

Choosing a Breathing Technique to Calm Your Anxiety

Objective

To use breathing exercises to calm your body and mind when you are feeling anxious.

You Should Know

During times of anxiety and distress, it is common for people to hold their breath or to breathe shallowly and rapidly. Learning how to breathe slowly and has many benefits: it will help quiet your mind, lower your blood pressure and heart rate, and suppress your brain's "fight or flight" response to fear. In other words, controlled, slow breathing relaxes your body and mind, decreasing the intensity of your anxiety.

What You Should Do

There are a variety of breathing exercises you can use to calm yourself when you are anxious. It is recommended that you try one or more of these exercises in the comfort of your home or other safe space, so that you can determine which is most the effective in reducing your anxiety. Once you have selected a breathing exercise, practice it several times until you feel confident using it in the dental office.

Before starting any of these breathing exercises, find a quiet, comfortable space where you can sit without being disturbed or distracted.

1. **Count Your Breaths.**

- Inhale slowly and gently according to your own comfort level.
- Count the seconds that your intake of air lasts.
- Exhale for the same number of counts.
- Repeat at least 3 times.

2. **The Navy Seal Technique.** Navy Seals train themselves to stay calm by using a four-step breath cycle.

- Inhale for 4 seconds.
- Hold your breath for 4 seconds.
- Exhale for 4 seconds.
- Hold your breath for 4 seconds again.
- Repeat the cycle at least 4 times.

3. **The 4-8-7 Technique.** This rhythmic breathing exercise is used in many meditation and yoga practices.

- Before starting, place the tip of your tongue on the tissue right behind the top front teeth.

- Empty your lungs of air
- Breathe in quietly through the nose for 4 seconds
- Hold your breath for a count of 7 seconds
- Exhale forcefully through the mouth, pursing the lips and making a "whoosh" sound, for 8 seconds
- Repeat the cycle up to 4 times

If it is not comfortable for you to hold your breath that long, try this shorter breathing pattern: breathe in through the nose for 2 seconds; hold the breath for 3 seconds; and exhale through the mouth for 4 seconds.

4. **Belly Breathing (also called diaphragmatic breathing). It is best to start this exercise while lying down, while you get used to breathing from your stomach instead of your chest.**

- Lie on your back on a flat surface with your knees bent. Place a pillow under your head and your knees for support, if necessary.
- Place one hand on your upper chest and the other on your belly, right below your rib cage.
- Breathe in slowly through your nose, letting the air in toward your lower belly. You should feel the hand on your chest remaining still, while the hand on your belly rises. It may help to imagine a balloon in your belly: each time you breathe in, you gently expand the balloon, and each time you breathe out, you gently deflate it.
- Tighten your abdominal muscles and let them fall inward as you exhale through pursed lips, as if you are blowing out a candle. The hand on your belly should move down to its original position.
- Take your time starting the next inhalation. Let your body inhale for you when it is ready. Let your next inhalation be a normal-sized, comfortable one, followed by a long, slow, complete exhalation.
- Once you are familiar with this exercise, you can practice it sitting in a chair, with your knees bent and your shoulders, head, and neck relaxed.

Try one of these techniques. How did you feel physically and emotionally afterward?

Try another breathing technique that sounds like it might be helpful. Try the other techniques as well if you like. What is the one technique that feels most natural to you?

Now try this technique at a time when you typically feel anxious. Describe what happened?

How can you remember to use a breathing technique when you are anxious?

What are some obstacles to you using a breathing technique to help you calm down?
