

EMOTIONAL RESOURCE

3.1 CONTROLLED BREATHING

The body is an important part of emotional experience. This means that our emotions can cause changes in our bodies, and this is particularly the case with our breathing. Emotions influence our breathing because they are designed to kick us into action - fear is a classic example. When fear tells us we are in danger, our bodies automatically react by breathing more quickly. This is part of our so-called 'fight-or-flight response', which helps our bodies react to threats more efficiently (e.g. we can run away faster as our muscles have more oxygen).

However, if we are trying not to act on our fear this rapid breathing causes us to hyperventilate and can create all sorts of uncomfortable physical symptoms (e.g. tingling, dizziness, rapid heart rate, faintness, chest tightness etc.). Unchecked, these physical symptoms can then get us stuck in the red zone (feeling too much), causing more fear and a negative cycle that can eventually lead to a panic attack.

Controlled breathing is a relaxation strategy that helps you gain better control of your breathing, to prevent hyperventilation. It encourages slow, deep breaths, which are the opposite of hyperventilation. This can help your body start to relax and come out of the red zone.

It is important to point out that because controlled breathing works by bringing you down from the red zone (feeling too much), **it should not be used when you find yourself in the blue zone** (feeling too little). This could cause you to slip deeper into the blue zone.

Although you will have a copy of a relaxation CD or a track via the Moodcafe website which can guide you in Controlled Breathing, the instructions on the next page may also be helpful.

Controlled Breathing - Instructions

You may wish to find a calm place or sit down before you start. You can also say or repeat a calming word or statement to yourself, ideally on the out breath, which is most important.

1. Focus on your breathing
 - a. Breathe out in a long and slow exhale
 - b. Breathe in slowly
 - c. Breathe out slowly, to the count of four
 - d. Hold your out breath for a moment, just beyond the urge to breathe in again, then breathe in slowly.
2. Repeat this until your emotion feels less intense.

Take ordinary breaths in between the deep ones, as and when you feel you need to, but try to stick to the deep breaths until the intensity of the emotion has decreased.

Another option is to try the re-breathing technique. This can help because your breathing depends on a fine balance of gases like oxygen and carbon dioxide. Hyperventilation can sometimes mean you lose too much carbon dioxide. Re-breathing can help you get it back. Do this exercise slowly and without holding your breath. It should not be repeated for more than 4 breaths:

1. Cup your hands in front of your mouth and over your nose (some people may use a paper bag instead, but not a plastic one!).
2. Breathe in through your nose
3. Breathe out through your mouth
4. Breathe in your exhaled air

It is important to point out that because controlled breathing works by reducing the intensity of your hyperarousal/fight-or-flight response (feeling too much; red zone), it should not be used when you find yourself in your hypoarousal/freeze-and-submit (feeling too little; blue zone) response. This could cause you to slip deeper into this response. Remember we are trying to find a balance between these two extremes.