

28 following your breath

for you to know

Breathing is a natural and effective tool for cultivating peace and decreasing anxiety within you. One way to use your breathing for this purpose is simply to be aware of it.

Our thoughts are the main cause of our anxiety. When our minds are racing from thought to thought, commitment to commitment, fear to fear, they signal our bodies to become tense. Keeping our minds focused on stressful thoughts, or just on too many thoughts at once, can keep our anxiety level high.

Focusing your thoughts on something simple and peaceful will have the opposite effect, and your breath is an ideal point of focus. Left to its natural rhythm, your breath will settle into a very peaceful cadence. It will be balanced and regular, slow and deep—much like it is when you are in a peaceful sleep.

Focusing on your breath is a simple way to bring yourself out of an anxious state and back to peace. It is a tool you always carry with you, so it can be used in any situation, at any time of night or day, wherever you are, whoever you are with, whatever you are doing. You can stop and focus on your breath when you feel yourself getting anxious because you are having an argument with your friend, having a hard time understanding a math problem, getting ready for a job interview, talking with someone you are attracted to, or at any other time.

Putting your attention on your breath for just a minute or two during a time of high anxiety can help you to lower the anxiety and bring yourself back to a peaceful state. Focusing on your breath takes your mind off anxious thoughts and causes your breath to slow and deepen, bringing more oxygen to your body and relaxing it, bringing more oxygen to your mind and clearing it.

directions

Try this exercise to learn how to focus on your breath.

Sit comfortably and close your eyes. Then simply put your attention on your breath. Notice where you feel it. Can you feel air moving in and out of your nostrils? Do you notice it raising and lowering your chest? Does your breath move all the way down into your abdomen when you inhale, or does it move only into your mouth or throat? You don't have to try to change your breathing or make your breath do anything special: your goal is just to find it and follow it and see how it moves as it flows in and out of your body. Continue to follow it for a couple of minutes or for as long as you are comfortable.

Since we are not usually used to paying attention to our breath, this exercise may not come easily at first. Some people say they cannot even locate their breath. If that happens to you, try holding your breath for a few seconds and then releasing it. Stopping breathing and then starting again can make the presence of your breath more obvious to you.

You may have to practice this exercise a few times until it becomes easy to find and follow your breath. Once you can do it more easily, you will not have to close your eyes anymore. You will be able to focus on your breath while you are in class, at a party, in the shower, or eating dinner with your family. If you feel anxious, simply remembering to find your breath and put your attention on it will cause you to slow down and breathe more deeply and will lower your anxiety.

activity 28 * following your breath

more to do

Over the next day or two, practice paying attention to your breath at different times. Describe how fast or slow, shallow or deep, your breathing is when you are

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|-------|-------------------------------|-------|----------------------|
| _____ | eating lunch | _____ | talking on the phone |
| _____ | in a hard class | _____ | riding in the car |
| _____ | in an easy class | _____ | listening to music |
| _____ | watching TV | _____ | doing homework |
| _____ | hanging out with your friends | | |

Name some situations in which it would be easy for you to focus on your breath without anyone noticing what you are doing.

Name some situations in which it might be harder to focus on your breath without anyone noticing what you are doing.

activity 28 * following your breath

Name any anxious situations in which it could be helpful for you to focus on your breath.

Describe what happens to your anxiety level as you pay attention to your breath.
