

Breathlessness in lung cancer

Coping with breathlessness

For some people being breathless can be frustrating and at times even frightening. Perhaps not surprisingly then, a number of people report that breathlessness is commonly associated with anxiety and panic. Unfortunately, anxiety only makes breathlessness worse. It can therefore be useful to learn ways of controlling anxiety and panic.

Anxiety is a normal reaction to situations where we may feel frightened or threatened. The anxiety response involves changes in the body, and in the way you think and behave.

Some common bodily responses to anxiety include:

- **Fast breathing, chest tightness and shortness of breath.**
- **Muscle tension, trembling or shaking.**
- **Sweating, cold and clammy hands.**
- **Heart pounding/racing and palpitations.**
- **Light headedness, dizziness and feeling faint.**
- **Dry mouth, “butterflies” in the stomach and nausea.**

Unfortunately, the increase in breathing rate commonly associated with anxiety can sometimes make matters worse if you already feel breathless. Indeed, some people report that there is a clear relationship between their breathing and level of anxiety. The more breathless they become, the higher their anxiety. As anxiety increases, breathlessness can then become worse. In some cases, this can lead to feelings of panic.

While breathing is something we do all the time and seems “automatic”, with

practice you can learn to increase your control over it. You can learn to control your breathing and anxiety by using the advice on the following pages.

Learning to control your breathing

Breathlessness causes you to increase the speed at which you breathe. This causes anxiety, tension and overuse of the muscles in your shoulders and upper chest. All of this makes the effort of breathing harder, by involving more muscles and using more energy. Your breathing can also become shallower. This means that the lungs do not receive as much air, which in turn can add to the feeling of breathlessness.

There are several techniques which can be used to overcome these feelings and make breathing easier.

The first step in learning to control your breathing is to become more aware of your breathing pattern generally. Exercise, talking too fast, stressful situations and even excitement can upset your breathing pattern, so be ready to correct it if it is too shallow or too quick.

Positioning:

The most important thing is to be comfortable. This will vary from one person to another. Try to be supported so

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that the upper chest and shoulders can relax. This will allow the upper abdomen and stomach to expand. On the following page are some examples of positions which may be comfortable for you, when doing these exercises.

You can correct your breathing pattern by placing one hand on your upper chest, let your chest relax down. As you breathe in, allow your stomach to swell upwards and back down again gently as you breathe out. Try to get a steady rhythm going, counting as you breathe to make sure your breathing is regular. Try to breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. As you breathe out, it is sometimes helpful to say the word “relax” to yourself or to try to imagine the numbers as you count, in your mind’s eye.

At first, it is best to practice this exercise either sitting in a comfortable armchair or propped up in bed. However, as you get more skilled and feel more confident, check that you have got it right in all positions (see positions across).

Breathing exercises

Gentle breathing

The aim is to allow the fresh air into the lungs and get rid of the old air. Try to imagine you are breathing out for twice as long as you breathe in. This will make room for the fresh air and also helps to slow down the speed of your breathing. Try to keep the shoulders and the upper chest relaxed and easy.

Feel as if the air is going down to your stomach and imagine that the breathing is taking place there.

Positions for breathing exercises

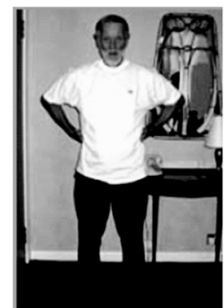


Here are some exercises to try:

A. Expansion of the lower chest.

Place your hands on either side of your chest. Breathe out through your mouth, letting your ribs sink in as far as possible.

Then, breathing in through your nose or mouth, feel your ribs expand outwards towards your hands. Gently breathe out to start again. Try to repeat the exercise about five or six times.



B. Diaphragmatic breathing

Relax the top of your chest and shoulders. Place your fingers lightly at the front of your chest on your stomach. Breathe out as gently as possible like a sigh, feeling the lower ribs come down and in.

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Breathe in and feel the expansion of the lower ribs, and your stomach rise under your fingers, as the air comes in. Gently breathe out again. Try to repeat this exercise about

five or six times.

It is a good idea to practice these exercises frequently throughout the day, so that they become a habit and can be used when you are feeling breathless. Repeating the exercises about six times in a row, every two hours would be helpful.

Coughing can be hard work and can increase breathlessness so, if possible, try to cough only when you are ready to spit out phlegm. The breathing exercises may help to move the phlegm, which will make it easier to spit it out.

For further information about breathing exercises and advice on breathlessness, ask your doctor or nurse to refer you to a physiotherapist.

Learning to relax

Another common reaction to anxiety is increased muscle tension, such as hunched shoulders, clenched fists or feeling a knot in your stomach. Learning to relax by letting go of this muscle tension can also be a useful method of controlling anxiety and breathlessness. The first stage in learning relaxation is becoming more aware of which particular parts of your body tense up when you

feel uptight. The most commonly affected areas are the neck, shoulders and back. Below are exercises that are intended to help you learn how to relax.

Progressive muscular relaxation

These simple exercises take about 20 minutes to complete. Learning to relax takes practice. To begin with, start by practising these exercises at least once a day.

Either do these exercises in a comfortable armchair, which provides good support for your head and shoulders, or propped up in bed. To begin with, do the exercises somewhere where you know you will not be disturbed and you can concentrate fully. It might be helpful to get someone to read out these exercises to you at first.



Deep relaxation involves tensing and relaxing muscle groups throughout your body. Some exercises are listed on the page below. You should tense the muscle group for a few seconds before relaxing it. Try to concentrate on the difference between feeling tense and relaxed. For maximum benefit, tense and relax each muscle group twice before moving on to the next one. Before starting the exercise, shut your eyes and establish a slow, steady pattern of breathing. Begin to notice how every time you breathe out, you start to feel more relaxed.

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Hands and wrists – tense your hands by squeezing your hands into fists. Feel the tension and – relax. Notice the difference between tension and relaxation. Repeat.



Arms – bend your arms, bringing your hands up towards your shoulders and again, notice the tension. Try to make the muscles tight for a few seconds and – relax. Repeat.



Shoulders – bring your shoulders up as high as you can. Hold the tension and then – relax. Allow your shoulders to drop back down and again feel the difference between the tension and the feeling of relaxation. Concentrate on how



your hands, wrists, arms and shoulders now feel relaxed and heavy. Repeat.

Neck - press your head backwards, either against the bed or chair and feel the tension. Hold that tension for a couple of seconds and – relax. Repeat.

Face - pull your eyebrows tightly together and close your eyes, as if making a frown, and hold that tension for a few seconds, then – relax. Now try clamping your teeth together, feeling the tension in your mouth and jaw. Push your tongue against the roof of your mouth and hold that tension for a couple of seconds and – relax. Repeat.

Chest and stomach - push your chest out arching your back and hold that position for a couple of seconds. Notice how the muscles in your chest feel relaxed. Continue to breathe regularly and evenly. Next, pull your stomach in tightly and hold the tension for a couple of seconds and – relax. Repeat.



Legs - point your toes away from your head and stretch your legs. Feel the tension for a couple of seconds and – relax. Repeat.

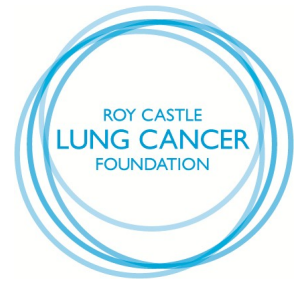
For a few moments, continue to breathe gently and regularly, enjoying the feeling of relaxation. Try to imagine a pleasant image in your mind's eye. Once you are ready to move, count backwards from three to one and open your eyes. Get up slowly and try to keep that state of relaxation for as long as possible.

Coping with worry

Although you may feel anxious when breathless, it is important that you do not add to the anxiety with frightening thoughts. Try to keep calm by concentrating on controlling your breathing and telling yourself to relax. Remember that you can control your anxiety by controlling your breathing. It is also important that people around you stay calm. Sometimes, it helps to focus on a pleasant image in your mind's eye or do something to take your mind off the breathlessness.

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Find out what works best for you, for example: relaxing music, comedy show or a scenic view.

Anxiety and your behaviour

While it might be tempting to avoid anxiety provoking situations, in the long term this can affect your self confidence. You can learn to manage any anxiety experienced in such situations by facing up to them a little at time and using the techniques described above.

Coping with acute anxiety

Feelings of acute anxiety can sometimes happen suddenly. It is important to remember that these feelings will subside quickly if you do not add to them with frightening thoughts. Try to remember to stay calm and relaxed (that also means the people around you), slow down your breathing, and don't add to the panic with frightening thoughts.

Remember the fear will subside in time. If you are experiencing significant problems coping with anxiety, it may be useful to discuss with your doctor or nurse being referred to a clinical psychologist.



This information has been taken from "Lung Cancer—A practical guide to breathlessness" booklet.
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Roy Castle Lung Cancer Foundation is the only charity in the UK wholly dedicated to the defeat of lung cancer.

It funds research into prevention and early diagnosis, provides practical and emotional support as well as helping people to quit smoking.

A variety of patient-focused lung cancer information materials are available free of charge to people affected by lung cancer. For further information and details of your local support services please call The Roy Castle Lung Cancer Helpline on:

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