

Procedures for Controlling Hyperventilation Catching it early

If it has happened to you before, you may be able to identify the 'warning signs', for example, a stifling feeling as if the window should be open, tightness in the chest, or noticing your breathing is fast. These should be your cue to:

- 1** → Stop whatever you are doing and try to find a quiet place to sit down.
- 2** → Close your eyes and focus on the word 'calm' in your mind.
- 3** → Try to release some of the tension in the upper body. Sitting in a tense hunched-up position increases the possibility of hyperventilation. Dropping shoulders in a sideways widening direction makes hyperventilation more difficult since the diaphragm muscles are stretched outwards.
- 4** → Breathe slowly from the stomach, not the chest. Breathe in to a count of four slowly and out to a count of four slowly. Or visualise your breathing in as going up one side of a hill, experiencing a plateau at the top, and then breathing out as though coming down the other side. Slow your breathing rate to 10 to 12 breaths per minutes.
- 5** → It may also help to place your hands with your fingertips together on your stomach; make sure that each time you breathe in, your fingertips come
- 6** → Concentrate on breathing out. Try to breathe through your nose.

The re-breathing technique

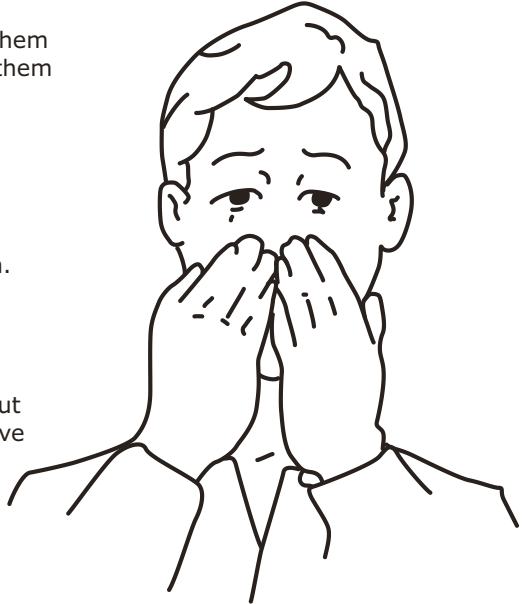
If your symptoms don't go away after a few minutes it is probable that you haven't caught it quickly enough, and you will need to use the re-breathing technique. This involves breathing in the air you have just breathed out. This air is richer in carbon dioxide and will thus quickly replenish the carbon dioxide you have been exhaling.



Mental health coping strategies

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- Make a mask of your hands and put them over your nose and mouth and keep them there.
- Breathe in through your nose (if possible).
- Breathe out hard through your mouth.
- Breathe your own exhaled air.
- This should be done slowly and without holding your breath. Repeat four or five times (no more).
- All the time try to stay calm and relaxed.



It is even better to use a paper bag (not polythene) over your nose and mouth instead of your hands, if circumstances allow. Adjust your posture so that your elbows are on level with or above your shoulders, (this makes it difficult to overbreathe.)

Recognise hyperventilation

Try to occasionally monitor your breathing rate. Do you breathe too deeply or shallowly? Do you sigh and yawn more than others? Triggers for hyperventilation that should be avoided include low blood sugar, tobacco, tea, coffee and other stimulants which accelerate the fight or flight response. Do you breathe in but do not breathe out?

Progressive muscle relaxation exercise

This exercise involves tightening and relaxing all the different muscle groups in your body, one at a time. When you tighten a muscle it becomes hard and tightens around the bone, when you relax it loosens, creating a sensation of warm heaviness.

Sit or lie down in a comfortable position. Set aside 15 to 20 minutes with no interruptions or distractions. Relax yourself to the best of your ability. Consider the various muscle groups one at a time, and aim to learn the difference between tight and relaxed muscles. Try constantly to concentrate on the feeling in the muscle as it goes from tight to loose.

Hands and arms: Clench your fists, and tense your arms; feel tightness in your hands and arms, hold for 5 seconds then slowly relax them. Release and relax each muscle group for 10 to 15 seconds. See how far they will go, but do not push. Do not hold on at all; let everything go.

Shoulders: Hunch your shoulders, then gradually let them settle down. Proceed as above.

Forehead: Pull your eyebrows together, then gradually let your forehead smooth out.

Eyes: Screw your eyes up tight, then gradually let them smooth out, leaving your eyes close, feeling your eyeballs sink, and your eyelids droop. Let them get really heavy.

Jaw: Bite your teeth together, then gradually ease off, and let your jaw get heavy.

Back of neck: Pull your chin forward on to your chest, feel tightness, then relax.

Front of neck: Pull your chin forward on to your chest, feel tightness, then relax.

Breath: Slow and steady, letting yourself go each time you breathe out.

Tummy: Pull in your tummy tight, then gradually let it go, feeling it relax.

Thighs: Push your heels down hard against the floor, feeling the tightness in your thighs, then gradually let that go.

Calves: Point your toes, then gradually let that tightness go.

Let everything go, further and further, and think about a really relaxing scene, for example, lying in the grass by a river, under a warm sun and a blue sky, or sitting by a fire in the a big, comfortable chair. Feel yourself getting heavier and heavier.



Mental health coping strategies

Progressive muscle relaxation exercise cont.

Once you can tell the difference between tension and relaxation, you should be able to notice more quickly when your body is getting tense. When this happens, this should be your cue to try any of the following techniques of cued relaxation.

Relax the particular area of your body that feels tense. Tighten the muscles, then relax. Think about that muscle relaxing. Imagine your pulse rate slowing and your whole body slowing down.

Change your posture to a relaxed one when you notice yourself getting tense. Drop your shoulder in a sideways widening direction.

Repeat a sound or word which you find relaxing, for example, the word 'calm', or say to yourself, 'I am going to relax my body. It is feeling heavy and more relaxed'.

Gaze at a fixed object in the room, such as a picture or ornament which you particularly like.

Think of an image that you find particularly calming and soothing and imagine yourself there, for example, lying on a deserted beach or floating on a feather mattress through the clouds. Imagine the different sights, sounds, smells and sensations. Imagine your body feeling heavier and warmer.

Breathe through your nose and become aware of your breathing. As you breathe out focus on your mental device (from preceding box). Breathe easily, slowly and naturally. Breathe from your stomach, not higher up in your chest.

Acute Hyperventilation 'Life is in the breath' - *Indian Yoga*

Hyperventilation means overbreathing, that is breathing in excess of your body's needs.

Acute hyperventilation is very common during panic attacks. This is understandable because some degree of overbreathing is part of the body's normal response to threat. Recall how when you are suddenly shocked you might gasp. The function of overbreathing is to supply the muscles with more oxygen for 'fight or flight'. It often happens after a combination of strong emotion (fear, excitement, anger etc) and physical exertion, although either can bring it on. If the extra oxygen isn't needed by the muscle, the effect can be dramatic and terrifying and can cause the following symptoms:

- Rapid breathing, but difficulty in getting breath.
- Tightness in the chest.
- Very rapid heartbeat.
- Sweating.
- Tingling or numbness.
- Feeling of faintness.
- Feeling of unreality
- Visual problems/blurred vision.
- Rigid muscles, cramps.
- Sudden emotional outbursts, eg, crying.
- Feeling too hot or too cold.

When you begin to overbreathe, the balance of gases in the lungs is upset. Breathing in an excess of air too frequently pushes out carbon dioxide which normally forms a reservoir in the lungs. Because there is too little carbon dioxide in the lungs, the blood becomes more alkaline, which causes the above symptoms. It is important to remember that the symptoms are the effects of too little carbon dioxide.



Mental health coping strategies

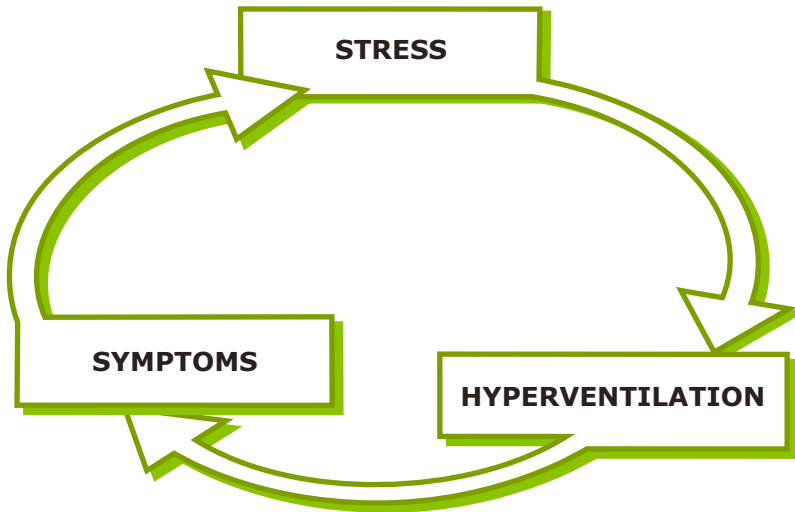
Acute Hyperventilation

'Life is in the breath' - *Indian Yoga*

Two things are necessary: to stop overbreathing, and to get enough carbon dioxide back into the lungs.

A general point to remember is that hyperventilation produces symptoms which are very frightening in themselves. These can cause more overbreathing.

It is very important to break the vicious circle of hyperventilation, leading to frightening secondary symptoms, leading to stress, by learning to control your breathing.



Hyperventilation is not always obvious to the person themselves. In many cases hyperventilation can be very subtle, and may be habitual or chronic going on over a long period of time. This makes the person more vulnerable to panic if placed in a stressful situation which increases the breathing very slightly.

As it is hard work to overbreathe, prolonged periods of hyperventilation will often result in tiredness or exhaustion.

Ten rules for coping with panic

- 1** → Remember panic feelings are only normal reactions that are exaggerated - they are not dangerous.
- 2** → They are not harmful and nothing worse will happen. The feelings will soon pass.
- 3** → Notice what is happening in your body now. Stay with the present. Slow down, relax, but keep going.
- 4** → Thinking about what might happen is unhelpful. Only now matters.
- 5** → Accept the feelings. Let them run through you and they will disappear more quickly. Try not to fight the panic. Float over it.
- 6** → Monitor your level of anxiety: 10 (worst) to 0 (least). Watch the level go down.
- 7** → Stay in the situation. If you run away, avoid or escape, it will be more difficult in the future.
- 8** → Take a few slow, deep breaths. Breathe from your stomach say the word 'calm' as you breathe out.
- 9** → Consciously relax your tense muscles. Feel yourself relaxing. Drop your shoulders.
- 10** → Now begin to concentrate again on what you were doing before. Slowly move on when ready.



Challenges to upsetting thoughts

What is the evidence?

What evidence do I have to support my thoughts?
What evidence do I have against them?

What alternative views are there?

How would someone else view this situation?
How would I have viewed this situation in the past?

What is the effort of thinking the way I do?

Does it help me, or hinder me from getting what I want? How?

What thinking error am I making?

- a. Am I thinking in all-or-nothing terms. *ignoring the middle ground?*
- b. Am I awfulising or catastrophising *overestimating the chances of disaster?*
- c. Am I personalising. *blaming myself for something which is not my fault?*
- d. Am I focusing on the negative. *looking on the dark side; ignoring my strengths?*
- e. Am I jumping to conclusions. *predicting the future and mind-reading?*
- f. Am I living by fixed rules. *fretting about how things ought to be; overusing the words should, must and can't?*

What action can I take?

What can I do to change my situation?
Am I overlooking solutions to problems on the assumption they won't work?

What is the worst possible outcome?

What is the worst thing that can happen and how bad would that really be?