

## Counted breathing – in a nutshell

1. Breathe in through your nose for a count of 4. Push your stomach out gently but firmly. and (if you can imagine this) pushing your diaphragm down.
2. Breathe out for a count of 6. Pull your stomach in gently but firmly and (if you can imagine this) pulling your diaphragm up.
3. If you need to return to your normal breathing pattern occasionally then that's fine. When you are ready you can return to counting in- and out-breaths.

### As you feel more confident

If and when you are ready, you can increase the count. Remember... breathe out for a count of 2 longer than the in-breath.

You could try:

In for 6 and out for 8

In for 8 and out for 10

In for 10 and out for 12

The important thing is to set your count so that it is comfortable and relaxing for you – not for anyone else!

*Panel 1: Counted Breathing*

# Counted Breathing

## A little background

When we are feeling anxious, it feels like our heart is beating a little faster, our gut may feel uncomfortable, we think a little less clearly, we forget things, we don't hear as well, and we are often a bit clumsy.

We breathe a little more quickly and breathe from the top of our lungs rather than the deeper, more measured breathing when we are feeling relaxed and safe.

We aren't able to take as much comfort from those around us because we stop recognising the facial cues that we know show care, concern and compassion. Consequently, this really important source of soothing is not available to us and we feel even more alone and anxious.

This Counted Breathing technique is one of a number that is designed to bring our physiology – our body and organs - closer to our rest, restore and repair state.

In this state we are better able to see, hear, to think clearly and to recognise the social and facial cues which we find soothing. Our heart rate returns to normal and our gut feels better.

In other words, we are able to bring down our level of anxiety in a virtuous circle – as we are better able to see, hear, feel and think then we do those things better and better and feel less and less anxious.

## What is the technique?

The technique is designed to bring your body back into that rest, restore and repair state.

It helps you to bring your heart rate back to a resting rate; it allows the muscles in organs such as your gut to start working again; it allows your emotions to subside, to reduce their intensity and the sense of overwhelm; it allows you to re-engage your cortex so you can think more clearly and rationally.

The idea is to breathe from the belly.

On the in-breath push the stomach out gently but firmly. On the out-breath pull the stomach in gently but firmly.

On the in-breath your rib cage is able to open out which encourages you to breathe deeply and to draw in more air making more oxygen available to your brain.

On the out-breath your diaphragm is pulled upward which helps to expel residual carbon dioxide being held deep in your lungs

Just take a few moments to practice breathing in by pushing the stomach out and then breathing out pulling the stomach in.

## Counted Breathing

In this exercise you will be breathing in and then breathing out for a count that is two longer than the in-breath. This has the effect of exhaling as much carbon dioxide as possible and encourages a very deep breath on the next in-breath to fill the lungs with fresh air.

To start with use a count of 4 to breathe in and a count of 6 to breathe out.

As you get used to the feeling of breathing using the stomach and as you get used to counting on the in-breath and the out-breath you may want to extend the count.

### How you “do” the technique

You can “do” Counted Breathing at any time in any place. You do not need to do anything special to prepare. You could start right away using the information in Panel 1: Counted Breathing.

In the next section is a suggestion for how you might practice Counted Breathing so that when you want to do it, it will be familiar to you and you can get into the rhythm quickly and easily.

### The advantage of practicing the technique

The advantage of practicing in this way is that when you start Counted Breathing your body will remember the sense of relaxation associated with the breathing technique and you can be just that bit more relaxed.

### Practicing Counted Breathing

The exercise is best practiced while sitting down. (When needed it can, of course, be done while standing or lying down).

### Taking up a comfortable position

Sit in a comfortable position with your back supported, your feet placed on the floor and your arms relaxed with your hands resting in your lap. Your hands can be palm up or palm down whichever is most comfortable for you.

If you feel any restrictions in your clothing, then adjust them until you feel comfortable.

Your eyes can be open or closed. You may choose to close your eyes or to focus on a point in front of you, on a wall or on the floor. Some people like to focus on a specific object in front of them or even to hold an object.

Start by taking a deep breath and as you exhale allow your shoulders to relax and drop.

Continue to breathe normally.

### Preparing and relaxing

Now we prepare ourselves by starting to relax.

Notice any sounds you can hear from outside the room – birds, cars, voices. Name them in your mind and then allow your attention to let them go. However you do that is perfect.

Bring your attention into the room and notice any sounds you can hear from inside the room – clock ticking, chair creaking. Name them and let them go.

Bring your attention to yourself and notice any sounds that you are making – breathing, stomach gurgling, sighing. Name them and let them go.

## Counted Breathing

Notice how it feels to be in your chair. The back of the chair supporting your back. The seat of the chair supporting your legs. The floor providing a firm foundation for your feet. Your lap supporting your hands.

Notice how your ribcage moves against the back of the chair as you as you breathe in and breathe out.

## Now we start Counted Breathing ...

### Counted breathing

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### Completing your practice session

When you are ready to finish your practice session:

- Return to your normal breathing pattern. You may find that you sigh a couple of times as you do so.
- Wiggle your fingers and toes and become aware of sensations in your arms and legs;
- Become aware of the noises inside the room and then outside the room;
- If you had closed your eyes then open them. If you were focussed on an object then change your focus and look beyond the object.
- Stretch your arms and legs; stretch your shoulders.
- Stand up slowly and again take the opportunity to stretch your whole body.
- Notice how much more relaxed you are feeling and remember to SMILE!

## Other things to remember

Remember... you can start your counted breathing with or without completing the relaxation beforehand.

The Counted Breathing technique has lots of advantages.

- It is easy to learn and to do; it is also easy to teach.
- It can be performed as soon as it is needed and acts quickly to help reduce emotional overwhelm.
- The technique can be performed anywhere. You can do this while standing or sitting or even lying down, in company or alone.
- It is a discrete technique, something that you can do without anyone noticing which is very useful in a work context.
- It needs no special location or equipment. You can do this anywhere. All you need is yourself!