

Managing physical symptoms - Diaphragmatic breathing

- **What is it?** Diaphragmatic breathing involves taking slow, even breaths into the diaphragm (stomach area) instead of the chest.
- **When should I use it?** Diaphragmatic breathing can be helpful when trying to decrease intense physical symptoms of stress and anxiety, such as increased heart rate, shortness of breath, and “butterflies” in the stomach.
- **Why does it work?** Taking slow, even breaths into the diaphragm creates a stronger relaxation response in the body than taking deep breaths into the chest. This type of breathing stimulates the body’s parasympathetic nervous system, or the part of the nervous system that “shuts down” intense physical symptoms of stress and anxiety.
- **How do I do it?** The goals of diaphragmatic breathing are to (1) slow down breathing, (2) make breathing more even, and (3) direct the breath into the diaphragm instead of the chest.

To practice, start by placing one hand on your chest and the other hand on your stomach. As you inhale, try to direct the air toward your stomach so that your stomach expands, pushing the hand that is on your stomach away from your body. As you exhale, pull the muscles of your stomach in toward your body to push the air out of your lungs. Most people find this difficult to do at first but that it gets easier with practice. The goal is to eventually be able to make the hand on your stomach move when you inhale and exhale and for the hand on your chest to move as little as possible.

After you have mastered the basics of how to get the air into your diaphragm, then start to focus on slowing down your breathing. Many people find it helpful to count as they inhale and exhale. For example, you could try slowly counting to three as you inhale, and then slowly counting to three as you exhale. This will help you take slow, even breaths in and out.

Remember that the goal is not to take deep breaths, but to take normal size breaths that are slow and even and are directed into your diaphragm. For this to be most helpful, try first practicing several times for 5-10 minutes when you do not feel that stressed or anxious. Then, as you get better at doing this type of breathing, start practice during times of higher stress. The more your practice, the easier it will be to calm your body when you are under stress.

Managing physical symptoms - Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR)

- **What is it?** PRM is a type of relaxation exercise that involves tensing and then relaxing all the major muscle groups of the body.
- **When should I use it?** PMR can be helpful when trying to decrease muscle tension or tightness (and related headaches) that is associated with increased stress or anxiety. It can also be helpful for relaxing the body before going to sleep.
- **Why does it work?** Tightening muscles before relaxing them works like a pendulum – the more tension you create by tightening muscles, the more relaxed you will feel when you release this tension. Also, by noticing what different parts of your body feel like when they are tensed and relaxed, you will get better at being able to recognize early signs of tension in your body so that you can do something about it before it builds up.
- **How do I do it?** The goals of PMR are to (1) learn how to isolate and tense/relax specific muscle groups, (2) decrease feelings of tension and tightness in the body, and (3) increase feelings of relaxation throughout the body.

First practice how to tense and relax each set of muscles in the body. Instructions for how to tense each set of muscles are as follows (taken from Barlow & Craske, 2006):

- Hands and forearms – make fists and pull fists in toward forearms
- Upper arms – pull arms back and in toward sides
- Lower legs – flex feet and pull toes up toward upper body
- Upper legs – push knees together and lift legs off the ground
- Stomach – pull stomach muscles in toward the spine
- Chest – take a deep breath into the chest and hold it
- Shoulders – pull shoulders up toward ears
- Neck – push neck back against chair or pull chin down toward chest
- Mouth/throat – clench teeth and pull corners of mouth back into a “smile”
- Eyes – squeeze eyes shut (do for 5 seconds instead of 10)
- Lower Forehead - pull eyebrows down toward the center of the face
- Upper forehead - raise eyebrows as high as possible toward the scalp

After you have practiced how to tense each set of muscles, start at the beginning of the list and tense the first muscle group (hands and forearms) for **10 seconds**. Then, slowly let the tension go and relax those muscles for **30 seconds**. Think the word **relax** as you do this. Then start this process over with the next set of muscles and continue until you finish the list.

PRM is most effective if you pay attention to the contrast between the feelings of tension and relaxation in each muscle group. Try to only tense one set of muscles at a time, making sure that all the other muscles in the body are relaxed with each step. Also, when tensing muscles,

you should notice feelings of tightness, but this should not be painful. If you feel pain you may be tensing too much and you should try releasing some of the tension until you no longer feel pain.