

## Coping strategies for anxious times

We understand that this is a very difficult and uncertain time for all of us and that everyone may benefit from some wellbeing tips. It is important that we all continue to look after ourselves, and these tips can be shared with the people that you support as well. This information sheet contains a variety of different relaxation methods and you may find some work for you others don't. This is normal and it is important to focus on what works best for you and your wellbeing. Hopefully you might find something new to try out as well.

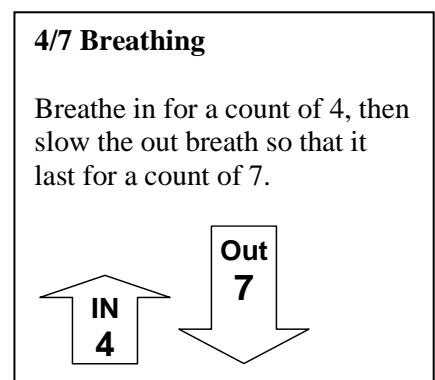
### Breathing Techniques

One of the first things anyone can do when they notice that they are feeling anxious or starting to panic is to practice relaxed breathing. Below there are three different methods that all work in the same way, by breathing out for longer than we breath in. Breathing out more oxygen than breathing it in can reduce the fight-flight response and strengthen your relaxation response. You can practice any of the methods based on your personal preference.

**\* Breathing OUT is the key to lowering anxiety\***

#### Method 1: 4/7 Breathing

Breathe in for 4 counts and out for 7 counts. You can change the ratio to whatever suits you best. The most important thing is to make the OUT breath longer than the IN breath.



## Method 2: Stomach Breathing

This involves breathing right down into your belly, rather than your chest. Try to get your stomach to rise with your in breath, and fall with your out breath. Imagine blowing up a balloon inside your stomach as you breathe in and deflating the balloon as you breathe out. If you find that you breathe more from your chest, it is possible to teach yourself to lower your breathing with lots of practice (yoga teaches how to do this).

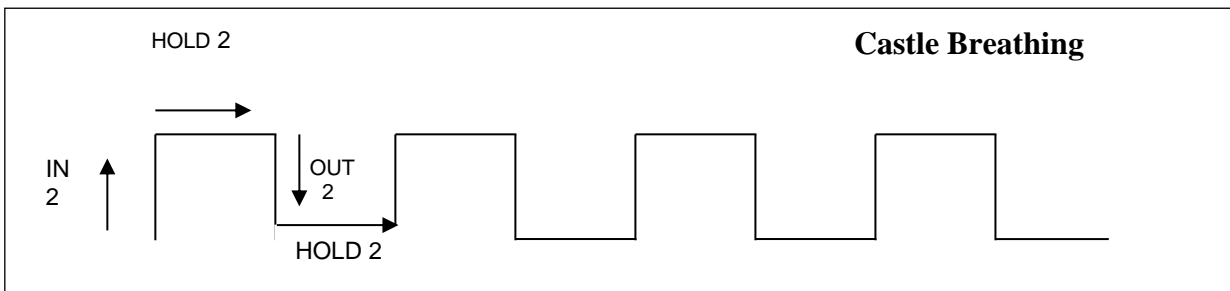
### Stomach Breathing

As you breathe in expand your stomach, and as you breathe out, allow the stomach to contract. Imagine having a balloon in your stomach!

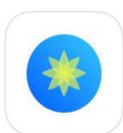


## Method 3: Castle Breathing

Breathe in for two counts and hold the breath for two counts. Then breathe out for two counts and rest for two counts. Count the same number for the in-breath, the hold, the breath out, and the rest period before breathing in again.



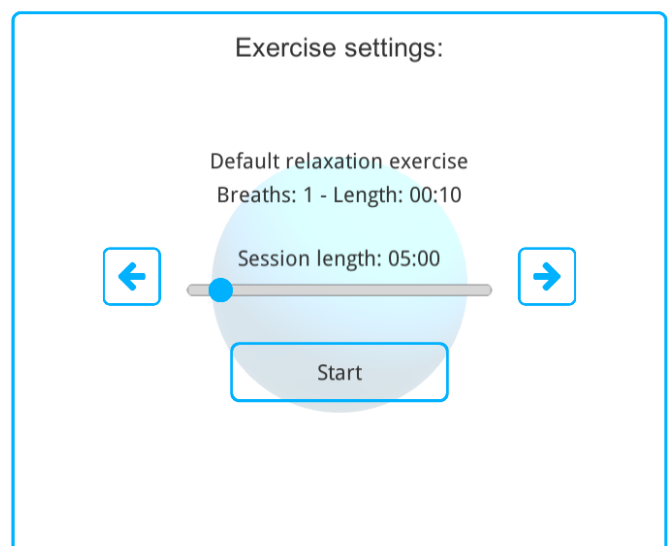
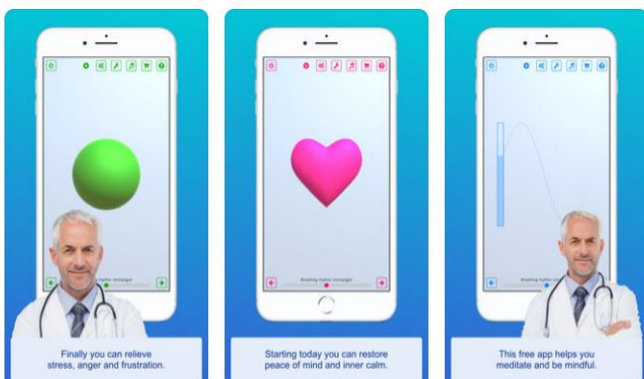
Smart phone apps are now available to help you practice relaxation breathing in everyday life. For example, **'Breathing Ball'** gives simple instructions on how to breathe together with images of a ball changing in size. It is free and easy to use.

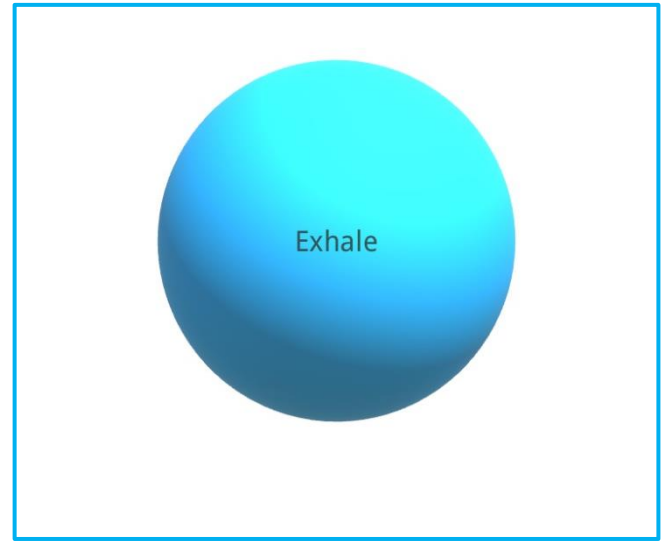
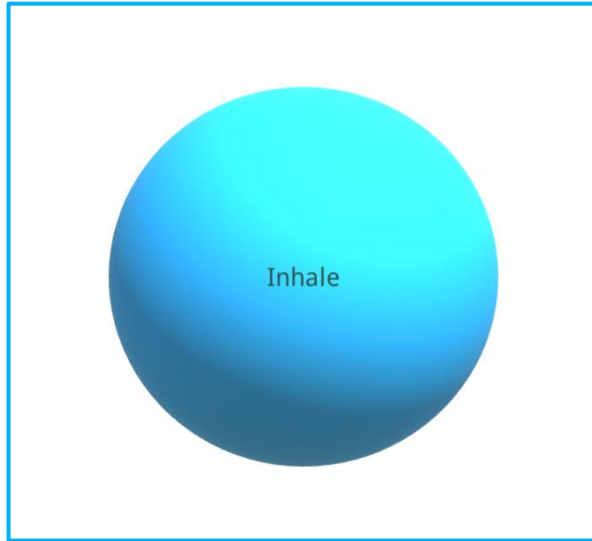


Breath Ball Breathing...

A Fast Stress Relief Method.

OPEN





Other applications for relaxation breathing and meditation are also available.

For example, **Headspace**, **Breathe +**, **Calm**, **Oak** and **Breethe**.<sup>1</sup>

## Three Minute Breathing Space

### 1. AWARENESS

Bring yourself into the present moment by deliberately adopting an upright posture, with your back straight and your shoulders back. If possible close your eyes. Then ask:

‘What is my experience right now.....my thoughts.....my feeling ....and body sensations?’

Acknowledge and register your experience, even if it is unwanted.

### 2. GATHERING

Then, gently redirect your full attention to your breathing, to each in-breath and to each out-breath as they follow one after the other:

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<sup>1</sup> \*Please notice that all the applications mentioned above are **free to download**, but some of them may require **payment for subscription** for continuous use or unlocking more functions. Please be aware of the potential charge.

Your breath can function as an anchor to bring you into the present and help you tune into a state of awareness and stillness.

### 3. EXPANDING

Expand the field of your awareness around your breathing, so that it includes a sense of the body as a whole, your posture, and facial expression.

## Progressive Muscle Relaxation

One of the body's reactions to fear and anxiety is muscle tension. This can result in feeling 'tense'; muscle aches and pains and feeling extremely tired. Progressive Muscle Relaxation is one way to reduce muscle tension. In this exercise, tense particular muscles, hold the tension and then relax those muscles.

### Steps:

1. Sit or lie in a comfortable position and slow down your breathing.
2. Tense a particular muscle group for 5 seconds – start with your toes and feet, your lower legs, thighs, stomach, back, arms, shoulders, face etc. You should be able to feel the tension but not feel a great deal of pain.
3. Then relax this muscle group for 10 seconds.
4. Repeat step 2&3 for the next muscle groups of your body. You can start from your feet and work up to your head, or the other way around.

\* If you have access to the internet, there are many **scripts** and **audio guides** for this exercise. You can simply search 'Progressive Muscle Relaxation' on Google or YouTube and choose a version which suits you best.

## Distraction Skills

Learning to use distraction and relaxation skills can help your body and brain calm down, feel safe and better cope with stress.

Distraction strategies work on the principle of distracting your conscious mind away from triggers and unhelpful or intrusive images or thoughts. Below are some common distracting activities people have found helpful and try to prepare a list of things that work for you the best.



## Self-Soothing Skills

People can also find it very helpful to use their five senses to soothe body and mind. When your body feels relaxed and comfortable, it is easier for your mind to feel safe.



## Special Place Imagery

The purpose of the safe or special place imagery exercise is to help you to imagine a place in your mind, which you can escape to. This place can be real or imaginary but it should be somewhere you feel safe. Thinking about being in your special place can help you feel calm and relaxed. The more details you give to this place, the better you can visualise and remember it.

If you struggle to think of a special place, perhaps use the scene shown below as a starting point.



- 1) Start by getting comfortable in a quiet place and take a couple of minutes to focus on your breathing, close your eyes, become aware of any tension in your body, and let that tension go with each out-breath.
- 2) Imagine somewhere you can feel calm, peaceful and safe. It may be a place you've been to before, somewhere you've dreamt about going to, or maybe somewhere you've seen a picture of.
- 3) Focus on what you can see from where you're standing or sitting – what does the sky look like? What exactly can you **see** around you – focus on the detail.
- 4) Now notice the sounds that are around you, or perhaps the silence. What can you **hear**?
- 5) Think about any smells you notice. What can you **smell**?
- 6) Then focus on any skin sensations - the earth beneath you, the temperature, any movement of air, anything else you can **touch**.

- 7) Now whilst you're in your peaceful and safe place, you might choose to give it a name, whether one word or a phrase that you can use to bring that image back, anytime you need to.

Encourage yourself to do activities that are pleasant and distracting can help calm your body and mind. Without taking the time to unwind, it is easy to feel overwhelmed and stressed but sometimes we sometimes need to do encourage ourselves to do these things rather than waiting until we feel like doing them. There are some examples below but activities you find relaxing will differ between people.



## Grounding Skills

Feeling anxious or stressed can sometimes feel overwhelming and for some people may lead to remembering traumatic events in the past, very vividly.

Grounding is an important and helpful technique in helping remind you that you are safe in the present moment. It can also help when you feel really distressed, particularly when the distress makes you feel you are 'shutting down' or 'spacing out' and losing a sense of where you are.

It may help to see this as a brain arm wrestle - memories from the past try to pull you back into the past but we need to help your brain win that arm wrestle by pushing back the other way and making the present stronger than the past. We do this by using what we can see, smell, hear, touch and taste in the present.

We will introduce a simple grounding technique and we strongly recommend you practice this at home.



Look at postcards, photographs or a keyring, which reminds you where you are. You may also find it helpful to choose an object around you e.g. a tree or leaf and draw your attention to the detail in what you can see.



You may want to carry prayer beads, pebbles, marbles or small pieces of fabric, again focus on noticing the feel of them in your hand. Think about what the object feels like between your fingers.



Some people find listening to music/ radio helps ground them in the present. It can be helpful to draw your attention to sounds around you.



Carry something with a strong comforting smell e.g. a Vicks stick, spices in a bag, perfume, lavender oil etc to use when needed. Again, draw your attention to the smell.



You may also find it helpful to carry fruit or sweets with a strong taste (mints or menthol sweets) to ground your mind using taste.

Hopefully some of these exercises will be helpful. Like other skills, they take practise, so try to introduce a routine each day, which step by step will help you feel more in control of your anxiety and allow you to feel less anxious each day.