

Technique

#2 Breathe

To manage the anxious body, there is no single technique as effective as breathing. It's almost miraculous what controlling your breath can do to calm your physiology. The beauty of breathing is that it works even if you don't believe it's going to. You already know how to breathe, so you aren't starting from scratch when you learn to apply breathing to feelings of anxiety. No matter what physical arousal symptoms you experience, breathing will make you more comfortable immediately if you learn how to apply it and remember to use it. Different aspects of breathing have applications for all kinds of anxiety. Some breathing methods include:

- Diaphragmatic breathing to interrupt panic *before* it starts
- Breathing to diminish and then stop panic when it has already started
- Associating deep breathing with progressive muscle relaxation such that taking a breath can relieve tension by cueing muscle relaxation
- Using breathing to keep your body calm as a way to keep stress from building

PRACTICING DIAPHRAGMATIC BREATHING

Try this before you read any further: take a nice deep breath and slowly release it. If you tried it, you just demonstrated how diaphragmatic breathing works its magic. You made an executive decision in the prefrontal cortex (PFC) of your brain to breathe, and the cortex sent instructions to the parts of your brain that would make sure the breathing was carried out by all the muscles and organs necessary to execute a breath. In your medulla, a primitive part of your brain, respiration and heart rate are constantly directed and monitored without any conscious effort on your part. But you can, by making a conscious decision, change the rate of that respiration. This starts parasympathetic activity, which stops sympathetic arousal by stimulating the vagus nerve that initiates activity in that part of the autonomic nervous system. If you keep up the breathing, your panic symptoms will subside.

The optimal rate of diaphragmatic breathing depends on your individual lung capacity. Most people normally take around five breaths per minute, but being faster or slower doesn't affect how effective this method is. The difference between the inbreath and the outbreath is the key. The optimal ratio is 1:2. That means that when you breathe slowly in, you should exhale twice as long. When you use apps, as I suggest later, the best ones demonstrate this ratio.

Diaphragmatic breathing is the most reliable way to stop a panic attack once it has begun. It's the only thing you can do as an act of will, even without believing it can work. Breathing changes your physiology immediately. When the body is tense, breathing is affected even before panic starts. But in panic, breathing gets shallow and rapid instantly and often without warning, and can change into gulps or gasps. This rapid breathing can become hyperventilation, which causes dizziness. Diaphragmatic breathing is the counter to hyperventilation.

Getting ready to start, carefully observe your breathing. Write down these observations so they don't get lost. Answer these questions: Is your breathing pace regular on inhaling and exhaling? Do you pause in your breathing? When? Do you feel short of breath or rushed? Can you tell if

you're filling your lungs or breathing into your chest only? What do you notice?

The next time you're under pressure, set aside a part of your attention to observe how your breathing changes when you're tense. If you have to speak at a meeting and that makes you nervous, notice your breathing. If you're having a disagreement, note how you breathe. Even if you are feeling time pressure, take a moment to feel your breathing. It may surprise you to find that you haven't been filling your lungs or that you've been holding your breath when you inhale.

Make a chart, such as the one shown in Figure 4.1, to observe your breathing. Put a check mark next to all of the items that apply and add a note if you find any other observations about your breathing.

Breathing can be done anywhere, anytime. Whether you are tense at work or at home, whether in public or in private, you can breathe without being obvious. If you practice this breathing rigorously, you will be able to use it for panic attacks right away. You will immediately notice a reduction in the length of a panic attack. Over a period of a few weeks, if you are successfully diminishing the impact of any panic attacks that arise, you will see a decrease in the frequency of the panic. Stopping panic in its tracks calms the basal ganglia and causes them to trigger panic less often.

Practice the first time by lying down or standing—after that, you can breathe anywhere without anyone noticing. Be aware that the goal is not to change the way you breathe as you go about your daily activities, but rather to consciously change the way you breathe when you begin to feel panic coming on.

1. Lie down flat on your back or stand in a relaxed manner, feet slightly apart, knees loose. This is so you can sense the movement in your abdomen, which should move out when you inhale and pull in when you exhale.
2. Rest your hand on your abdomen. This will help you notice whether you're breathing deeply enough and whether your chest is tight.

THE 10 BEST-EVER ANXIETY MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES

	Short or impeded intake <i>Notes:</i>		Even, but fast <i>Notes:</i>
	Gasping <i>Notes:</i>		Relaxed <i>Notes:</i>
	Long in, short out <i>Notes:</i>		Holding breath <i>Notes:</i>
	Shallow <i>Notes:</i>		Panting <i>Notes:</i>
	Gulping <i>Notes:</i>		Hyperventilating <i>Notes:</i>

Figure 4.1 Breathing Observations Checklist

3. Next, exhale the air in your lungs so you are completely empty to start the practice.
4. Breathe in through your nose. Inhaling must be done evenly, as if you could fill your lungs from bottom to top in equal, even amounts. One way to imagine this is to think about a balloon filling up with water when you attach it to a faucet. The bottom fills and widens first and then the water expands the upper portion. Form an image of your breath filling a balloon in your abdomen, becoming heavy and warm as you inhale. It will help you to breathe evenly if you find a pace that allows you to measure your breathing in and out. Count until you feel exactly full (e.g., a slow one, two, three, four) to help you get a measured, even breath. Chances are you will take between three and six counts to fill your lungs with smooth inhalations. If you don't like the idea of counting, breathe while thinking a sentence with an even rhythm, such as, "I am steadily filling my lungs with air. I am emptying my lungs slowly and evenly." Fill up evenly, no gulps or gasps, so that you reach the top of your imagined balloon just in time to release the breath at the same even, measured pace.
5. Exhale evenly, taking twice as long as you did to inhale, until your lungs feel empty. The pace of exhaling should be slow and steady. Imagine you're blowing at the flame of a candle enough to move it but not blow it out. Your body needs time to exchange the oxygen and carbon dioxide or you can get dizzy—a sign that you are trying to eliminate, not encourage!
6. If you are uncomfortable or feel pressured to push air out while you are exhaling, stop the exhale at a comfortable point and simply pause for two counts before you start to inhale again. (Just try to make the exhale longer than the inhale before you pause.)
7. Practice! Diaphragmatic breathing is for you to use to calm down a panic attack. Most people who panic immediately forget their panic control measures unless they've practiced them. It's essential to use diaphragmatic breathing the moment you sense a panic

attack beginning, so you must practice frequently, whether or not you are sensing panic at the moment.

Create “Breathing Minutes”

For 30 days, try this “breathing minutes” exercise 10 or more times per day. For a minute at a time, practice diaphragmatic breathing whenever you’re waiting for something. Remember, you don’t need to be standing or lying down. You can do this whenever:

- You’re stopped at a stoplight
- You’re on hold on the phone
- You’re waiting in line at the store
- You’re waiting for the microwave to heat your food
- You’re waiting for a friend at work or school
- You’re waiting in the car to pick someone up
- You’re waiting for the computer to boot
- You’re waiting for the teacher to hand out the test papers
- You’re waiting for someone to return a text
- You’re waiting for a meeting to start

After practicing for seven days, pick one time of day when you can predict that you will be uninterrupted for a few minutes. For most people, it works best to pick early morning, late evening, or your lunch break. During this one uninterrupted period per day, you are going to *add one minute of breathing*. For the next seven days, you will continue the one- to two-minute practices seven to nine times a day, but you will add one minute each day to the time you picked when you can be uninterrupted. By the end of the week, you may be practicing for seven to eight minutes once per day. Once you can breathe for this long, you have set the stage to breathe for other important purposes, such as for profound relaxation, for meditation, and for cueing the stress response to turn itself off.

As you become better at automatically using diaphragmatic breathing when you feel panic symptoms set in, you can eventually stop practicing.