



# Worksheet | Panic

## Exercise 1: Breathing

One of the most common responses to anxiety and panic is that our breathing rate increases. This is driven by the perception, often outside our awareness, that we are under threat and preparing us to fight or flee. Under normal circumstances we need to breathe at regular controlled intervals providing us with sufficient oxygen to survive. When we breathe in, our lungs take in oxygen, where it is used by the body and produce carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) which we breathe out. In order for the body to run efficiently there needs to be a balance between oxygen and carbon dioxide. This balance is maintained by how fast and deeply we breathe. Breathe in too much and the balance tips so there's increased oxygen; breathe in too little and there's increased levels of carbon dioxide. We need different levels of oxygen and carbon dioxide, depending on our level of physical activity.

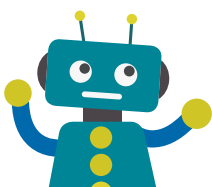
When we exercise, there is an increase in both oxygen and carbon dioxide so the balance is maintained even though the breathing rate has increased. When we relax both oxygen and carbon dioxide decreases, so the breathing rate decreases, again maintaining the correct balance.

When a person over-breathes, they are taking in more air than the body needs. This upsets the balance between carbon dioxide and oxygen. Most of the body's mechanisms including breathing, are automatically controller, but breathing can also be put under voluntary control. We do this, for example, when we hold our breath when swimming, or increase our breathing when blowing up a balloon. Stress and our general mood also affect breathing. We can learn to maintain a calm and relaxed rate of breathing, so we can stop many of the physical symptoms that accompany stress.

When we over-breathe, the balance is tipped so that there is less carbon dioxide than oxygen. The body responds with a number of chemical changes, which lead to two main types of symptoms:

- 1) Due to the slight reduction of oxygen in certain parts of the brain, symptoms like dizziness, lightheadedness, blurred vision, confusion and breathlessness can occur
- 2) The slight reduction of oxygen in certain parts of the body, leads to physical symptoms such as an increase in heart rate, numbness and tingling, cold clammy hands, and muscle stiffness.

Although these changes are NOT harmful, you can bring the body and brain back to equilibrium by following the exercises on the next page.





### Check your breathing rate

Count your breathing rate for one minute, where a “breath in and out” counts as one breath

My breathing rate is \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ breaths per minute

The appropriate rate of breathing when calm and relaxed is around 10-14 breaths per minute

Focus on your breathing and regulate it (keep it consistent) until it returns to within normal levels

### Exercise 2:

#### Thinking

Avoid negative “self-talk” that focuses your attention on your symptoms – avoid telling yourself “Stop panicking!” or “Relax!”

Remind yourself that the symptoms of a panic attack are uncomfortable, but understandable and not life threatening. Do tell yourself that you’ve felt these feelings before and nothing bad or life threatening happened, you survived.

Focus your attention on something outside your own body and symptoms, i.e distract yourself by counting back in threes from 100, recall the words from a favourite song or notice and concentrate on the sights and sounds around you.

Fleeing from the situation will only reinforce the perception that your panic attacks are unbearable. If you sit with the knowledge that the symptoms will pass and allow that to happen, it affirms that nothing bad will happen, increasing your confidence in your ability to cope.

