

Appendix 6 Slow breathing exercise

You will remember that when you get anxious your rate of breathing increases. This overbreathing is often referred to as 'hyperventilation'. When you overbreathe you breathe out too much carbon dioxide which leads to a decrease in the level of carbon dioxide in the blood. The decreased level of carbon dioxide causes or worsens a number of symptoms such as breathlessness or light-headedness. You may experience these symptoms if you have panic attacks.

To get rid of these symptoms, the level of carbon dioxide in the blood must be increased and steadied. One way of achieving increased levels of carbon dioxide is to breathe into a paper bag. A large portion of the air you breathe out is carbon dioxide, therefore, by rebreathing your old air you are taking higher amounts of carbon dioxide into your lungs.

Although breathing into a paper bag is simple and effective, it may not always be convenient or socially appropriate to pull out a paper bag in public! Additionally, although breathing into a paper bag is effective during a panic attack, this method cannot prevent hyperventilation in the future. An alternative method which is less obvious to other people and more effective in the long run is the slow breathing exercise. This method will help you to control your hyperventilation. Also, by learning slow and regular breathing habits you will help to prevent future episodes of hyperventilation and other symptoms of panic.

The following exercise is to be practised four times every day for at least five minutes each time, AND at the first signs of panic or anxiety. Combining slow breathing with relaxation is particularly helpful.

SLOW BREATHING EXERCISE (TO BE PRACTISED REGULARLY AND AT THE FIRST SIGNS OF ANXIETY OR PANIC)

If you recognise the first symptoms of overbreathing, STOP what you are doing and sit down or lean against something. If you are driving, pull over and park in a safe place.

1. Hold your breath and count to 5 (do not take a deep breath).
2. When you get to 5, breathe out and say the word 'relax' to yourself in a calm, soothing manner.
3. Breathe in and out slowly through your nose in a six second cycle. Breathe in for three seconds and out for three seconds. This will produce a breathing rate of 10 breaths per minute. Say the word 'relax' to yourself every time you breathe out.
4. At the end of each minute (after 10 breaths) hold your breath again for 5 seconds and then continue breathing using the six second cycle.
5. Continue breathing in this way until all the symptoms of overbreathing have gone.

It is important for you to practise this exercise so that it becomes easy to use any time you feel anxious. (Treatment Protocol Project 1997)