

Anxiety and Breathlessness Workshop

The Workbook Part 1



Developed by the ABUHB Respiratory Psychology Service

May 2026

The information in this workbook is intended to be used *alongside* medical advice and management of your respiratory condition and does not replace medical advice.

We would recommend taking your time to work through the information and activities in this workbook over several days or weeks, and ensuring you allow time to practice the different exercises regularly.

Anxiety and Breathlessness

What is breathlessness?



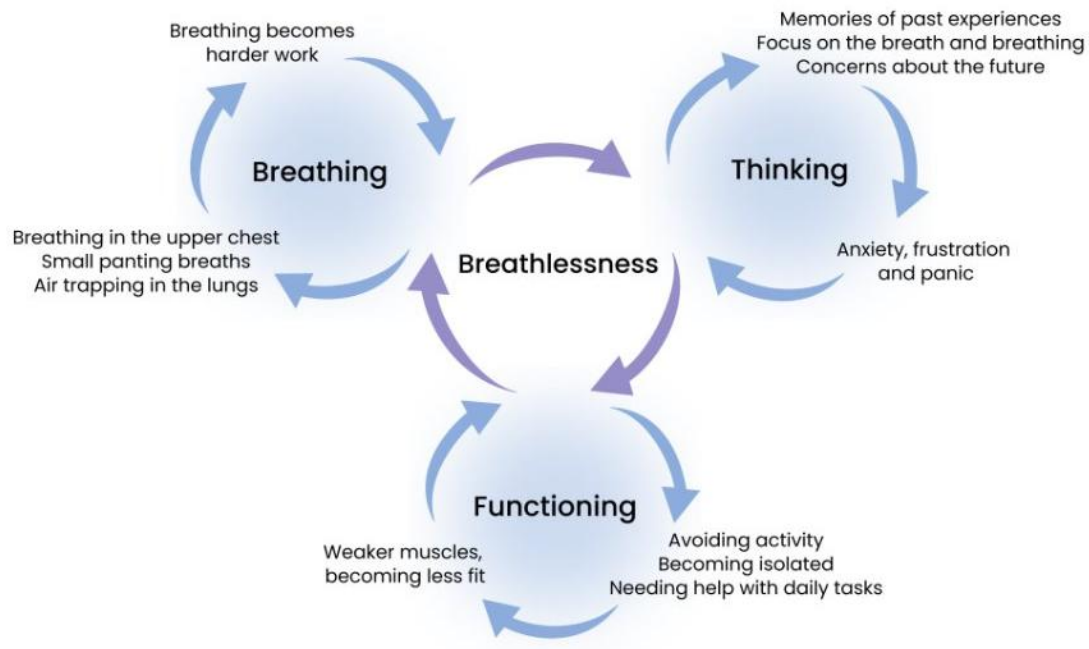
Breathlessness is an unpleasant feeling of breathing discomfort. It can be **disabling and incredibly frightening** to experience. Several factors come together to impact our breathing, including **underlying medical conditions, the way we breathe** and **anxiety**. Many people living with respiratory conditions such as COPD, asthma and pulmonary fibrosis experience chronic breathlessness even when their underlying respiratory condition is being treated as well as possible.

Everyone's experience of breathlessness is unique to them. Describe your experience in 1-3 words:

It is common to experience anxiety and low mood, and to feel isolated or distressed when struggling with chronic breathlessness. These feelings can make it harder to manage our breathing and can even make us feel more breathless. The good news is that:

by learning skills to manage anxiety and breathlessness, breathlessness can usually be relieved even when the underlying condition cannot be further improved.

Managing Chronic Breathlessness



Reproduced with permission of the Cambridge Breathlessness Intervention Service. Spathis A, Booth S, Moffat C, Hurst R, Ryan R, Chin C, et al. The Breathing, Thinking, Functioning clinical model: a proposal to facilitate evidence-based breathlessness management in chronic respiratory disease. *npj Primary Care Respiratory Medicine*. 2017;27(1):27.

The Cambridge “Breathing, Thinking, Functioning” model shows how **normal responses** to breathing difficulty can become locked in “**vicious cycles**” that lead to worsening breathlessness in people living with respiratory conditions.

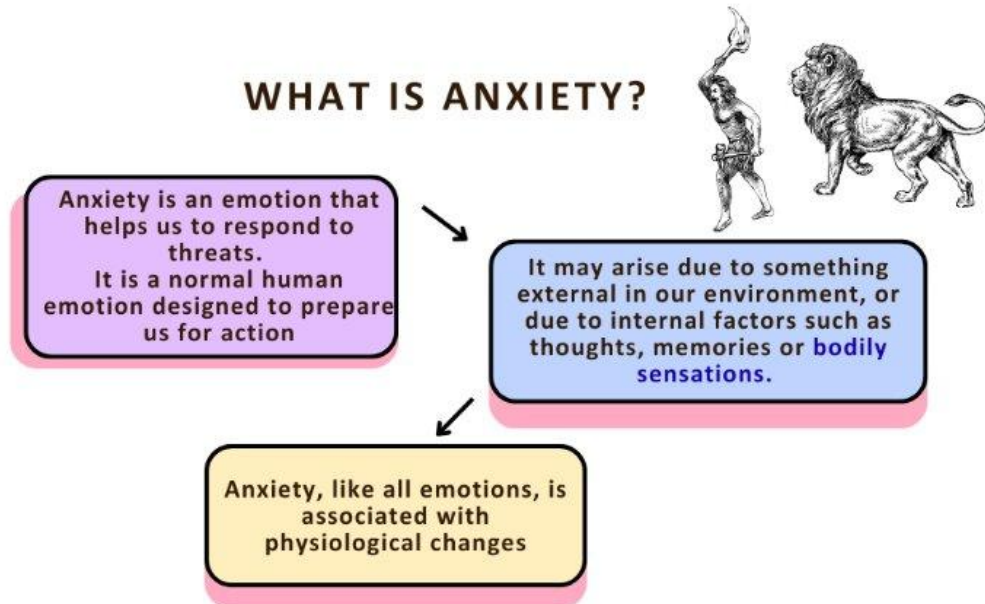
Thinking: Living with breathlessness can have a huge impact on our lives. We might find ourselves focusing on our breathing all the time, struggling with frightening memories or worrying about the future. These thoughts can cause us to feel very anxious. As we will see, this anxiety can exacerbate breathlessness.

Breathing: When we are breathless, we may fall into an inefficient breathing pattern as we try to get more air in. For example, we may not fully empty our lungs on the out breath, or we may “pant” which causes us to breathe primarily with the top part of our chest. This can make us feel even more breathless.

Functioning: When we worry about our breathing, we may avoid activities that cause us to feel breathless. Over time, our muscles then become weaker. Weaker muscles use oxygen less efficiently and this makes breathlessness worse.

By addressing these cycles, we can improve our breathlessness management. As we will see, **anxiety can play a role in all of these cycles**. Anxiety management is therefore an important part of managing breathlessness for many people with respiratory conditions.

Understanding Anxiety



Write down some of the situations that trigger feelings of anxiety for you.

Our “Fight or Flight” Response

Our fight or flight response is the **bodily response** we experience when we feel anxious. When we **feel under threat or in danger**, an “alarm” goes off in our brains and adrenaline is released into our bloodstream. This triggers our sympathetic nervous system to **prepare our bodies** to either fight the threat or to run away (flight). Our body systems speed up and blood is diverted towards our big muscles ready for action. This can feel uncomfortable and may be alarming to us if we don’t recognise what is happening.

We might notice...

Racing thoughts – our brain becomes “hijacked” to focus on the perceived threat. We might think of frightening past experiences or future worst-case scenarios. It can be hard to think clearly when we are in this mode.

Our **breathing** becomes **faster and shallow** to help us take in more oxygen. This can lead to **breathlessness, light headedness and dizziness**. We may experience a **tight chest** and even a choking feeling.

Our **heart beats faster and harder** to pump more oxygen and blood to our muscles. We may notice **palpitations**, increased blood pressure and feeling hot. We might sweat in order to cool our bodies down again.

As more blood is carried to the big muscles in our arms and legs, we may feel **tense and achy** in our muscles. We might notice **tingly hands or trembling**.

Our **senses are heightened** so that we are more alert. Our eyes widen to let in more light and to focus in on the perceived threat. We might experience improved or blurred vision.

Digestion slows down (digesting food is not our body’s top priority during a perceived emergency!), and the muscles in our stomach and intestines are relaxed as blood is diverted elsewhere. We might experience **stomach churning/ butterflies/ nausea**, as well as a **dry mouth**.

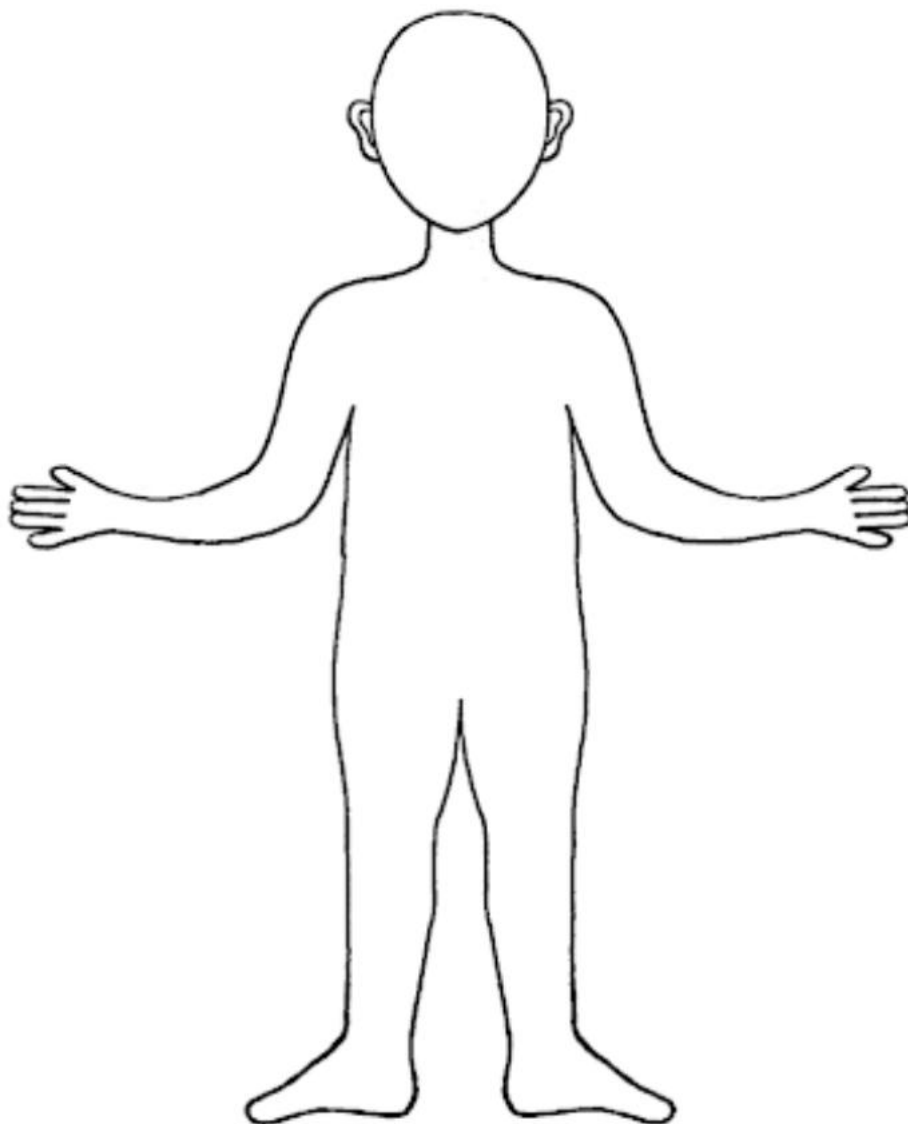
Our **bladder relaxes** and we might feel the need to go to the toilet.

Our **immune responses** also decrease during this response.

Our body returns to normal after the perceived threat has passed.

However, some people experiencing ongoing anxiety may notice a longer-term impact on their pattern of breathing.

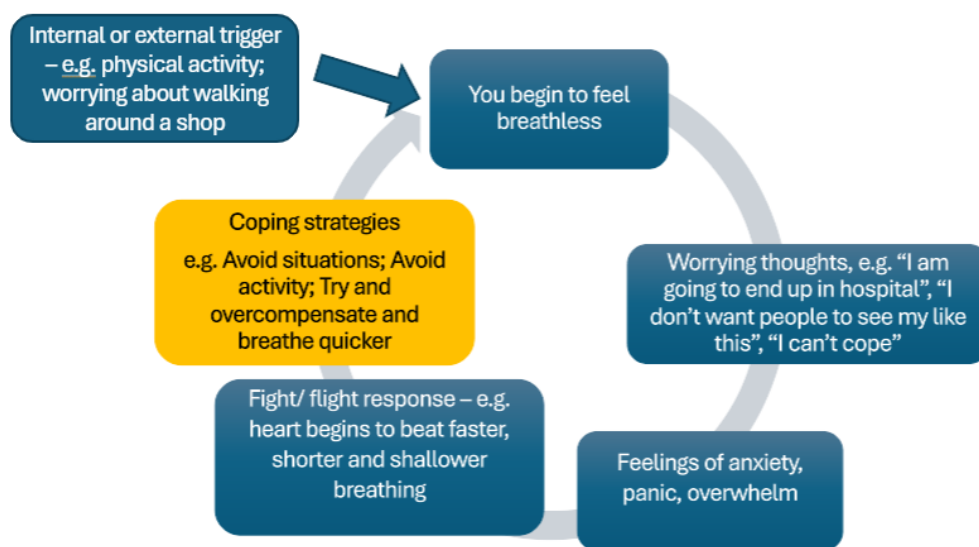
Use the diagram below to **record any changes** that you notice in your body when you are feeling stressed or anxious.



Cycle of Anxiety and Breathlessness

As we can see, when we feel in danger or under threat, this can trigger a strong body response. Just **thinking** or **talking** about things that worry us can trigger our natural anxiety response. For people living with respiratory conditions, noticing **changes in breathing** or **planning to do something active** can feel threatening. You might worry about becoming more breathless. This can lead to feelings of anxiety and trigger your fight or flight response, which in turn exacerbates breathlessness. You might find yourself avoiding situations that can trigger feelings of anxiety and/ or breathlessness for you. This can give some short-term relief, but in the long run can lead to even more anxiety.

The **cycle of breathlessness** below shows how breathlessness and anxiety can exacerbate each other.



Does this cycle resonate with you?

Write down some of the things you do to cope when you feel breathless or are worried about your breathing:

Signs that anxiety may be contributing to your experience of breathlessness

Anxiety and panic... 

...Tend to start **suddenly and sometimes without warning**. You may be breathing normally in one moment and it's hard to breath the next.

...Tend to lead to **shallow rapid breathing or hyperventilation**. This can make it feel like you can't get enough air in.

...May follow a **stressful event**, but can also build up over time

...Often comes with other **“fight or flight”** symptoms

...Tends to respond well to **relaxation exercises and breathing control**.

Progressive breathlessness that worsens over time is more likely to be associated with your underlying physical health condition.

Could anxiety be contributing to your breathlessness?

Write down some signs that you have notcied.

Anxiety and Thinking

Thoughts are the **things our minds say to us** – they include ideas, opinions, pictures, beliefs and memories that pop into our heads. They are like an “inner voice” that helps us to make sense of the world. Sometimes we are aware of our thoughts, but often we don’t notice them playing in the background.

Our thoughts can **feel very real** and as though they are facts...for example “I really can’t cope with this hospital appointment” or “I can’t get in control of my breathing, I am in trouble”.

We often find ourselves thinking about things that worry us – this is because our minds are always **looking out for danger** to try and protect us. If we have had very frightening experiences of being unable to breathe properly or are living with a respiratory condition, it is very normal to pay a lot of attention to our breathing and to worry about becoming breathless. We might **revisit memories** of frightening experiences or **predict future catastrophes**. Unfortunately, our thoughts can quickly spiral and feel very overwhelming.

Becoming **more aware** of our anxious thinking habits and learning strategies to manage them can **reduce their impact** on our breathing and behaviours.

What thoughts show up when you feel anxious?

Have a look at the “unhelpful thinking habits” handout on the next page. Make a note of the “habits” that you notice yourself falling into most often.

The handout also includes some helpful questions you can ask yourself when you notice these types of thoughts.

Unhelpful Thinking Habits

Over the years, we tend to get into unhelpful thinking habits such as those described below. We might favour some over others, and there might be some that seem far too familiar. Once you can identify your unhelpful thinking styles, you can start to notice them – they very often occur just before and during distressing situations. Once you can notice them, then that can help you to challenge or distance yourself from those thoughts, and see the situation in a different and more helpful way. *Blue text (italics) helps us find alternative, more realistic thoughts.*

 Mental Filter - When we notice only what the filter allows or wants us to notice, and we dismiss anything that doesn't 'fit'. Like looking through dark blinkers or 'gloomy specs', or only catching the negative stuff in our 'kitchen strainers' whilst anything more positive or realistic is dismissed. <i>Am I only noticing the bad stuff? Am I filtering out the positives? Am I wearing those 'gloomy specs'? What would be more realistic?</i>	 Judgements - Making evaluations or judgements about events, ourselves, others, or the world, rather than describing what we actually see and have evidence for. <i>I'm making an evaluation about the situation or person. It's how I make sense of the world, but that doesn't mean my judgements are always right or helpful. Is there another perspective?</i>
Prediction - Believing we know what's going to happen in the future. <i>Am I thinking that I can predict the future? How likely is it that that might really happen?</i> 	Emotional Reasoning - I feel bad so it must be bad! I feel anxious, so I must be in danger. <i>Just because it feels bad, doesn't necessary mean it is bad. My feelings are just a reaction to my thoughts – and thoughts are just automatic brain reflexes</i> 
Mind-Reading - Assuming we know what others are thinking (usually about us). <i>Am I assuming I know what others are thinking? What's the evidence? Those are my own thoughts, not theirs. Is there another, more balanced way of looking at it?</i> 	Mountains and Molehills Exaggerating the risk of danger, or the negatives. Minimising the odds of how things are most likely to turn out, or minimising positives <i>Am I exaggerating the bad stuff? How would someone else see it? What's the bigger picture?</i> 
Compare and despair Seeing only the good and positive aspects in others, and getting upset when comparing ourselves negatively against them. <i>Am I doing that 'compare and despair' thing? What would be a more balanced and helpful way of looking at it?</i> 	Catastrophising - Imagining and believing that the worst possible thing will happen. <i>OK, thinking that the worst possible thing will definitely happen isn't really helpful right now. What's most likely to happen?</i> 

 Critical self Putting ourselves down, selfcriticism, blaming ourselves for events or situations that are not (totally) our responsibility <i>There I go, that internal bully's at it again. Would most people who really know me say that about me? Is this something that I am totally responsible for?</i>	 Black and white thinking - Believing that something or someone can be only good or bad, right or wrong, rather than anything in-between or 'shades of grey'. <i>Things aren't either totally white or totally black – there are shades of grey. Where is this on the spectrum?</i>
Shoulds and musts - Thinking or saying 'I should' (or shouldn't) and 'I must' puts pressure on ourselves, and sets up unrealistic expectations. <i>Am I putting more pressure on myself, setting up expectations of myself that are almost impossible? What would be more realistic?</i> 	Memories - Current situations and events can trigger upsetting memories, leading us to believe that the danger is here and now, rather than in the past, causing us distress right now. <i>This is just a reminder of the past. That was then, and this is now. Even though this memory makes me <u>feel</u> upset, it's not <u>actually</u> happening again right now.</i> 

Managing unhelpful thoughts: Wise observation

It can be helpful to think of our “**stream of thoughts**” as a fast-flowing river. We wouldn’t ordinarily jump into water with a strong current, and we would do our best to find a way out if we notice ourselves getting pulled in. Otherwise, we could easily get **swept away**. We can’t control the flow of the river, but we can choose to take a step back, sit on the bank and watch as the water flows past.



Our thoughts can be similar – we can’t always control what pops into our minds. However, we can learn to “**take a step back**” rather than getting “swept away” by them. This can be an incredibly useful skill to master. It involves first **becoming more aware** of the things that **trigger** our anxiety and of our thinking habits. It can be helpful to keep a thoughts diary for this (see page 21 of this workbook). We then practice **noticing with curiosity** when our thoughts are beginning to pull us in, and simply describing our experiences to ourselves. We remind ourselves that **these are thoughts, not facts**. For example:

“**I’m noticing the thought that** I can’t get in control of my breathing, this is causing me to have an anxiety response”

“**I am noticing** that I am predicting the future again. Anxiety is telling me I can’t cope. This is typical of anxiety.”

The “**Leaves on a Stream**” exercise on page 14 is a great way to practice noticing our thoughts without getting swept away.

“Leaves on a Stream” exercise



This exercise is adapted from Harris (2009). It is a mindfulness exercise aiming to help us learn to notice our thoughts without getting lost in them.

1. Sit comfortably and either close your eyes or rest them gently on a fixed spot in the room.
2. Visualise yourself sitting beside a gentle flowing stream with leaves floating along the surface of the water.
3. For the next few minutes, take each thought that enters your mind and place it on a leaf... let it float by. Do this with each thought - pleasurable, painful, or neutral. Even if you have joyous or enthusiastic thoughts, place them on a leaf and let them float by.
4. If your thoughts momentarily stop, continue to watch the stream. Sooner or later, your thoughts will start up again.
5. Allow the stream to flow at its own pace. Don't try to speed it up and rush your thoughts along. You're not trying to rush the leaves along or "get rid" of your thoughts. You are allowing them to come and go at their own pace.
6. If your mind says "This is dumb", "I'm bored" or "I'm not doing this right", place *those thoughts* on leaves, too, and let them pass.
7. If a leaf gets stuck, allow it to hang around until it's ready to float by. If the thought comes up again, watch it float by another time.
8. If a difficult or painful feeling arises, simply acknowledge it. Say to yourself, "I notice myself having a feeling of anxiety/ impatience/ frustration." Place those thoughts on leaves and allow them float along.
9. From time to time, your thoughts may hook you and distract you from being fully present in this exercise. This is *normal*. As soon as you realize that you have become sidetracked, gently bring your attention back to the visualization exercise

Reconnecting with the Present Moment

As we have seen, when we are anxious our thoughts can “run away” with us. We might be thinking about things that have **already happened**, or worrying about things that **might happen** in the future. Grounding and mindfulness exercises help to “**anchor us**” when we are caught up in our thoughts and feelings, or experiencing anxiety that is exacerbating our breathlessness. They help us to come back to the present moment and **focus on what is happening right now**. When we can focus our attention on the here and now, we can take a broader perspective and are more able to focus on doing things that are important and helpful to us.



Grounding exercises can help to **re-focus** on the present moment using our senses.

Mindfulness exercises help us to become **more aware** of what is happening in the present moment. This might involve:

- Being more consciously awareness of the environment around us;
- Slowing down and becoming more aware of our thoughts, feelings and body;
- Really focusing on what we are doing in the moment (for example, drinking a cup of tea).

We have included some ideas for practicing these skills on the next few pages. **With practice**, they will become easier and feel more natural.

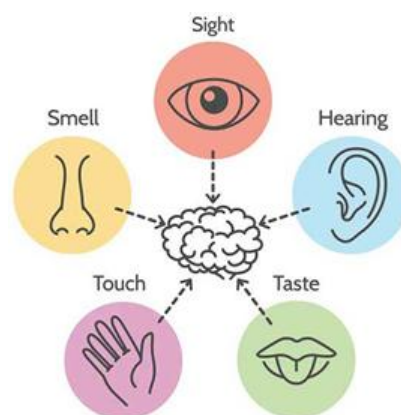
Dropping Anchor Grounding



This is a simple exercise that does not rely on breathwork. It helps us to steady ourselves when we are feeling overwhelmed. *Note - if it feels too challenging to notice your thoughts and feelings at the moment, you can skip over step 1.*

To start, get into a comfortable seated position, or do this exercise standing. Gently push your feet into the floor. Notice the floor beneath you, supporting you. Notice all the points where your feet are in contact with the ground.

1. **Acknowledge** your thoughts and feelings – see if you can notice any thoughts or feelings showing up right now;
2. **Connect** with your body – feel your feet on the floor; Gently roll your shoulders back and down; take a stretch – notice the sensations as you do this.
3. **Engage** with your environment – look around and describe...
 - 5 things you can see
 - 4 things you can touch/feel
 - 3 things you can hear
 - 2 things you can smell
 - 1 thing you can taste



You can find **free audio recordings** of different versions of this exercise below to help you practice this skill:

- **Dropping anchor, step-by step, 10 minutes:** actmindfully.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Dropping-Anchor-step-by-step-Russ-Harris.mp3
- **Dropping anchor, 4 minutes:** actmindfully.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Dropping-anchor-4-mins-Russ-Harris-The-Happiness-Trap.mp3
- **Dropping anchor, 8 minutes:** actmindfully.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Dropping-Anchor-8-mins-Russ-Harris-The-Happiness-Trap.mp3

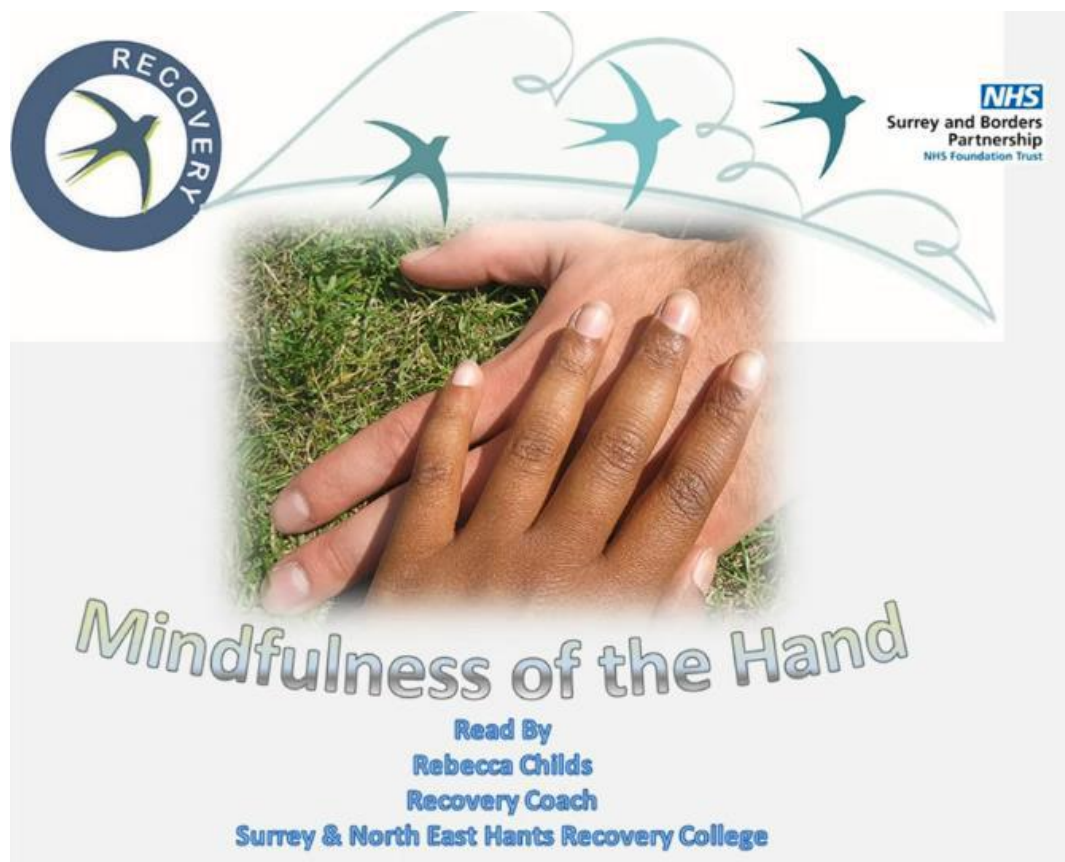
“Notice your hand” exercise

“Notice your hand” is a brief grounding and mindfulness exercise developed by medical practitioner and psychotherapist Dr Russ Harris. Simply follow the guided instructions to focus your attention on your hand for 5 minutes.

This might seem like a long time to be focusing on your hand! We invite you to **notice any judgments** your mind makes about this idea, and give it a go with a **sense of curiosity**.

Follow the link below to listen to the “Notice your hand” exercise on YouTube, or type “Mindfulness of the Hand read by Rebecca Owen Childs” into YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MW00P8qoNGQ>



How to practice mindfulness:

Practicing mindfulness simply means **focusing our attention** on something here and now. This could be our breathing, our body, or something we are doing. We could choose an activity to do mindfully during the day, for one, two or five minutes. For example, drinking a cup of tea, walking, or washing the dishes. Whatever you are doing, **be in that moment**, right now. See, hear, smell, touch, feel, breathe. See if you can **describe experiences**, rather than judging them as good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant. As you are doing this, notice whenever thoughts come to mind, then **re-focus your attention** on your chosen activity.



Mindfully washing the dishes

If we wash the dishes each evening, we might tend to be ‘in our heads’ as we’re washing up, thinking about things we have to do, worrying about future events, or revisiting things from the past. Without meaning to, we practice worrying. But a young child might see the washing up differently: *“Look at those bubbles! They’re all colours of the rainbow!”* They notice the things we’ve come to overlook – and they **don’t tend to get caught up** in worrying thoughts. Washing up and other routine activities can become a regular chance to practice mindfulness. We could notice the temperature of the water and how it feels on the skin, the texture of the bubbles on our hands and how they sound when they pop. The sound of the water as we splash the dishes clean. The smoothness of the plates and the texture of the sponge. **Just paying attention** to what we might not usually notice gives our minds a break from worrying thinking.

Mindful walking

Walking is something that most of us do at some time during the day. We can practice, if for only a few minutes at a time, walking mindfully. Rather than being ‘in our heads’ (thinking, planning or worrying usually), we can look around and notice what we see, hear and sense. We might notice the sensations in our own body just through the act of walking. Noticing the sensations and movement of our feet, legs, arms, head and body as we take each step. Thoughts will continuously intrude, but we can **just notice them**, and then bring our attention back to our walking.



Be patient, kind and gentle with yourself. When we first start to practice being mindfully present, we often notice that thoughts seem to intrude almost all the time – that’s ok, and to be expected.

The aim of mindful activity is to, gently and patiently, bring our attention back to the present moment activity continually and repeatedly, noticing what is going on **‘here and now’**

Reframing unhelpful Thoughts

As we become more aware of our thinking habits, we are likely to notice that some of our thoughts can be unhelpful — they might be very frightening, critical, or not entirely accurate.

It can be helpful to practise **reframing unhelpful thinking**. This means learning to look at your thoughts and consider **alternative** or **more balanced** ways of seeing things. The goal isn't to force positive thinking, but to find a perspective that is fair, kind, helpful and **grounded in evidence**. Here are some examples:

Trigger	Distressing thoughts	Alternative thoughts
Went on a walk outside, began to feel breathless.	I should be able to walk this far, my breathing is ruining everything	This is really challenging and upsetting, it is okay to find this hard. There are things I can do despite breathlessness. I can choose to focus on the things that I CAN do right now.
Becoming breathless at home.	I can't breathe, it's going to get worse, I'll end up in hospital again	I am falling into the habit of predicting the future. I have felt this way before and have come through it. I can manage this.
Exacerbation in underlying condition.	I should be able to manage this on my own. I'm wasting people's time.	It's okay to ask for support when I'm struggling; I don't have to do this alone.
Upcoming medical appointment.	They won't be able to do anything, no-one understands how bad my breathing is.	Last time I saw the doctor, they were caring. This anxiety is temporary, I am learning to tolerate it.

An example of a distressing thought I tend to notice myself getting:



A kind/ helpful thought I could tell myself is:

Putting Learning into Practice

Write down 1-3 **key take home messages** from the information so far.

1. Think about which of the “breathing, thinking, functioning” cycles you are struggling with most. **Make a note here:**
2. Keep the **monitoring diary** on the next page to help increase your awareness of your thinking habits, experience of anxiety and breathlessness, and what you do to manage anxiety;
3. **Practice some of the strategies** discussed above:
 - a. Try out “leaves on a stream” exercise
 - b. Practice “dropping anchor”
 - c. Try out some of the extra grounding and mindfulness activities that appeal to you
 - d. If you notice “unhelpful thoughts” popping up, have a go at reframing some of these.

Monitoring diary

Date/ time What was happening	Thoughts I noticed (can I identify any unhelpful thinking habits?)	Emotions I noticed	Physical sensations I noticed (can I recognise a “fight or flight” response?)	What did I do to cope?
<i>Monday 7th Sept, 8am Getting ready for doctor appointment</i>	<i>What if they say something is wrong? I won't be able to walk, I'll be too breathless</i>	<i>Anxiety Panic</i>	<i>Fast breathing Hot Tingling fingers</i>	<i>Rang to cancel the appointment Used reliever inhaler</i>

Monitoring diary

Date/ time What was happening	Thoughts I noticed (can I identify any unhelpful thinking habits?)	Emotions I noticed	Physical sensations I noticed (can I recognise a “fight or flight” response?)	What did I do to cope?

Anxiety and Breathlessness Workshop

The Workbook Part 2



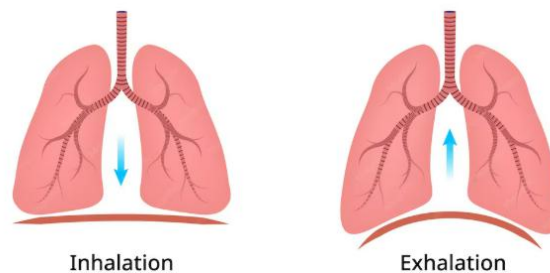
Developed by the ABUHB Respiratory Psychology Service

May 2026

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Anxiety and Breathing Pattern

Our **diaphragm** is the main muscle used for breathing. This is a large, dome-shaped muscle located at the base of the lungs shown in the diagram below. It is strong and designed to work continuously without getting tired. We also have other muscles in our **shoulders and chest** which work to provide short bursts of extra oxygen. However, these muscles tire quickly and use around **25% more energy** than the diaphragm. For efficient breathing, we want to be engaging our diaphragm.



When anxious, we tend to move to a more **rapid and shallow** pattern of breathing. This way of breathing relies more on the muscles in our shoulders and chest, and **doesn't use your full lung capacity**. This is a normal response to anxiety and is part of our fight or flight response. It is usually temporary and not harmful. However, if anxiety continues over a long period of time alongside other factors that impact our breathing, this may become our normal pattern of breathing. This can make **breathing feel harder** and is sometimes described as **inefficient breathing**. It makes us feel more breathless, and even though you *are* breathing, it can feel as though you can't get enough air in. Some people describe this sensation as "air hunger".

Breathing control exercises can be used to help improve our breathing pattern and ensure we are using our full lung capacity. They **help air move in and out of the lungs efficiently**. Breathing exercises also activate the body's "parasympathetic nervous" system—a part of our nervous system that supports calmness, relaxation and clearer thinking. They help to counteract our "fight or flight" response by calming our body and mind. They are therefore **recommended for breathlessness AND anxiety**.

It is normal to feel a little uncomfortable or panicky at first when practicing these exercises. This can happen because:

1. You are focusing closely on your breathing – something that can cause anxiety;
2. It might feel different, as your body may have adapted to a different breathing pattern.

With practice these sensations usually settle. It can be helpful to just practice for a minute or two to start, and to use grounding exercises alongside breathing exercises.

Practicing Effective Breathing

Breathing exercises can help to [regulate our breathing](#) and [slow down](#) our body's natural responses to anxiety. You can do them anywhere at any time, whether you are lying down, sitting down or being active.



Helpful principles:

[Breathe in through your nose if possible](#). This helps to filter the air before it reaches your lungs, warms and humidifies the air so it's easier for your lungs to handle, produces nitric oxide to improve oxygen delivery to the lungs, and slows down airflow slightly so your lungs can absorb oxygen more efficiently.

[Use your diaphragm](#). You want to feel your tummy moving in and out as you breathe, and have a relatively still chest and shoulders.

[Focus on a longer and controlled out breath](#). We need to breathe out fully in order to take a full in breath.

It can help to have [something extra to focus your mind on](#) while practicing breathing exercises to manage any anxiety about your breathing. This could be a picture, holding a calming object, or counting as you breathe.

It can also help to [cool your face](#) as you practice breathing control exercises. For some people, this can be just as effective as oxygen in relieving breathing discomfort. Try holding a [damp cloth to your face or using a handheld fan](#).

Like any skill, [regular practice](#) is important. Start small, for example 1 minute twice a day, and build up from here.

Breathing Exercises

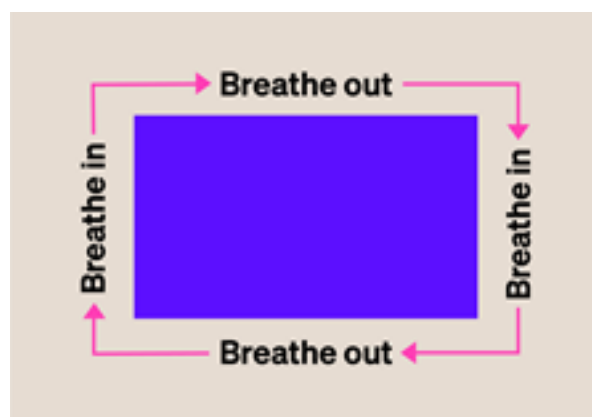
Below are some exercises to help you to develop [good breathing control](#) and to help you relax. Play around, [be curious](#) and find what works for you! Remember, like any skill, the more you [practice](#), the more effective they will be for you.

Rectangle breathing:

Using a rectangle shape to guide our breathing can help to regulate our breathing pattern while also providing an extra focus for our attention.

To do this, find something rectangle shaped. This could be a piece of paper, your phone, a window, or simply visualising a rectangle.

Follow the sides of the rectangle with your eyes as you breathe. You could try tracing round the sides of the rectangle with your finger at the same time. Gently breathe in as you follow the short edge, and breathe out as you follow the longer edge to encourage a long out breath. See if you can breathe in a smooth and rhythmic pattern, and gradually slow the speed at which you move around the rectangle.



Diaphragmatic (belly) breathing

Breathing from the diaphragm is more effective than breathing with just the chest muscles, and regular practice can help this become more automatic – it can become your more natural way of breathing again. When first trying this, it can help to lie down. However, it can be done sitting or standing too.

Try lying comfortably on your back with a pillow under your head and knees. Place one hand on your stomach, with the other hand relaxed by your side.

Gently close your mouth and allow your jaw to remain relaxed.

Breathe in gently through your nose, feeling your tummy rise and expand ‘like a balloon’ as you breathe in. The breath should be not be forced, and should be quiet.

Breathe out gently through your nose if possible, without pushing or forcing the air out. Try and keep your stomach relaxed. You could try gently saying to yourself in your mind “relax”. Allow a brief pause at the end of every out-breath before taking another breath in.

When you breathe in, your upper chest should be relaxed and barely moving. From time to time, place your hand on your upper chest to check this. As you repeat this sequence be aware of any areas of tension in your body and concentrate on ‘letting go’ particularly in the jaw, neck, shoulders and hands.

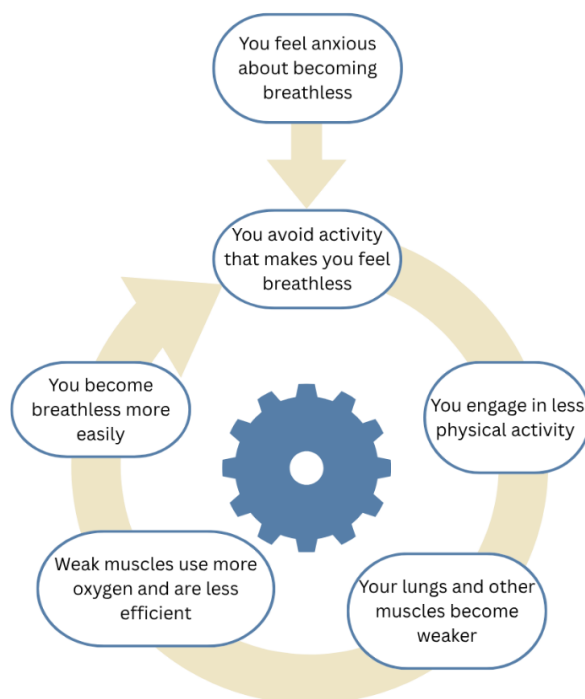
Practice as often as you can. Try **little and often**; progress to practicing whilst sitting, then standing and finally while walking.

Further information about helpful breathing techniques can be found on the Asthma and Lung UK website: <https://www.asthmaandlung.org.uk/symptoms-tests-treatments/symptoms/breathlessness/how-can-i-manage-my-breathlessness>

You can also find helpful advice and video demonstrations on the website: <https://www.physiotherapyforbpd.org.uk/> (note – while this website is aimed at supporting people with breathing pattern disorder, the breathing techniques shown are likely to be helpful for anyone struggling with breathlessness).

Anxiety and functioning

When living with breathlessness and experiencing anxiety about our breathing, we may feel frightened to do anything that could make us feel even more breathless. You may worry that you will cause yourself harm, or exacerbate your respiratory condition. You may worry about feeling exhausted later on. When things that we used to be able to do with ease now cause us to feel breathless, this can also **feel very distressing**. It is very normal to feel frustrated, embarrassed, sad, and to feel a sense of loss. Sometimes, we may cope with this by not doing the activity. This can offer temporary relief. However, over time this can contribute to the “**vicious cycle**” of **doing less and less** activity shown in the “breathing, thinking, functioning” model”. **The more we avoid, the more anxious we are likely to become** and so we avoid even more things. Over time our muscles become weaker – sometimes called “**deconditioning**”. Weaker muscles use oxygen less efficiently, leading us to become breathless more easily. As we withdraw more from activity, our **quality of life and mood** are also likely to be impacted.



The good news is that we can break this cycle. Gradually **building up activity and fitness can help improve breathing over time**. Doing more can

also help improve our quality of life and mental wellbeing. Remember, [being moderately breathless from day-to-day activities will not harm you.](#)

Increasing meaningful activity: Pacing

It can be tempting to either [avoid doing things altogether](#), or to [push yourself](#) to do things in the same way you did before your breathing got harder. However, pushing yourself too hard may lead to frustration, exhaustion and ultimately to a “crash”. It is important to [pace yourself](#) when building your activity for a more [sustainable](#) approach. Here are some pointers:



- Take activities at a [steady and comfortable pace](#)
- [Break down tasks](#) into smaller more manageable steps
- [Plan](#) activities ahead and take [regular breaks](#). You could spread tasks across the day or week and do more strenuous tasks at times of day when energy and breathing are their best.
- Consider use of [aids and adjustments](#). It may help to sit to do certain tasks where needed and to keep frequently used items within easy reach.
- Practice using [breathing control](#) during activity – breathe out during the most strenuous part of an activity and take a break to regulate your breathing when needed. [Stopping to recover from breathlessness is okay.](#)
- [Prioritise](#): Ask yourself, what *needs* to be done today? What is most important to me today?

[Be kind to yourself. Progress may vary day to day and this is normal.](#)

Can you thinking of examples of how you pace your activity now?

What barriers might get in the way of pacing your activity?

How might overcome any barriers?

Increasing meaningful activity: Goal setting



Think about how you can start to build up your physical activity. Focus on things that are **important and meaningful to you**. Try following the steps below to set yourself small and achievable goals.

1. What is important to you?

Imagine for a moment that you are free from anxiety. You are still living with breathlessness, but anxiety is no longer running the show. You feel confident that when you become breathless, you can manage this.

What might you be doing differently? What might you try doing if fear wasn't getting in the way?

Why this is important to you? What does it mean to you?

2. Thinking about what is important to you, set a goal that you would like to work towards.

Write down a meaningful and realistic goal that you would like to work towards over the next week, month or year:

How realistic does this goal feel for you now?

(Not at all) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (very realistic)

What level of anxiety do you feel when thinking of completing this goal?

(No anxiety) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (highest anxiety)

Can you break this goal down into 4-5 smaller steps?

Step 1:

Step 2:

Step 3:

Step 4:

Step 5:

3. Make a “SMART” plan that you can commit to

Make a plan that is

Specific: What exactly do you want to do? Make the goal clear and focused. E.g. *“I want to walk to the shop and back”*

Measurable: How will you know you’ve done it?

Achievable: Is it realistic for you right now? It should feel possible, not overwhelming.

Relevant: Does it matter to you? It should link to what’s important for your health or life.

Time Frame: When will you do it? Set a time frame while allowing flexibility where needed.



What small goal can you set yourself over the next few days that will help you move towards your longer-term goals?

What support might you need to achieve this?



4. Review how you got on.

How was the activity?

Was it enjoyable and/ or meaningful?

How did you feel during the activity?

How did you feel after the activity?

If an activity/ goal you tried didn't work for you, that's okay. It doesn't mean you have failed. Consider:

Were there any barriers that got in the way?

Do I need to readjust expectations/ break this goal down further?

What can I try next to support my health and get a sense of achievement?

Self-care

As we have discussed, living with breathlessness can lead many people to experience high levels of anxiety and stress. We have seen that anxiety can contribute to vicious cycles that can worsen breathlessness. Practising regular self-care is therefore very important.

Caring for ourselves and allowing ourselves the opportunity to relax and recharge can [reduce our stress and anxiety](#), and [promote better mental and physical health](#). This puts us in a much better position to manage anxiety associated with living with breathlessness.

When thinking about self-care, we need to be thinking about how we care for both our [body and mind](#). Self-care can come in many forms:



Use the self-care planner and diary on the next pages to [think about ways that you can care for yourself](#), and to schedule regular self-care activities. We would recommend doing this regularly.

Self-care planner

Things I and do to care for my body (movement / diet)

Things I can do for social connection

Things I can do to connect with the natural world

Things I can do for down time, and/ or that help with my sleep

Things I can do for fun (hobbies/ leisure time)

Focused activities I can use or that give me a sense of achievement?

Other self-care ideas



Day	What self-care activities will I plan in today	When/ how will I do this?
Monday		
Tuesday		
Wednesday		
Thursday		
Friday		
Saturday		
Sunday		

Putting Learning into Practice

Write down 1-3 **key take home messages** from part 2 of this workbook.

See our [Respiratory psychology website](#) for more information and links to other services that you might find helpful.

Visit <https://abuhb.nhs.wales/hospitals/a-z-of-services/respiratory-medicine/respiratory-psychology/>

OR scan the QR code.

