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mental
health

wellbeing and recovery

a guide to controlled
breathing
(pursed lips breathing)





Your doctor or nurse may suggest that you learn how to do ‘controlled breathing’. This can help to ease shortness of breath (breathlessness) caused by various conditions.

Note: controlled breathing is in addition to any other medication or treatment which you may be prescribed for your condition.



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Why controlled breathing?

When you are short of breath, your breathing can become too fast, too shallow, or jerky.

Because of this you may not get as much air into your lungs as is possible.

‘Controlled breathing’ (sometimes called ‘pursed lips breathing’) will help you to get as much air as possible to your lungs.

This may help to ease shortness of breath. It is one way to slow your breathing rate and to make each breath as effective as possible.

It can be helpful to learn the technique when you are relaxed. Perhaps practise the technique 4-5 times a day at first.

You can then use it whenever you get short of breath, or when you have to do an activity that causes you to be short of breath, such as when climbing stairs.

Controlled breathing technique

Your doctor or nurse will explain how to do controlled breathing. The following is a reminder:

1. Sit upright, if possible

Sitting upright is usually better than lying down, or ‘slouching’, as it can increase the capacity of your lungs to fill with air.

2. Breathe gently in and out and purse your lips when breathing out

If possible, breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth in a steady slow rhythm. Try to keep your mouth closed when you breathe in through your nose. As you breathe out, pucker or ‘purse’ your lips (as if you are about to whistle).

This gives slight resistance to the outflow of air. Try to make your breath out twice as long as your breath in. This helps to empty your lungs of old air, and to make as much room in your lungs for fresh oxygen-rich air.

To do this you may find it helpful to count ‘one, two’ as you breathe in, and ‘one, two, three, four’ as you breathe out. Do not hold your breath between breathing in and out.



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3. If possible, mainly use your diaphragm (lower chest muscle) to breathe

Your diaphragm is the big muscle under the lungs. It pulls the lungs downwards which expands the airways to allow air to flow in. When we become breathless we tend to forget to use this muscle, and often use the muscles at the top of the chest and our shoulders instead.

Each breath is more shallow if you use these upper chest muscles. So, you tend to breathe faster and feel more breathless if you use your upper chest muscles rather than your diaphragm.

You can check if you are using your diaphragm by feeling just below your breastbone (sternum) at the top of your abdomen. If you give a little cough, you can feel the diaphragm push out here. If you hold your hand here you should feel it move in and out as you breathe.

4. Try to relax your neck, shoulders and upper chest muscles when you breathe

It is best to 'take the weight' off your shoulders by supporting your arms on the side-arms of a chair, or on your lap.

A friend or relative standing behind you, gently massaging your shoulders, may encourage you to relax.





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References

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Inspire Mental Health works with and for people with mental illness to ensure they live healthy, productive lives and are supported to achieve their full potential within all aspects of their lives. We provide a range of supported accommodation including floating support that supports over 400 people per year. Day opportunities and recovery focused services are provided to over 1000 people per year and our advocacy services touch the lives of thousands every year.

We also provide a range of community support services for people over 60 leaving hospital or who have become socially isolated to help them reintegrate into society.

We provide support to people with Personality Disorders, who self-harm and who are in prison. We also provide support to young mothers struggling with parenting and their mental wellbeing.

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