



Understanding and Coping with Anxiety

Breathlessness Advice and Support

Breathlessness Advice and Support is for those who:

- Experience breathlessness at rest and/or during activity
- Live with/support someone who suffers from breathlessness

Introduction

Breathing problems are very common in people who have heart and lung conditions, cancer and neurological conditions. Breathlessness can be disabling and frightening that can cause increased feelings of anxiety.

This leaflet provides an understanding and basic advice on how to cope with anxiety.

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal response to a real or perceived threat. When we become anxious we experience a range of symptoms that fall under 4 types of response. These responses to anxiety include **physical, cognitive, behavioural, and emotional** aspects.

Physical symptoms include increased heart rate, shallow breathing, muscle tension, dry mouth, sweating etc.

Cognitive responses (thoughts and images) include worries and fears about what will happen in the future. Many of these thoughts or images may include negative content which can prolong and maintain other symptoms of anxiety possibly leading to panic.

Behavioural responses can be aimed at either avoiding the anxiety or finding ways to cope with it until it passes.

Emotional responses can be summed up in one word such as fear, terrified, scared, worried etc.

There are many self-help strategies that can assist you to reduce your anxiety and several are listed below. Firstly it can be helpful to learn to rate your anxiety on a scale of 1 – 10, 1 being the lowest level of anxiety and 10 being totally overwhelmed by anxiety. This is important because the more aware you become of your anxiety levels the better you will be able to intervene as your anxiety rises. Remember anxiety does not last forever and it will subside naturally. If you are particularly concerned by your anxiety speak with your Doctor.

Techniques to reduce your anxiety

Breathing techniques

Take in a deep breath and release, do this a minimum of three times. This can help to reduce symptoms of anxiety as you feel it rising.

The 7/11 technique. Breathe in for 7 seconds and then immediately after breathe out for 11 seconds. If this is too much breathe in for 3 seconds and breathe out for 5 seconds. Repeat this pattern of breathing for a minimum of 20 cycles at least three times a day when you are beginning to feel your anxiety rise.

The clenched fist method. When you become anxious your body will become tense and this method can assist you in letting go of this tension. Find a quiet space to sit, then clench your

fist into a tight ball and hold this for around 5 seconds. Feel the tension in your hand and then after 5 seconds slowly release and unfold your fingers until they are straight. Repeat this process a further 3 times and pay particular attention to the feelings of relaxing your hand and letting go of the tension. The more you become aware of tension in your body the better you can become at releasing it.

Deep muscle relaxation. There are many audio CDs/downloads that will guide you through the process of deep muscle relaxation. This process involves setting aside 20-30 minutes a day to work through the major muscle groups in your body tensing and holding and releasing them as with the clenched fist method. Please ask a member of staff if you would like to be facilitated through the process.

Creating a safe place. This is a method that uses imagery to create a place in your mind's eye in which you feel safe and fully relaxed. This place can be anywhere that has meaning for you and you will be asked to focus on all your 5 senses to enhance the power of this process. Your 5 senses include sight, sound, taste, touch and smell.

Mindful awareness. This approach requires you to bring your full attention to the flow of your breath as it passes in and out of your body. Whilst you are attending to the flow of breath thoughts and images will arise which may increase your anxiety levels. This approach teaches you to de-centre/gain distance from your thoughts/images and to just simply notice them as they arise in consciousness and fade away.

Identifying thoughts and assumptions that arise before and during anxiety. Our thoughts have a distinct part to play in our experiences of anxiety as often people report such thoughts as "I'm going to die or this will never end or I can't cope with this." Thoughts like these add to and prolong anxious experiences, thus it can be very important to record them on a sheet of paper or in a diary when and wherever we experience them. The idea of recording them is that the more awareness we have of our thoughts/images the more control we can have over our responses to them.

Distraction. If you can learn to distract yourself when highly anxious it can be a very helpful means of coping with any symptoms that arise. The idea is that you engage yourself in an activity that requires your full concentration for a period of time until the symptoms subside. It can really help if you have someone who can take your mind off the current situation. Distraction is only a short term coping strategy.

Additional Support

Easy Breathing Support Group, St Elizabeth Hospice (Ipswich)

Relaxation Classes, St Elizabeth Hospice (Ipswich)

SKILLS Group, St Elizabeth Hospice (Great Yarmouth and Waveney)

Positive Living, St Elizabeth Hospice (Ipswich)

For further information

This information sheet is intended as a guide. You can speak to a member of the medical, nursing or therapy team at St Elizabeth Hospice if you would like to discuss any specific issues you have relating to you.