



Breathing & relaxation strategies

A GUIDE FOR TEENAGERS

Diaphragm breathing

It is important to breathe with your diaphragm. It is especially important to use diaphragm breathing when you are tense, stressed or in pain. It will help you relax and reduce how much the pain is bothering you.

Where's my diaphragm muscle?

Your diaphragm is a big band of muscle across the bottom of your lungs and above your stomach. To feel where your diaphragm is, put your little fingers near your belly button and the rest of your fingers on your tummy. Sniff! You should feel your diaphragm move when you sniffed. If not, sniff harder!

Check if you are using diaphragm breathing

When you breathe properly, your diaphragm does the work. To check if you are using diaphragm breathing do this:

1. Put one hand on your chest
2. Put the other hand on your stomach
3. Breathe in and out, slowly

If you are doing diaphragm breathing, the hand on your stomach will move up and down more than the hand on your chest.

To learn diaphragm breathing

- 1) lay on your back
- 2) place a hand on your stomach above your belly button
- 3) breathe in and imagine filling up a balloon inside your body, under your hand
- 4) imagine the balloon shrinking as you breathe out

If you are having trouble feeling your tummy move when you breath, try this.

1. stand up
2. put your hands behind your head and lock your fingers together
3. breath normally and watch and feel your tummy move
4. this position 'locks' your chest so you can't help but breath from your diaphragm

When diaphragm breathing can help

Diaphragm breathing can help you through painful or upsetting procedures like blood tests or joint injections. You can even use diaphragm breathing at the dentist or when you're stressed about an exam! Anytime you're stressed, anxious or in pain, breathing slowly from your diaphragm will help. It can also help you to fall asleep at night.

Breathing and pain

Pay attention to how often you hold your breath when you are expecting or feeling pain. When you are feeling pain, tension, stress, anxiety or anger, change this experience by using diaphragm breathing.

1. Deliberately stop what you doing
2. Take slow deep breaths using your diaphragm breathing
3. Think about what you are doing and how you are feeling.
4. What are your choices to manage this situation?
5. Pick a strategy to use, and do it!

Mini relaxations

Practice mini-relaxations using diaphragm breathing whenever you have a minute or are feeling tense or stressed:

- Take a deep breath in. As you breathe out, imagine all the tension in your body and mind leaving on this breath.
- If you have a few moments, take a tour of your body, tensing all the muscles in each area (such as your legs, arms and torso) one at a time, and then letting the tension go as you breathe out.
- Scan your body for tension in places where you know you often get tense. Is there tension in your neck or back? If so, take a few breaths using diaphragm breathing, and imagine that you can direct the breath to the tense spot. As you breathe out, feel the tension go.

Tips about breathing and relaxation

To get really good at diaphragm breathing, you need to practice it. Try and practice every day. Two 10 minute practices a day would be good.

Using a relaxation CD or having someone else to talk you through it can help you concentrate on what you're doing.

When you practise breathing, your mind will often wander. When this happens just notice that you've wandered and bring your mind back to breathing. It will get easier each time you practice.

Sometimes when we stop to relax we feel the pain more because we've taken away all other distractions. This is normal, and won't last long because you are about to distract your attention again by focusing on your breathing and /or relaxation. Use the breathing to help you through the pain, instead of getting stressed and anxious and letting the pain stop you from breathing and relaxing.

Ideas for longer relaxation practices

- Use any of the mini-relaxations, but longer and in more detail, e.g. tense and release every muscle in your body one at a time (this can take 20-30 minutes once you get good at identifying all the muscles!).
- Once you are used to diaphragm breathing and it happens naturally, focus on using visualisation to reduce your pain. For example, imagine that you are at the top of a tall building. This building represents your pain and tension. Imagine slowly going down in the lift, watching the counter count down from 100th floor to the ground floor. As the lift and the counter go down, feel the pain and tension reducing in your body, exactly as if you are 'turning down the volume'. By the time you get to level 50 you should be feeling pretty comfortable. At level 25 you should be feeling quite relaxed and not bothered by your pain. By the time you get to the ground floor and leave the lift, your pain will be significantly reduced and you will be feeling, relaxed, calm and in control of your body and mind. Stay on the ground floor for a while to enjoy this feeling before ending the relaxation.
- You can use visualisation to describe and change your pain. Once relaxed, visualise what your pain looks like. Where is it? What colour is it? Does it move or vibrate? Does it look like an object? Is it a red throbbing ball, for example? Once you know what your pain looks like, you can use your imagination to counteract the pain. For example, if it's a red hot spot, then imagine building a cold blue igloo around it, or tipping ice water over it and 'putting out the fire'. If it's sharp, blunt the edges. Whatever pictures you find in your mind that work for you are OK to use.
- You can also learn to create a numb feeling in your body, and then use it to numb places of pain in your body. This is more difficult and requires lots of practice, usually with a therapist. This example is called the 'magic glove' technique. Imagine your hand getting warm and heavy, and then progressively numb starting with thumb, each finger, then palm, back of hand and wrist. Then imagine the sensation returning equally gradually. Once you can do this easily, imagine 'numbing' the painful area (or site of an injection), while also visualising turning down the volume knob of pain and tension.