

COVID-19 Coping with breathlessness and stress

Summarised version

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COVID-19

Coping with breathlessness and stress

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Psychological management of breathlessness with COVID-19

The main symptoms of COVID19 include fever (37.8°C or above), cough or chest tightness, and breathing difficulties.

If we are feeling stressed or panic about our breathlessness a vicious cycle occurs which leads to further tension and worse breathlessness.

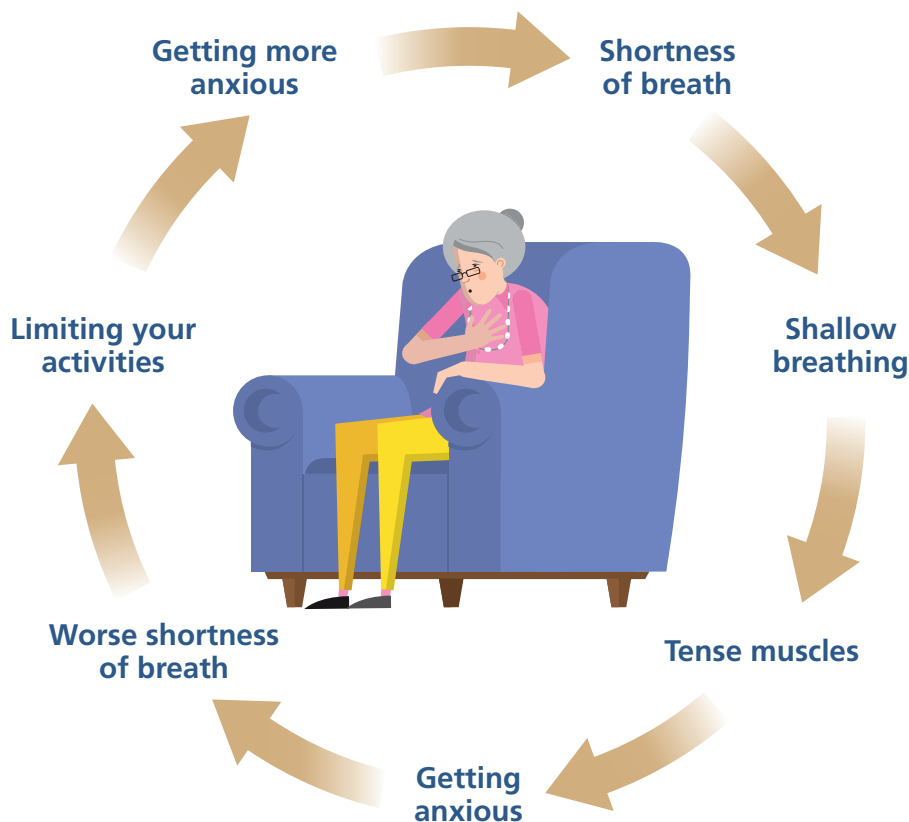
The feeling of breathlessness can be distressing. It can impact on the way we think, the way we **breathe** and our **ability to function**. What we are thinking about and stress itself can make breathlessness worse.

Breathlessness – don't panic

Stress makes breathlessness worse as it activates the 'fight or flight' response where it recognises you are feeling anxious. The brain will speed up breathing and make the heart pump faster. This can make us feel breathless, hot, sweaty and shaky.

A vicious cycle can occur where worry and stress can lead to panic, and the body reacts to the panic with more breathlessness.

It is possible to slowly manage breathlessness by managing stress, using good breathing techniques and postures.



Breathing techniques

Being breathless can make you panic or feel frightened and uncomfortable, but it is not in itself dangerous, you are still receiving oxygen.

Try the following breathing techniques and practice the one that suits you best every day.

Breathing control

Breathing control means breathing gently, using the least effort. It will help if you use breathing control when you are short of breath or feeling fearful, anxious or in a panic. By using breathing control, the effort of breathing is reduced.

- Get into a comfortable position so that you can relax. Make sure that your arms are supported. Put one hand on your chest and the other on your abdomen.
 - Close your eyes to help you relax and focus on your breathing.
 - Slowly breathe in through your nose, with your mouth closed. If you're relaxed, the air will reach low in your lungs. Your abdomen will move out against your hand. If your breathing is controlled, the hand on your chest will hardly move.
 - Breathe out through your mouth. Your abdomen will fall gently. Imagine all the tension in your body leaving as you let the air out.
 - Try to use as little effort as possible and make your breaths slow, relaxed and smooth. With every breath out, try to feel more relaxed and calm. Gradually try to breathe more slowly.
 - You can use it with the 'pursed lips breathing' technique that is also described in this booklet.
 - With each breath out, try to let go of any tension in your body.
 - Gradually try to make your breaths slower.
 - Do not force your breath.
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Relaxed slow deep breathing

Relaxed slow deep breathing is very useful when you are active. It should be used from the start of an activity that makes you out of breath, for example, walking or making the bed.

- As you start to exert yourself, slow down your breathing and breathe in more deeply.
- Breathe in through your nose if you can.
- Use it with pursed lips breathing and /or 'blow as you go' described in this pack.

Pursed-lips breathing

This exercise can be used at any time to help you control your breathing. You can also use it while you are doing something that makes you breathless and it will help you to feel less short of breath.

- Breathe in gently through your nose, then purse your lips as though you were going to blow out a candle or whistle.
- Blow out with your lips in this pursed position. Imagine “blowing out a candle” or whistling when you breathe out.
- Try to blow out for as long as is comfortable; do not force your lungs to empty.

This YouTube video demonstrates how to do pursed lips breathing:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7nhHHoc8hCY>

Blow-as-you-go

This exercise helps make tasks easier. You can use it while you are doing something that makes you breathless, for example, when lifting a heavy bag by breathing in before you lift the bag and then breathe out as you lift the bag - “blow as you go”.

- Breathe in before you make the effort.
- Then breathe out while making the effort.

It can be helpful to use pursed lips as you blow as you reach for something, such as a glass of water by your bed, as you reach or bend down, as you lift a heavy object or weight, as you step up.

Using a fan

Some people find that the cold draught from a hand held fan can reduce the feeling of breathlessness **ALERT:** If using a fan, be aware that this can re-circulate the air particles and increases the risk of spread. Ensure that **others are not in the room** during this time and that they **do not enter the room for at least 20 minutes** after you have stopped using the fan.

- Find a position that eases your breathlessness.
- Hold the fan approximately 15cm from your face.
- Aim the draught of air towards your face, moving the fan slowly from side to side so that the air hits your nose, mouth and sides of your cheeks.



Positions to ease breathlessness

There are some positions that you can try to ease your feelings of breathlessness. Getting into these positions helps the muscles involved with breathing to work more effectively which therefore can reduce feelings of breathlessness.

Leaning forward may also improve the movement of your diaphragm, the main muscle of breathing. Experiment with and modify different positions until you find out what works best for you.

Here are some diagrams of good positions to ease breathlessness:



Managing your thoughts

Breathlessness can be frightening, and this anxiety can make us think negative thoughts and images. Getting caught up in negative thinking patterns can increase anxiety and make breathlessness worse. If you are having lots of anxious thoughts, it may be useful to say to yourself and write down the following statements that are true for you:

- Even though I am breathless I am still breathing in oxygen.
- Stress and worry will make me even shorter of breath, relaxing will help.
- I need to practice the breathing techniques now in a good breathing position.
- This difficult time will pass.

Some things that may help you with negative thoughts are:

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|--------------------------------|--|
| Distraction | e.g. watching television, a film, reading, games, cards, colouring, jigsaw etc. |
| Occupying your mind | e.g. puzzles, think of a food beginning with every letter of the alphabet, make a list of the top ten films of all time, start a new skill or learn to do something you haven't done before. |
| Limit the news | Limit your time spent watching, reading, listening to coverage of the outbreak. Switch off breaking-news alerts on phone. Set a specific time of updating yourself, e.g. 1 o'clock news only. |
| Connect with others | Plan times to stay in touch with others by phone, messaging, video calls or email, whether it's people you see often or reconnecting. |
| Chair exercise | If you can, do some chair exercise. Stretch arms up and down and out three times get up and down from chair three times. |
| Do things you enjoy | Make an effort to do things that you enjoy. When we feel worried or low we may stop doing these things as they don't feel as pleasurable – if these are things that you can do from home, schedule them into your daily routine. |
| Do what you can control | Plan out what you can do during the day and stick to this timetable. |
| Relaxation | e.g. breathing techniques, mindfulness, relaxation techniques. You will find instructions for these in the next pages. |

Relaxation

Relaxation has been shown to reduce tension and anxiety and ease breathlessness.

Relaxation script: make yourself comfortable, breathe gently from your tummy and close your eyes.

- Imagine you are walking along and find the door to a secret garden.
- Use your senses as you walk through the door and into the garden. Focus on what you see, hear, smell and touch.
- Notice a garden bench and sit here for a while. Notice the wildlife that you see and the feel of a light breeze and gentle warmth from the sun on your face.
- Take a little walk along the garden and notice a pond and then a wildflower meadow.
- Stay here for at least 15 minutes before you slowly walk back through the secret garden door.

Progressive muscle relaxation

This exercise will teach you to recognise and reduce muscle tension. You can relieve tension in any part of your body just by tensing and relaxing each muscle in turn.

Sitting in a comfortable chair:

1. Sit on a chair



2. Scrunch up your face...

Then relax it.



3. Tense your arms...

Then relax them.



4. Tense your shoulders and chest...

Then relax them.



4. Tense up your legs...

THEN RELAX!



6. Breathe in relaxation...

Breathe out tension.



You can find more relaxation exercises here:

https://www.cuh.nhs.uk/sites/default/files/publications/PIN0736_leaflet_6_relaxation_v8.pdf
or apps:

https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.velindrecc.mindfulness&hl=en_GB

<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/app/velindre-mindfulness-app/id1450624693?mt=8>

Mindfulness

Mindfulness allows us to become more aware of the stream of thoughts and feelings that we experience and helps us deal with them better. An important part of mindfulness is being in the moment. This means waking up to the sights, sounds, smells and tastes of the present moment. That might be something as simple as the feel of a banister as we walk upstairs.

Apps with mindfulness techniques include:

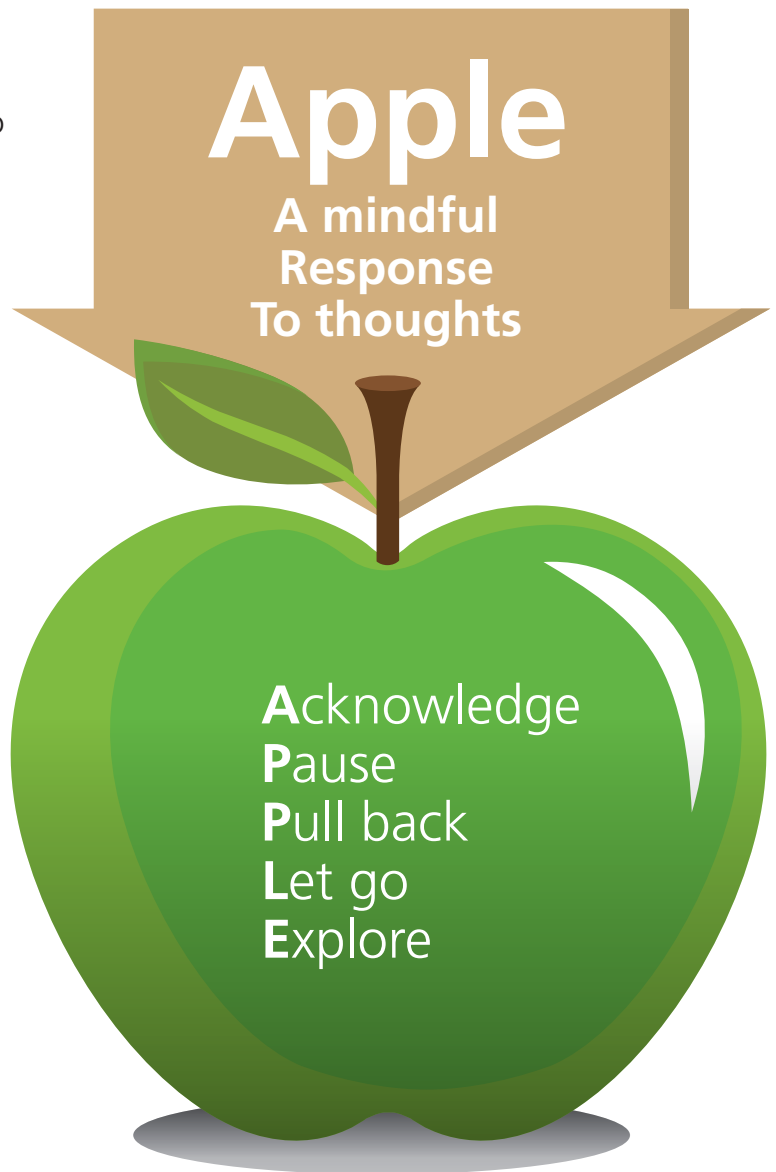
<https://www.headspace.com/headspace-meditation-app>

<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=gov.va.mobilehealth.ncptsd.mindfulnesscoach>

The APPLE technique

There are many ways to be mindful. Two popular techniques are APPLE and “letting go of thoughts”.

- **Acknowledge:** Notice and acknowledge anxiety and uncertainty as it comes to mind.
- **Pause:** Don't react as you normally do. Don't react at all. Pause and breathe.
- **Pull back:** Tell yourself this is just the worry talking, and this apparent need for certainty is not helpful and not necessary. It is only a thought or feeling. Don't believe everything you think. Thoughts are not statements or facts.
- **Let go:** Let go of the thought or feeling. It will pass. You don't have to respond to them. You might imagine them floating away in a bubble or cloud.
- **Explore:** Notice the ground beneath you. Look around and notice what you see, what you hear, what you can touch, what you can smell. Right now. Then shift your focus of attention to something else on what you need to do, on what you were doing before you noticed the worry, or do something else mindfully with your full attention.



Letting go of thoughts:

- Spend a few moments taking control of the pace and regularity of your breathing.
- Close your eyes and imagine that you are sitting on the bank of a river.
- You are warm and relaxed, and able to breathe freely.
- You see many leaves slowly drifting downstream.
- When a thought or feeling comes into your mind, try to see this as a leaf and let it drift away from you, and disappear.
- When it's gone, return to gazing at the river, waiting for the next leaf to float by with a new thought.
- Try not to think about the contents of each leaf. Just observe it and then let it go.
- Sometimes the same leaf may come up many times or several leaves will seem related to each other, or the leaves may be empty. That's okay.
- Don't allow yourself to be concerned with these thoughts. Just watch them pass in front of your mind's eye.

Further advice on managing your mental health and wellbeing at this time can be found here:

<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/looking-after-your-mental-health-during-coronavirus-outbreak>

Useful relaxation and mindfulness links

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9tOJZQhO_Uw

<https://www.youtube.com/user/yogawithadriene>

<https://www.youtube.com/user/Getsomeheadspace>

<https://www.mindful.org/meditation/mindfulness-getting-started/>

<http://www.freemindfulness.org/download>