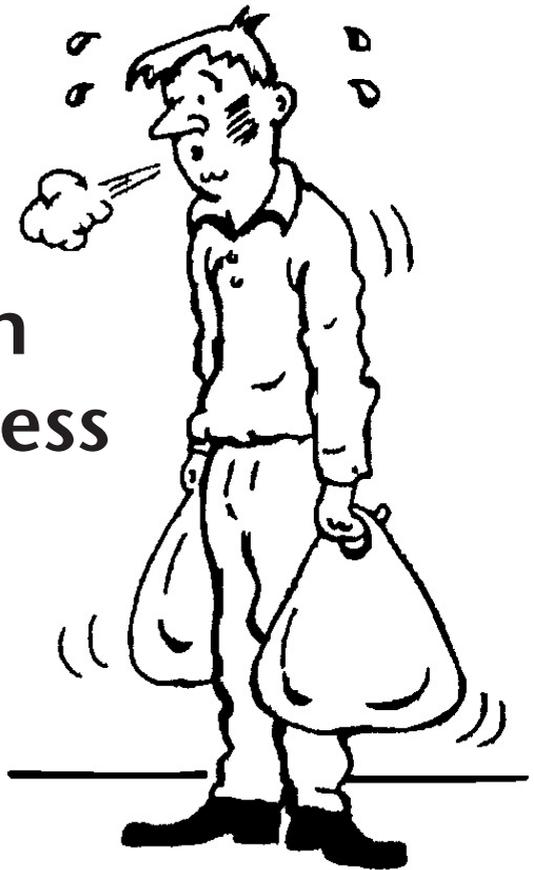


Coping with Breathlessness



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Everybody gets breathless at times, for example when running for a bus or climbing a big flight of stairs. However, people with lung disease will get breathless more easily and it will probably take them longer to get their breath back. This can be a frightening experience in which the anxiety experienced can in turn make the breathlessness worse.

The first step in managing your breathlessness is to realise that becoming short of breath is not harmful and that you will get your breath back in time. This short Booklet intends to provide you with Guidelines on how to control your breathing. This will be divided into four sections: Managing everyday activities, Breathing control, Positioning for the relief of breathlessness and Relaxation.

Managing everyday activities

If you are experiencing some degree of breathlessness, you may find that this is affecting aspects of your daily activities. This section intends to offer some general advice and Guidelines to help you overcome some of these difficulties.

To help you try and remember the following three P's:

- Prioritise
- Plan ahead
- Pace yourself

• **Prioritise**

Spend some time considering what is important to you. This may vary from day to day. You may find you cannot do as much in the one day, so you may wish to conserve your energy for specific activities or events. It may be helpful sometimes to leave some tasks to friends or family, particularly heavier tasks.

• **Plan ahead**

Forward planning can help you to achieve what you want to do, without becoming over-tired or breathless. For instance you may find that certain times of the day you are less breathless and feel better, so this is a good time for you to perform certain activities.

Also giving yourself extra time when undertaking a journey or performing a particular activity will result in you being more relaxed and less breathless.

• **Pace yourself**

Try to pace yourself during the day by balancing periods of activity with periods of rest. During activities try to take a rest before you become breathless.

Relax and conserve your energy

Breathlessness can be brought on with the least effort. Stress and anxiety can also make your symptoms worse.

Learning ways to conserve energy and avoiding situations which you know will be stressful, can be helpful.

While it is really important to stay active, save your energy for when you really need it.

Here are some useful tips to save you energy:

Eliminate unnecessary activities

Sit down as much as you can. For example while bathing, in the shower, preparing vegetables, ironing etc. Let dishes air dry.

Use a towelling bath robe instead of drying yourself with a towel.

Organise your space

Keep what you need or use most near at hand, including medications.

Put most used items in easily accessible drawers or shelves.

Organise your time

Do most tiring tasks at the time of day when you are at your best - be flexible and plan plenty of rest periods, just in case. Planning in advance will avoid having to rush which may worry you.

Pace yourself

Slow and steady will get you there.

Alternate work and rest periods. Don't overdo it on a good day - you may be overtired the next.

Try to maintain a good posture

Don't slump while sitting and avoid bending down. Wear slip on shoes or use long handled tools in the garden.

Relax

Give yourself time to do things and don't worry about getting a little breathless. Take a break and get your breath back and start again.

Don't be afraid to ask for help if you need it!

Breathing Techniques

There are various techniques for helping to cope with breathlessness. With practice, you can use these every day after an activities which may make you breathless or they will help you manage if you suddenly become short of breath.

Breathing control

This is helpful if you are generally short of breath. Breathing control means breathing gently, using little effort and helps you return to a more controlled breathing pattern.

Use one of the suggested positions:

- Settle in a comfortable, supported position, relax your shoulders, arms and hands.
- Breathe in gently through your nose if you can and out through your mouth or nose.
- Breathe at your own rate. Try to breathe out for longer than you breathe in.
- Continue until your breathing is back under control once more.

Techniques for when you are more active

Try all of these but don't force yourself.

You can combine these techniques. They are all helpful for when you are short of breath

If you feel wheezy or tight in your chest, try taking your reliever inhaler.

Remember never to hold your breath especially when doing activities. You need all that oxygen!

Relaxed, slow deep breathing

Gently slow down your breathing. Breathe more deeply. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth.

Pursed lip breathing

This may help you relax whilst getting more out of each breath.

Breathe out with your lips pursed as if you are whistling. Try to exhale for longer than you inhale.

This slows your breathing down and helps to make your breathing more efficient.

You may adopt this breathing from time to time anyway.

'Blow as you go'

Breathe out when you are making a big effort for example:

- Stretching your arms above your head
- Reaching for something above you
- Bending down
- Going up steps or stairs
- Standing up

Paced breathing

This is useful when climbing stairs or walking which can be very hard work. You will be able to do it but take your time and go slowly. Use handrails for balance and stability. Don't pull yourself up the stairs!

Breathe in time with the steps you take. Do this in a rhythm which suits your activity and how you are feeling i.e.:

- Breathe in when on a stair; breathe out as you go up a stair.
Blow as you go!
- Breathe in for one stair and out for one stair **or**
- Breathe in for one stair and out for two stairs **or**
- Breathe in for two stairs and out for three

or any rhythm which is suitable to you, making sure that you breathe out longer than you breathe in.

Positions to help with breathlessness

You may find that you automatically adopt certain positions as you feel it helps your breathing. The best positions are the ones which need the least effort or energy.

If you tense your shoulders and grip onto things when you are breathless, you're wasting energy and oxygen.

1. To help get your breath back in standing up, lean forward from the hips with arms resting on a support e.g. window sill, back of chair, kitchen work surfaces are often of a suitable height.
2. When you are standing or walking, try putting your hands on your hips, in your pockets or stick your thumbs into belt loops to support your arms without gripping. If you carry a shoulder bag, you can rest your arms on it.
3. Sitting uses less energy than standing. You might find it useful to lean forwards, resting your forearms on your knees or on a table in front of you or arms of chair.
4. Using a walking aid (walking stick or frame) can help you find one of these postures when you are out and about. Most people feel better pushing a supermarket trolley. It provides support in the same way.
5. Lying on your side with several pillows under your head and one under your upper arm is often comfortable in bed. Remember to try both left and right side. This is particularly helpful if you feel breathless at night.

Try all these different positions and decide which ones are best for you. Different ones will suit different situations.

Relaxation

Relaxation is a vital part of our lives and can be an effective method in reducing breathlessness.

Coping with anxiety and panic attacks:

Breathlessness can feel very frightening and can lead you to feel worried, anxious or frightened about your health.

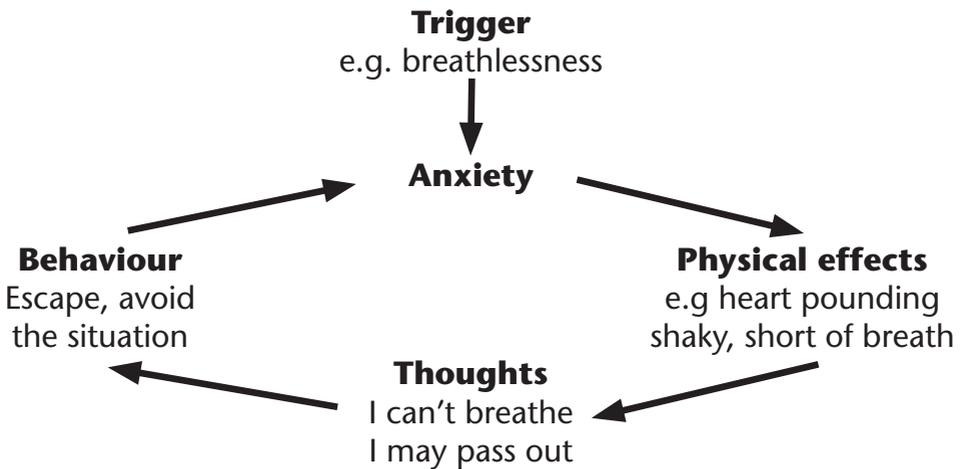
A lot of people with breathlessness report having panic attacks. These may only happen occasionally or some people may have them every day. Panic attacks are a form of anxiety that feel very intense and may come out of the blue or be triggered by breathlessness. There is usually a frightened feeling that something awful is about to happen.

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is your body's natural response to a situation seen as threatening or stressful. It is very important as it helps your body prepare itself to deal with the threat.

However, sometimes the body perceives a threat where there isn't one so the anxiety is a false alarm. The body reacts as if there is a threat and you feel physical effects of that reaction, for example, heart palpitations, butterflies in the stomach, feeling dizzy.

Unfortunately anxiety and panic can make you more breathless and can also lead you to avoid situations or stop doing things. A vicious cycle can therefore develop which keeps anxiety and panic going:



Coping with anxiety and panic

There are several things you can do to break the vicious cycle of panic and to manage times when you feel anxious. They may take some practice so stick at them and find out what works best for you.

1. **Identify the triggers** - If you tend to rush things this can make your breathlessness worse and might trigger a panic. Plan your activities and pace yourself.
2. **Tackle the frightening thoughts** - Remember that what you are feeling is nothing more than an exaggeration of the normal bodily reaction to stress. These feelings are not harmful or dangerous – just unpleasant. Nothing worse will happen. Try to focus your mind away from these thoughts, for example:
 - a. Distract yourself – focus on what is going on around you instead of on your body and what might happen. Listen carefully to someone talking or to the radio or try counting in your head – work out what helps you distract yourself best.
 - b. Question the frightening thought – For example, ask yourself ‘how many times have I had these thoughts and how many times have they come true?’
 - c. Reassure yourself – wait and give the fear time to pass without fighting it or running away from it. Notice that once you stop adding to it with frightening thoughts, the fear starts to fade away.
3. **Don't avoid situations** - Learn that you can control the anxiety in these frightening situations and gradually start doing the activities that you may have stopped because you were worried about having a panic attack
4. **Practice** - Practice your breathing and relaxation techniques regularly so that when you start to feel anxious you can use them quickly.

Summary

Although breathlessness can be a frightening experience, the first step in managing your breathlessness is to realise that feeling short of breath is not harmful and that you will get your breath back in time. Although you will from time to time still experience episodes of breathlessness, this booklet will help you to control your breathlessness during everyday activities. Overall it will lead to a greater quality of life.

