

Relaxation techniques

When we are afraid or anxious, our muscle tension increases and we breathe harder and faster.

Increasing muscle tension makes us feel tense, causes muscle aches and pains, and leaves some people feeling exhausted. Breathing fast can make you frightened, light-headed and dizzy, increasing your belief something bad is going to happen.

Muscle relaxation can be particularly helpful when anxiety causes muscle tension. And learning to regain control of your breathing gives you a simple tool to calm yourself and relax when you feel panicky.



Anxious breathing

We breathe in oxygen and breathe out carbon dioxide. To run efficiently, our bodies need a balance between oxygen and carbon dioxide. We maintain this balance through how fast and how deeply we breathe.

When we are anxious, we take in more air than our body needs – we over-breathe, or hyperventilate. The body responds with chemical changes that produce symptoms such as dizziness, light-headedness, confusion, breathlessness, blurred vision, increased heart rate, numbness and tingling in our hands and feet, cold clammy hands and muscle stiffness. We can use a calming breathing technique to overcome this. (Search for “calming breathing techniques” on www.healthinfo.org.nz).

Many people who over-breathe do not realise that they are doing so. You may not realise that frequent sighing, or yawning, or audible intakes of air before speech, are all signs that you are over-breathing. You can do this simple questionnaire on [buteykokent.co.uk/images/The Nijmegen Questionnaire.pdf](http://buteykokent.co.uk/images/The_Nijmegen_Questionnaire.pdf) to test how much you are over-breathing. If your score is high you are likely to benefit from help with improving your breathing techniques.

Muscle tension

Muscle tension is commonly associated with stress, anxiety and fear as part of a process that helps our bodies prepare for potentially dangerous situations. Even though some of those situations may not actually be dangerous, our bodies respond in the same way. Sometimes we don't even notice how our muscles become tense. Progressive muscle relaxation helps us learn to relax our muscles. (Search for “progressive muscle relaxation” on www.healthinfo.org.nz).



Other helpful information

Meditation

Meditation can help some people to relax.

- On the Calm Auckland website you'll find some audio relaxation and meditation files, which can help you relax using various techniques. See www.calm.auckland.ac.nz/20.html.
- Meditation Christchurch offers free classes. See www.meditationchristchurch.org.
- Centre for Modern Buddhism offers various classes, costing \$1–10 a session. See meditateinchristchurch.org/wp.
- Smiling Mind is a free mindfulness meditation available as a web-based program or an app. See www.smilingmind.com.au.

Physiotherapy

Learning how to breathe and relax properly can be very helpful. Some physiotherapists have special skills in relaxation and breathing. Check with your physiotherapist if they do.

Written by HealthInfo clinical advisers. Last reviewed March 2017.

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