

# COVID-19 Coping with Breathlessness and Stress

Full Version



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## Psychological Management of Breathlessness with COVID-19

- ❖ COVID-19 is a type of coronavirus. The main symptoms include fever (37.8°C or above), cough or chest tightness, and breathing difficulties.
- ❖ Stress and anxiety also influence breathing and can cause breathlessness.
- ❖ When there is both COVID-19 and stress, breathlessness will worsen.
- ❖ This resource pack provides advice on managing stress with COVID-19 to prevent symptoms of breathlessness becoming worse, due to anxiety and panic.
- ❖ There is also guidance on breathing techniques and postures to ease breathlessness.

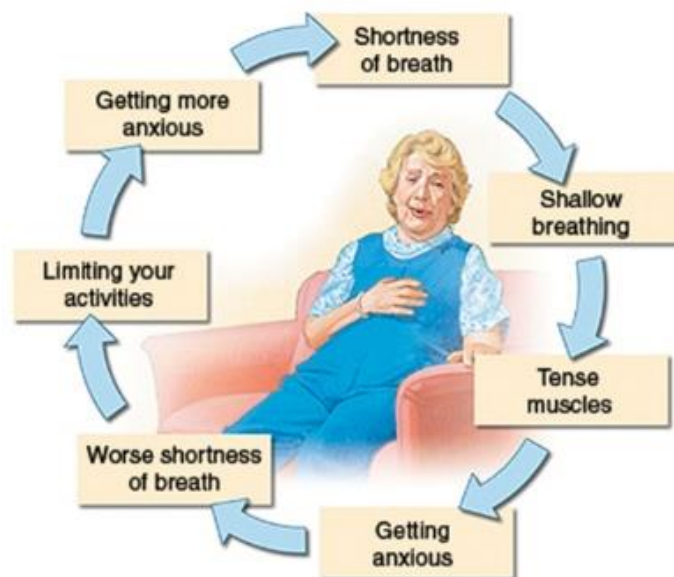
*For the most recent and reliable information on COVID-19 visit <https://www.gov.uk>*



## What can I do to manage my breathlessness symptoms at home?

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.

If we panic about our breathlessness a vicious cycle can build up which leads to further shallow breathing, tension and worse breathlessness.



Lots of things can make breathlessness worse, but it is possible to slowly manage breathlessness by managing stress and using good breathing techniques and postures.

This takes time and practice and will not get rid of breathlessness completely but will help ease breathing.

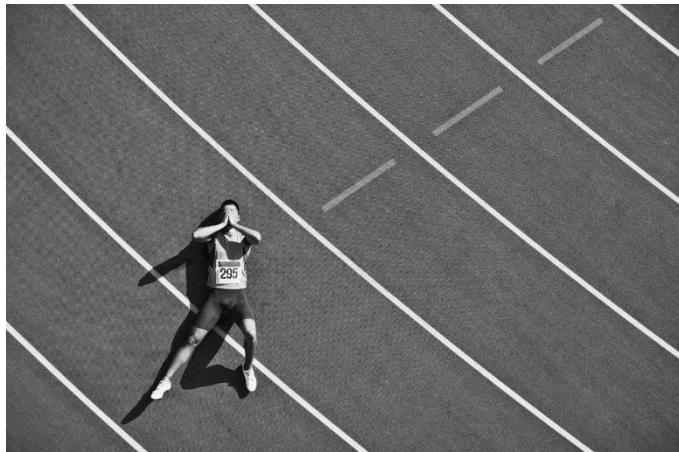


## Breathlessness – Don't Panic

Breathlessness can be frightening, but it is important to remember that it is not dangerous and has a purpose: it is a coping mechanism to get more oxygen into our bodies.

Even top athletes become breathless

A common mistake we make is believing that the treatment for breathlessness is to receive oxygen from cylinders. This is often not the case. Even with severe breathlessness, oxygen levels in the body can be fine.

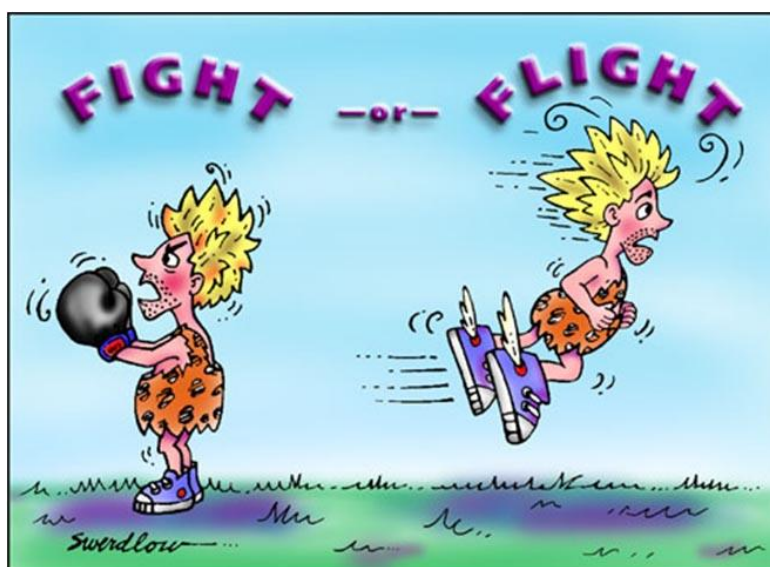


However, if we become panicked by breathlessness or stressed by it, it will make breathlessness worse and it will take longer to ease.

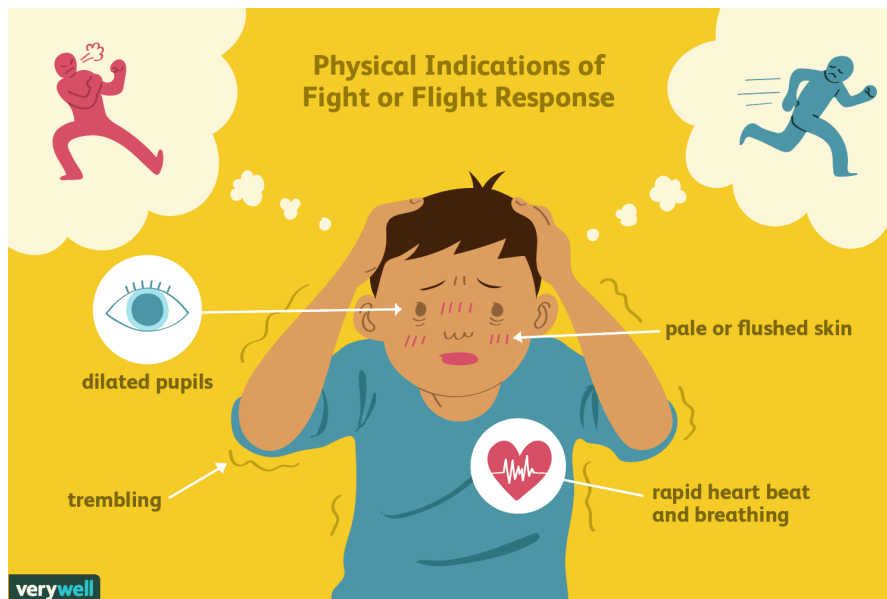
Feeling anxious or frightened will directly increase breathlessness.



Stress makes breathlessness worse as it activates the 'fight or flight' response.



This happens when our mind thinks something dangerous is happening. The brain will prepare the body to defend itself or to have energy to run away. This is a survival mechanism in times of threat.

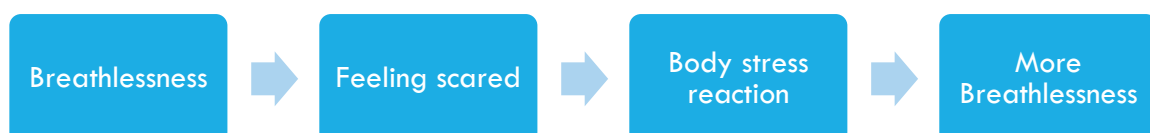


The brain will speed up breathing and make the heart pump faster.

This can make us feel breathless, hot, sweaty and shaky.

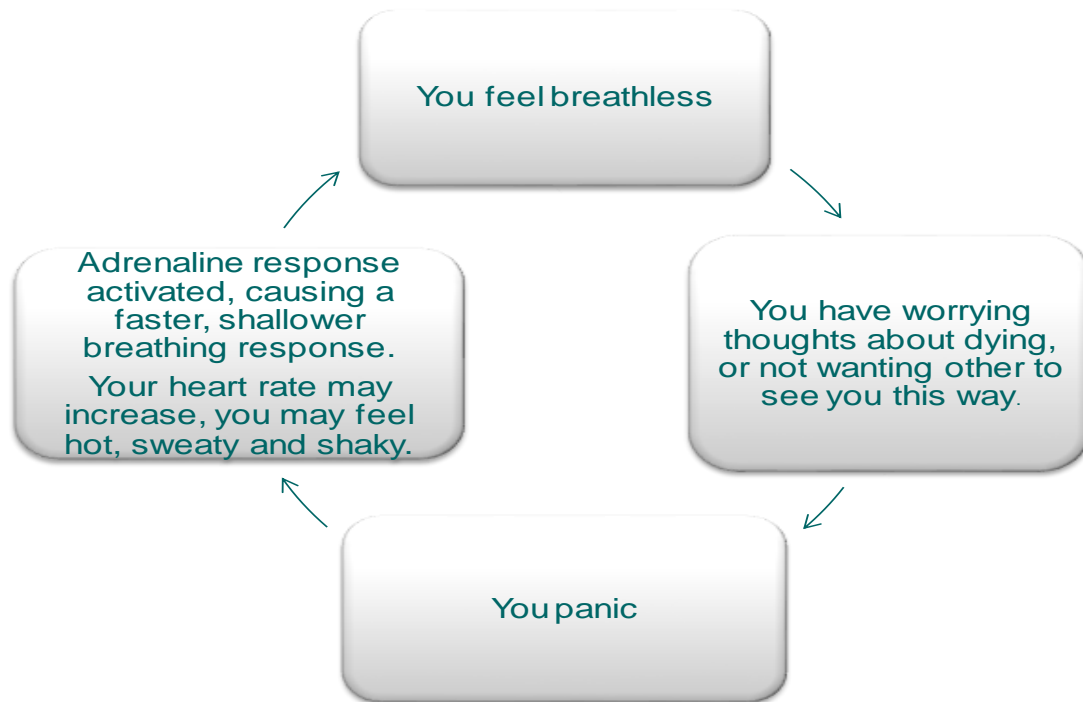
It may help if you are under a real threat, but is not useful when you feel anxious about being breathless in the first place!

To help with breathlessness with COVID-19, it is important to reduce any additional breathlessness caused by our body's stress reaction and our stressful thoughts.





A vicious cycle can happen with breathlessness where worry and stress lead to panic and the body reacts to that panic by becoming more breathless.



Feeling breathless can also set off a vicious cycle of stressful thoughts, which can lead to panic and faster breathing. Anxiety increases muscle tension, which increases the effort of breathing.

Practising breathing techniques, managing your stressful thoughts, mindfulness and relaxation can help.





## Breathing Techniques

Many daily tasks can make you breathless, such as walking, getting dressed, climbing stairs, or doing jobs around the house.

*Do not hold your breath when you do any of these things.*



Being breathless can make you panic or feel frightened and uncomfortable, but it is not in itself dangerous. Panicking will make you feel more short of breath.

**The following information describes techniques you can try to help manage your breathlessness:**

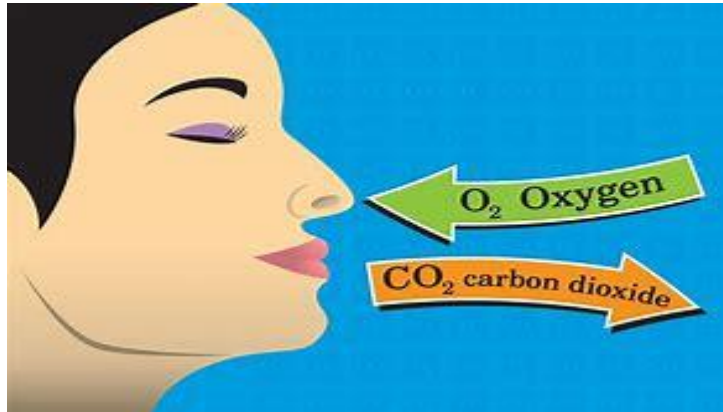
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Following these tips will help ease additional breathlessness that comes with anxiety, stress and worry.



## Breathing Control

Even though breathing feels limited, remember that you are still receiving oxygen.



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.



## 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.

It is not helpful to use this exercise if you are already very breathless.



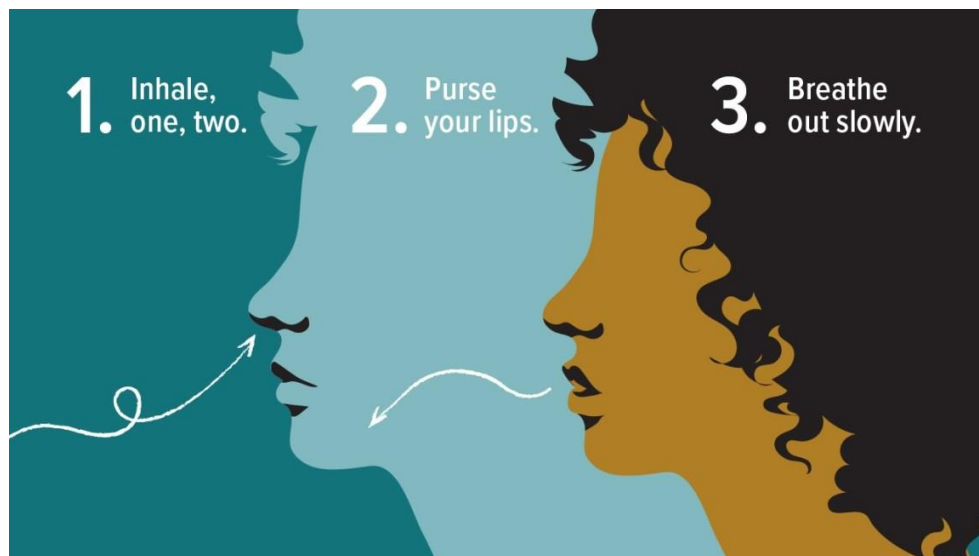
- ❖ As you start to exert yourself, slow down your breathing and breathe in more deeply.
- ❖ Breathe in through your nose if you can.
- ❖ Use it with pursed-lips breathing and /or 'blow-as-you-go' described in this pack





## 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 You Tube 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.

Here are some other examples of when to use ‘blow as you go’:

- ✓ 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.
- ✓ During the most difficult part of any action.



## Using a fan

Some people find that the cold draught from a hand held fan can reduce the feeling of breathlessness.

**PRECAUTION ALERT:** If using a fan, be aware that this can re-circulate the air particles and increases the risk of spread of COVID-19. To avoid the risk of spread it would be recommended that if you use a hand held fan that you 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 15 cm 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.
- ❖ A cool flannel or opening windows, may also help.

This video from The Cambridge Breathlessness Intervention Service demonstrates how to use a fan to help ease breathlessness:

<https://vimeo.com/75201124>



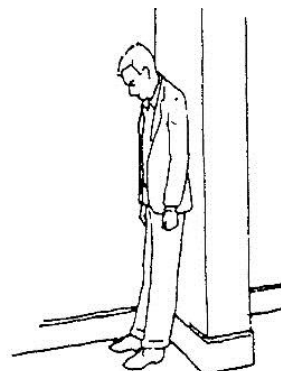
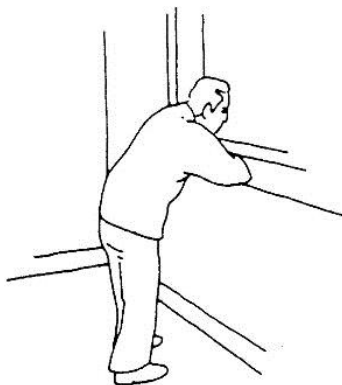
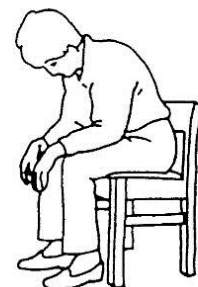
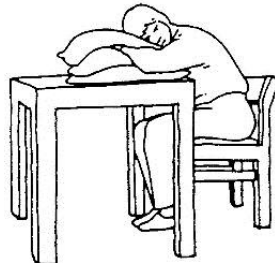


## Positions to ease breathlessness

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.

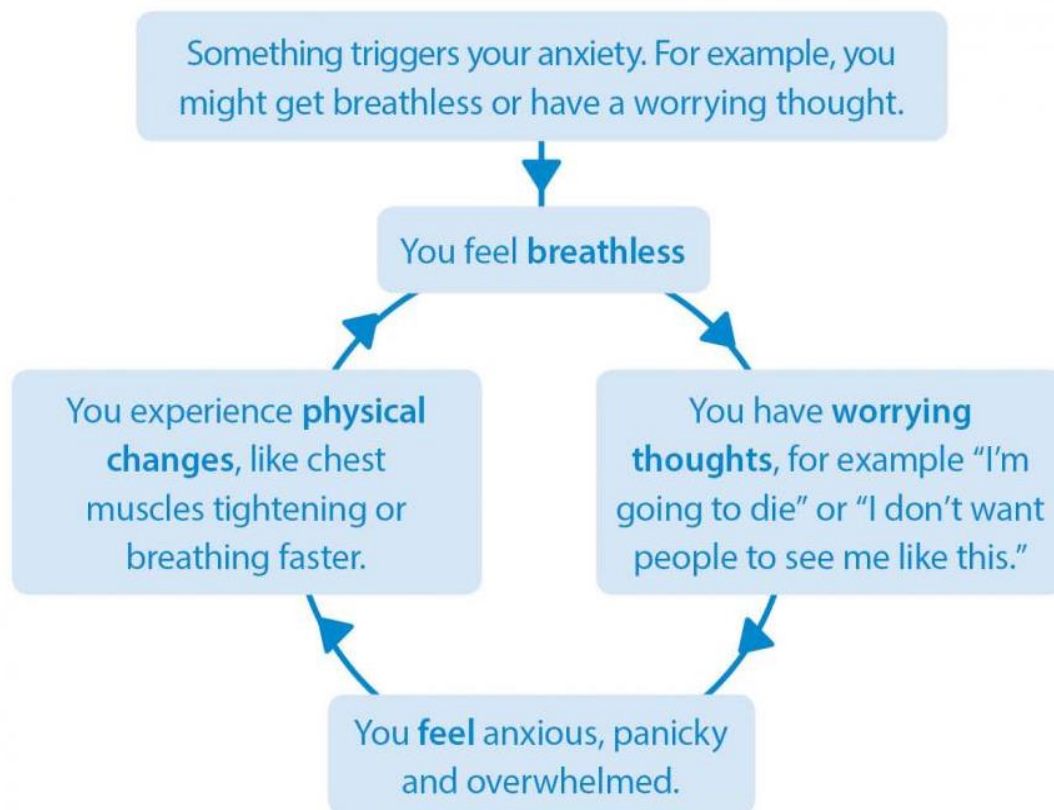
Here are some diagrams of good positions to ease breathlessness:





## Managing Your Thoughts

Breathlessness can be frightening, and this anxiety can make us think negative thoughts and images. The diagram below shows the link between negative thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations:



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:





Here are some suggestions:

- ❖ Even though I am breathless I am still breathing in Oxygen.
- ❖ Breathlessness is the body's natural way of getting in the Oxygen it needs.
- ❖ This difficult time will pass.
- ❖ Others that also have breathlessness and find this hard too.
- ❖ I have had worsened breathlessness before, and it then came better.
- ❖ Stress and worry will make me even shorter of breath, I need to do some relaxation.
- ❖ Having a good breathing technique will help – I shall spend 10 minutes focusing on good breathing techniques (e.g. breathing control, relaxed slow deep breathing, pursed lip breathing, blow as you go, use handheld fan – see technique leaflet)
- ❖ I can try different good breathing positions.



Some things that may help you with negative thoughts are:

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 its people you see often or reconnecting.
Chair exercise	If you can, do some chair exercise. Stretch arms up and down and out 3 times get up and down from chair 3 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

If you notice lots of negative thoughts it may be helpful to read more about managing these. Advice is available on <http://www.iawn.wales.nhs.uk/home>

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>



## Relaxation

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

Here are some relaxation techniques to use. You will get the best effect by practicing these twice a day.

You can find relaxation exercises here:

[https://www.cuh.nhs.uk/sites/default/files/publications/PIN0736\\_leaflet\\_6\\_relaxation\\_v8.pdf](https://www.cuh.nhs.uk/sites/default/files/publications/PIN0736_leaflet_6_relaxation_v8.pdf)

[https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.velindrecc.mindfulness&hl=en\\_GB](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>



On the next few pages you will find different relaxation scripts to use.



## 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:

- ❖ Close your eyes and slowly breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth with pursed lips
- ❖ Tense your feet by pointing your toes towards your body.
- ❖ Hold this for a few seconds, noticing the tension.
- ❖ Let go of the tension and notice the feelings in your feet as you let them flop and relax – repeat x3
- ❖ Tense your legs by pointing your toes out and hold for 10 seconds. Notice the tension in your legs as you hold
- ❖ Let go and relax and notice the feelings in your legs after the tension is released – repeat x3
- ❖ Make a fist, squeezing your hand tightly. Notice the tension in your fingers, knuckles and arms as you hold for 10 seconds
- ❖ Let go of this tension and slowly open your fingers and feel the difference — notice the difference. Your hand is much lighter and relaxed. Enjoy this feeling & repeat x3
- ❖ Lift your shoulders, trying to touch your ears and hold this tension. Notice how uncomfortable this is on your shoulders, neck and back.
- ❖ Release and notice the relaxation in your body – repeat x3



## Progressive Muscle Relaxation : Brief Version

Every time you tense, hold it and notice the tension in that area of your body. When you relax, take some time to notice the difference in that area now it is relaxed.

Repeat each exercise 3 times.

1. SIT  
ON A CHAIR.



2. SCRUNCH  
UP YOUR  
FACE...



THEN  
RELAX  
IT.

3. TENSE  
YOUR  
ARMS...



THEN  
RELAX  
THEM.



4. TENSE UP YOUR  
SHOULDERS  
AND CHEST...



THEN  
RELAX  
THEM.

5. TENSE UP  
YOUR LEGS...



THEN RELAX!

6. BREATHE  
IN  
RELAXATION...



BREATHE OUT  
TENSION.



## Visualisation Relaxation Script: Beach

Switch off all distractions. Find a relaxed position and read slowly. You may choose to play soft calm music. Take time in-between each line to do as it instructs.

If there is someone that can read it out to you slowly either in the house or over the phone – it may be good to ask them to do so as you will be able to keep your eyes closed.

- ❖ Begin by visualizing yourself on a beach. It is a pleasant sunny day, yet not too hot, with a light breeze. Feel the warm sun warming and energizing your skin.
- ❖ Listen to the waves gently lapping on the sand. Allow yourself to be at one with nature.
- ❖ You are completely alone on the beach and feel completely safe. You reach down and take off your shoes and socks and place them on a towel on the sand.
- ❖ Imagine getting up slowly and feel the grains of sand on your feet. Gently wiggle your toes and feel the warm, tingly and energizing sand.
- ❖ Listen to the faint sound of seagulls in the air, adding to the tranquillity.
- ❖ You begin walking towards the water and along the shore, where the water meets the sand. Allow any tension in your body to melt away and notice the perfect blue sky and floating white clouds above.
- ❖ Exhale gently with pursed lips as if you're doing the quiet whistles.
- ❖ Visualize in your mind any place you may be holding tension in your body, any aches or pains, gradually softening and releasing them.
- ❖ As the water ebbs and flows on the shore, so do all your worries and tiredness ebb and flow away. You are feeling completely serene and at peace at the beach.
- ❖ As a wave comes to shore, you look down and see a bottle by your feet. You reach down and pick up the bottle. As you hold the bottle in your hand, you notice the bottle has been sealed with a cork and there is a note inside the bottle. You loosen the cork and reach in with your fingers to pull out the piece of paper. You unfold the paper and read the words.
- ❖ "If you are reading these words, know that you are receiving this message at the right time and place. Know that you are special, loved and never doubt or forget how special you are – My Eternal Love, The Great Spirit."
- ❖ Overjoyed with emotion, you feel someone else should discover this bottle. You fold the note and place it back into the bottle. You reseal the bottle with the cork and with your best throw; you throw the bottle back into the water.
- ❖ It is now time to leave this peaceful setting. When you feel ready, gently bring your awareness back to your body and the room. You can give your fingers and toes a wiggle and when you feel ready, gently open your eyes, coming back to waking consciousness.



## 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 reconnecting with our reality, being in the moment with our bodies and the sensations they experience. 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

Here are links to some Apps with mindfulness techniques:



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



<https://apps.apple.com/gb/app/mindfulness-coach/id804284729>

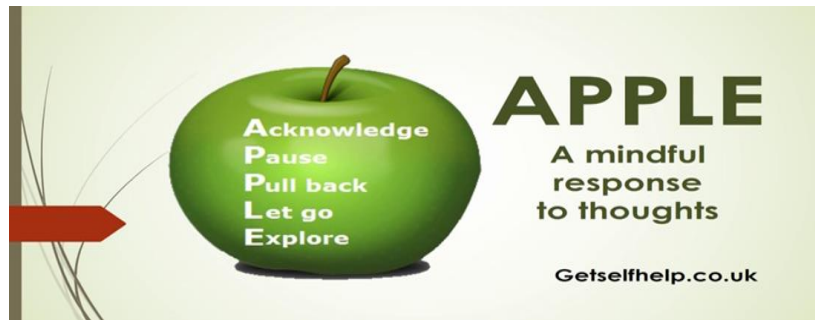
<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=gov.va.mobilehealth.ncptsd.mindfulnesscoach>

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





## The APPLE Technique



- ❖ **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.





## Movement

Sometimes we avoid movement as it can make breathlessness worse, however you should continue to move even if it involves moving your arms or legs in a chair or standing up and sitting down.



You will need to rest, however try not to stay totally still for long periods of time.

Continue to get up to use the bathroom, make drinks and when feeling well enough try short walks around the house or garden.



## Pacing

Find the best balance for you of movement and rest – this is called pacing.

- ❖ Slow down your activities as this will take less energy.
- ❖ Slow down when you talk, laugh, eat or cough – these actions can affect your breathing pattern.
- ❖ Break down your activities into smaller tasks that are more manageable.
- ❖ Allow yourself some time each day to try to relax.

Remember the 3 P's: Pacing, Prioritising, Planning

### 1. Pacing

Pacing means organising your time and efforts so that you can do roughly the same amount of activity from day to day. It's based on planning what you're going to do, rather than simply responding to what you feel at the time.

### 2. Prioritising

Prioritising activities means making choices about what to do. In any one day or week. Think about what needs to be done and about what you really enjoy doing. It is important to get a good balance between those chores and tasks that need to be done and those activities that are done first and foremost for *interest* or *pleasure*. We all need a good balance of both in order to make the most of our lives.

### 3. Planning

Pacing yourself well requires good planning in your life.

Decide when and how you are going to do the various activities you have chosen to do. Make sure that the tasks and activities that are most demanding are not all done in one go but, instead, are well spread out.



## General Health & Wellbeing

You can continue to look after your health and wellbeing during self-isolation. Try some of the top tips below that have been created by some psychologists and occupational therapists:

- ❖ Take your medications. Continue as directed unless told otherwise by your health professionals.
- ❖ Get plenty of rest
- ❖ Keep hydrated.
- ❖ Avoid watching, reading or listening to news that could cause you to feel anxious or distressed.
- ❖ Seek information updates at specific times of day rather than checking all the time.
- ❖ Get a good balance with social media. Stay connected with people but also have breaks from social media. Agree regular check in times and feel connected to the people around you.
- ❖ If you feel well enough, access natural sunlight in your garden and engage in light exercise.
- ❖ Establish a daily routine. Routines provide structure and purpose.
- ❖ Balance your weekly routine so you have a good mix of work (activities that have to be done), rest and leisure.
- ❖ Think about the regular activities that are most important to you.
- ❖ Talk with family, friends and neighbours to help them understand how you feel and how they can help. Can they talk you through using apps on your mobile phone, for instance?
- ❖ Take care of yourself. Eat and drink healthily with plenty of fruit, vegetables and water to support your immune function and energy levels. For more information see the BDA website.
- ❖ Avoid staying still for too long. Exercise and regular movement will maintain fitness and strength. If you are working from home, take breaks and eat away from your “desk.”
- ❖ Have a good sleep routine. If you are struggling, try avoiding tea and coffee in the late afternoon and evening, take a bath, use blackout curtains, listen to gentle music or try deep breathing exercises.
- ❖ Keep in touch. Arrange to speak to someone most days on the phone, through social media or over the garden fence. If you are older Age UK and Silverline have people you can speak to.



## Useful websites if you have an underlying health condition

### Diabetes

- ❖ If you have Diabetes you can find useful information about managing Diabetes and COVID-19 here

[https://www.diabetes.org.uk/about\\_us/news/coronavirus](https://www.diabetes.org.uk/about_us/news/coronavirus)

### Heart condition

- ❖ If you have a cardiac condition you can find information about COVID-19 here: British Heart Foundation info on COVID-19

<https://www.bhf.org.uk/informationsupport/heart-matters-magazine/news/coronavirus-and-your-health>

### Respiratory condition

- ❖ If you have a respiratory condition you can find useful information about COVID-19 here: British Lung Foundation info on COVID -19:

<https://www.blf.org.uk/support-for-you/coronavirus/what-is-coronavirus>