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Breathing more easily

Most of the time we don't think about our breathing – it just happens. However, to be able to control your breathing you need to become aware of how it changes from moment to moment; and you will learn this by assessing your own breathing. Once you are familiar with your own breathing pattern you can set about changing it for the better by learning the *relaxed breathing* exercise.

Remember that your breathing will not improve by just sitting and thinking about it. You must do the exercises to make it happen.

How are you breathing now?

Sit in an upright chair, place one hand on your lower chest and the other on your upper chest.

Let yourself relax for a moment and then answer the following questions.



Put your hands on your chest

Q1. How fast are you breathing?

Use your watch to measure how many breaths you take in one minute (one breath is in and out).

The ideal breathing rate is 12–16 breaths per minute.

Q2. Nose-breathing?

Are you breathing through your nose?

Y/N

As you know, nose-breathing is healthier than mouth-breathing.

Q3. Sighing or clearing your throat?

Is your breathing steady or is it interrupted by...	Sighs
	Sniffs
	Coughs

Normal breathing is steady, smooth and gentle.

Q4. Where are you breathing?

Which hand is moving most? Or are they both the same?	Upper
	Lower
	Same

Your lower hand should move most if you are breathing properly.

Q5. How much movement is there in your chest?

Do you feel that your upper and lower chest are both moving a lot?	Y/N
--	-----

Sitting at rest, you should feel very little movement.

Q6. Quiet breathing?

Is your breathing noisy?	Y/N
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Normal breathing is silent.

Q7. Are your chest muscles relaxed?

Do you feel any muscle tension in your neck, back, shoulders, chest or stomach? Y/N

In an ideal world all your muscles would feel relaxed.

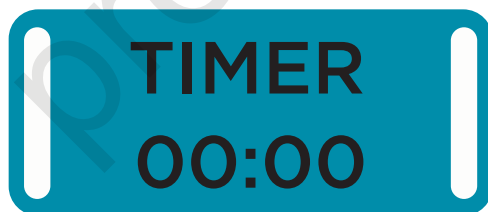
Now that you are aware of your breathing and know what correct breathing is, you can start to improve the way you breathe.

Relaxed breathing

1. Sit comfortably

Sit in a straight-back chair with your legs uncrossed. You may find a cushion behind your back makes this more comfortable. Make sure that the clothing around your waist is loose and not constricting your breathing.

Start the timer.



2. Notice any tension?

Put your hands on your upper and lower chest and let yourself breathe smoothly and quietly through your nose. Perhaps ask someone to read these instructions to you - so that you can close your eyes.

Check your face, jaw, neck, shoulders, chest, stomach and legs for any tension and let yourself relax as much as you can. Keep breathing gently.



Check your body for tension

Next, focus on those areas of your body where you feel movement as you breathe.

After around a minute bring your top hand down to rest in your lap, if you wish.

3. 'Let go...' as you breathe out

Now concentrate on the area behind the hand on your lower chest. Feel a sense of 'letting go'. It can help if you say to yourself silently 'Let go' or 'Relax' each time you breathe out. You may find that your breaths become slightly smaller – which is good.

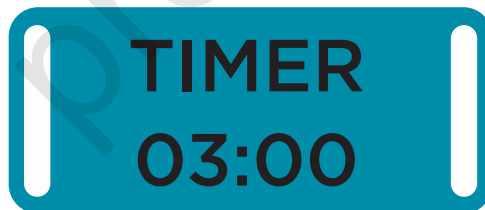


Breathe out and 'let go...'

4. Continue for three minutes, rest, then repeat once more

Practise *relaxed breathing* for three minutes.

Let yourself rest for around 30 seconds and then repeat the exercise once more.



Try to practise *relaxed breathing* three times each day. It is easier to do this when your stomach is not full. Practising before breakfast can get the day off to a good start. You may want to complete a second practice before lunch, in the afternoon or early evening. Many people find that it is a good idea to do the final

practice just before going to sleep as it also helps to relax the body.

Tick the chart on page 70 each time you complete a practice.

James's story

I first met James, age 75, after he had attended as an emergency at his local doctor's surgery, where the nurse had given him a nebulizer to ease his breathing. He felt better after being nebulized, but the nurse pointed out that he was still mouth-breathing and using his upper chest muscles to breathe. She suggested that a course of breathing techniques might help him. James was sceptical, but willing to give the techniques a try.

When he returned after two weeks of practice there was a definite improvement - he was now breathing properly. James was pleased; he said he had averted a panic attack by concentrating on his breathing and using *pursed lips breathing* until the feeling had passed. He was surprised that the techniques had made such a difference to his life. He found it easier to do the exercises lying on the bed with a couple of pillows behind his back. Now, he routinely did two rounds of *relaxed breathing* before his afternoon nap and at night before he went to sleep.
