

29 deep breathing

for you to know

When people are anxious, their breath tends to be shallow and rapid. Making a conscious attempt to breathe more deeply can help you relieve anxiety.

If you watch newborn babies breathe, you will notice that their stomachs rise and fall with each breath. That is because they are naturally breathing deeply and carrying their breath all the way down into their diaphragms. Babies have not yet learned to be stressed. As adults, we tend to inhale our breath into our nostrils, our throats, and sometimes down into our lungs. But rarely do we breathe so deeply that our abdomens move in and out. Most often, our anxious thoughts and hurried activities cause us to breathe using only the upper parts of our respiratory systems. Sometimes, when we are very stressed or in a rush, we may even hold our breath intermittently without realizing it.

Deeper breathing helps relieve anxiety by slowing down our heart rates, relaxing our muscles, and bringing more oxygen deep into our bodies and brains, nourishing our cells more completely and helping us think more clearly. When we are breathing deeply, we are physically less tense. We are also better able to remind ourselves to use positive and rational thinking skills instead of anxiety-producing self-messages and distorted thinking.

directions

Before trying this breathing exercise, it is recommended that you complete Activity 28: Following Your Breath, which will give you practice in finding and following your breath.

Sit or lie down comfortably. Close your eyes so that you can better concentrate and block out distractions. Place your hand gently over your abdomen. Pretend that there is a round balloon in your abdomen, with the opening at the top, or closest to your lungs. Now inhale, and think about pulling your breath all the way down through your body, through the balloon opening and to the bottom of the balloon. As you inhale, let your abdomen rise to make room for your breath. Think about using this breath to fill your body with fresh air, filling the bottom of the balloon first, then the top, then completely filling your lungs from the bottom up.

When you are ready to exhale, gently press down on the bottom of your “balloon” and push the air out of your body from the bottom up, emptying the balloon first, then your lungs and chest.

Repeat this pattern slowly for several minutes, or until it starts to feel comfortable.

Breathing in this way may seem awkward at first. Some people even become anxious because they feel they cannot do it “right.” Understand that it is normal to start out feeling this way. It is something new that your body and mind aren’t used to. The more you do it, however, the more familiar it will become and the more you will be able to relax. Try to take your time and know that eventually you will get the hang of it. Don’t set yourself up for feeling anxious by trying to do it perfectly.

more to do

Circle any of the following things that you noticed while you tried the breathing exercise:

- | | |
|------------------------|------------------------|
| breathing got deeper | muscles twitched |
| felt awkward | felt stiff |
| heart rate slowed down | mind wandered |
| felt peaceful | let go of tension |
| felt a little anxious | felt sleepy |
| muscles relaxed | breathing got steadier |
| other _____ | |

Following is a list of situations in which people can use deep breathing to help them relieve anxiety. Circle those that have happened or might happen to you:

- | | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| giving an oral report in class | getting a lecture from your parents |
| taking a test | going through a haunted house |
| performing in a recital | performing in athletics |
| going on a job interview | having a tense conversation with a friend |
| taking your driver's test | doing something new for the first time |
| going on a date | jumping or diving off the high-dive board |

Now make a list of personal situations in your own life in which you could use deep breathing to help you relieve anxiety.
