummy. Repeat 5-10 times to calm your anxious body.

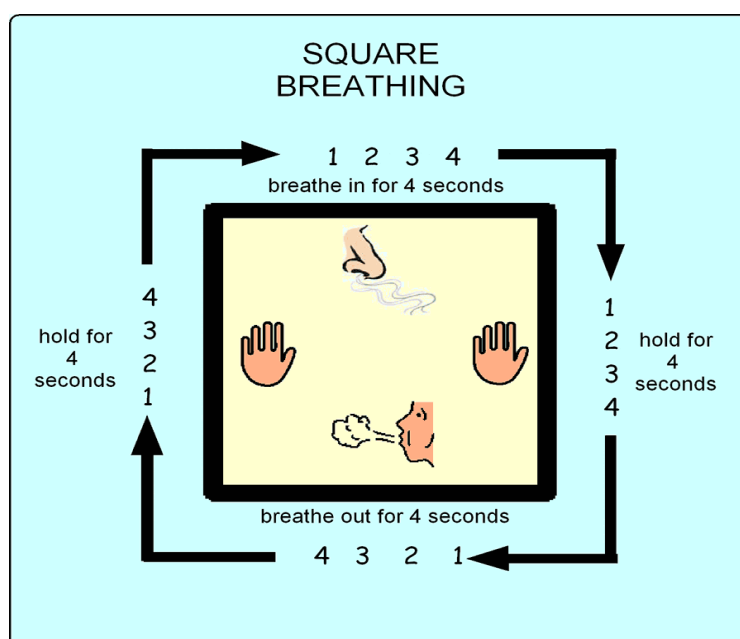
Or you can place one hand on your chest and one on your tummy if preferred:

# Belly Breathing

Diaphragmatic Breathing

<p>1. Stand, sit or lie down comfortably in a quiet place.</p>	 <p>2. Close your eyes and loosen any tense muscles. Make sure to relax your shoulders.</p>	 <p>3. Place one hand on your upper chest and another on your belly button.</p>
 <p>4. Breathe in slowly through your nose for <i>three seconds</i>. Feel your stomach expand. Your chest should remain still.</p>	 <p>5. Breathe out slowly through your mouth for <i>three seconds</i>. Feel your stomach move back.</p>	 <p>6. Repeat steps 4 and 5. Gradually increase the time you take to breathe in and out.</p> <p>Four seconds in and four seconds out, five seconds in and five seconds out.....</p>

Sometimes it can help to focus your attention outwards and away from your thoughts and anxiety sensations whilst breathing. If you focus on a square object, such as a window, follow the lines of the object whilst breathing and go around the square for your in and out breaths to keep your attention away from your anxious body. This technique is called 'square breathing':



b) Relaxation

### Why is Relaxation helpful?

- When we are stressed, the muscles in our body tense up and this muscular tension causes uncomfortably bodily feelings, such as a headache, backache, tight chest and so on.
- These aches and pains of tension can cause mental worry, making us even more anxious and tense.
- People who are tense often feel more tired.
- Relaxing slows down the systems in the body that speed up when we get anxious.
- If we can learn to turn on the bodily symptoms of relaxation, we can turn off the symptoms of tension. They are two sides of the same coin: you can't experience feelings of relaxation and tension at the same time.



### Relaxation is a skill.

The ability to relax is not always something that comes naturally, it is a skill which has to be learnt like playing the piano. The more you practice the better you become at learning to relax and the calmer you feel overall. If you're feeling stressed at the moment don't try and relax in response to stress, try and practice relaxation for 15-20 minutes daily at a set time to make it a new habit.

If you practice it not only will you feel better but you will become better and recognising when your body gets tense too and you can then relax your body and remove tension by for example relaxing shoulders down if you notice that they're high and tense.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation exercises are very effective at helping your body to feel relaxed.

**\*SELF HELP\*** Here is a link to an NHS site with an audio recording of progressive relaxation, plus several other relaxation exercises such as a floating visualisation, Yoga Nidra and Mindful breathing:

<https://www.cntw.nhs.uk/resource-library/relaxation-techniques/>

A great app to use at night time to help calm the body before sleep is CALM:

<https://www.calm.com/>

c) Mindfulness

***According to Jon Kabat-Zinn, 'mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgementally'.***



Research shows that if you can practice mindfulness techniques regularly you can significantly improve your mental wellbeing. Where the COVID-19 crisis is concerned it is likely at times you are anxious and more future focused and you may be struggling to live in the present moment.

If you are feeling the physical effects of anxiety, it would help to use the same technique I suggested with your worries earlier. Be mindfully aware of their sensations, notice that they are there but don't engage with them too much and let them pass.

Some people who are highly anxious find it very difficult however to be mindfully aware of feelings and internal sensations and may find it easier to focus their attention outwards instead. There are several things you can do to try and be more externally focused but in a mindful way.

**\*SELF HELP\*** Here are some useful strategies you could try to be more mindful everyday:

- Throughout the day, take a few moments to bring your attention to your breathing for at least five full breaths.
- When you hear a phone ring, a bird sing, a train pass, laughter, use it or any other sound to remind you to come fully into the here and now. Really listen, being present and awake.
- Focus your attention to your daily activities, such as brushing your teeth, brushing your hair, washing up, putting on your shoes. Bring mindfulness to each activity
- When you eat or drink something, take a minute and breath. Bring awareness to seeing your food, smelling your food, tasting your food, chewing your food and swallowing your food.

- Be aware of any points of tightness in your body throughout the day. See if you can breathe into them, and as you exhale, let go of any excess tension. Be aware of any tension stored in your body. Is there tension in your neck, your shoulders, the jaw, your lower back?

**Another simple exercise if you need to ground yourself in the present moment is the 5-4-3-2-1 Technique:**

**\*SELF HELP\***

**5.** Acknowledge FIVE things you can SEE around you. It could be a pen, a spot on the ceiling, anything in your surroundings.

**4.** Acknowledge FOUR things you can TOUCH around you. It could be your hair, your clothing, your feet on the ground.

**3.** Acknowledge THREE things you can HEAR. This could be any external sound, the birds singing, music, peoples voices.

**2.** Acknowledge TWO things that you can SMELL. Maybe the scent of perfume, a candle, the smell of nature outside.

**1.** Acknowledge ONE thing that you can TASTE. What does your mouth taste like, can you taste the coffee, gum or sandwich from lunch?

This five-step exercise can be very helpful during periods of anxiety as it helps you to tune into your sense and grounds you in the present moment.



**d) Medication:**

If you notice that you have intense worries, frequent physical sensations of anxiety that feel overwhelming or panic attacks then it could be useful to speak to a GP about medication. Medication works to dampen down the physical effects of your anxiety and can help you to engage in therapy. Sometimes if your anxiety levels are too high it is too difficult to challenge thoughts and make behavioural changes.

