

Extended exhale breathing

Explanation: When we feel stressed or anxious our bodies react to this with a range of physical changes. Most of these happen without us being able to control them, but one of the changes is to our breathing. When we are calm we breathe in a particular way and when we become anxious or stressed our breathing changes to become shallower, quicker and higher in the chest. We can hack this system by deliberately learning how to breathe in a calm way – and as our body becomes calmer so does our mind. When we feel calmer we are much more able to respond to things in ways that are more useful.

How to do it: There are just two things to do to get the relaxation going:

Firstly, breathe from your belly – imagine there is a balloon in your tummy that you are inflating with every inbreath – this is easiest to practise lying on your back with one hand on your chest and the other on your tummy. Your tummy should move out with each inbreath, whereas your chest shouldn't move much.

Secondly, make the outbreath longer than the inbreath – you could count (7 in and 11 out – or 5-8 or a number that works for you), or have a phrase to say (a shorter one for the inbreath and a longer one for the outbreath, such as 'I am calm' (on the inbreath) and then 'I am feeling very relaxed' (on the outbreath)). You could also imagine yourself playing a recorder or singing, as that uses the same breathing action.

When it's useful: This can be useful when you start to feel anxious or if something happens that produces a strong emotional response. It's a skill, though, so it's easier to do if you practise it when you're already feeling calm. If you do this, you will have more control over your responses when you begin to feel anxious. You could try practising this kind of breathing for a couple of minutes once or twice a day – maybe as you are going to sleep or before you get out of bed in the morning. It's good to do when you know you have a difficult event coming up, for example before an exam or a difficult conversation.

