



INSTRUCTIONS FOR FOCUSED BREATHING

Rationale

One technique for dealing with distressing feeling states involves decreasing your physiological arousal using breathing retraining. When people are in an aroused state they tend to breathe from their chest and also to breathe more quickly and deeply, taking in too much oxygen. This can actually increase symptoms of anxiety, including dizziness, breathlessness and even disorientation. The aim of this exercise is to slow down your breathing and decrease the amount of oxygen you take in, which will lead to a decrease in anxiety. It can also be used to manage states of irritation or anger and as a meditative tool for feeling calm and grounded.

Procedure for Diaphragmatic Breathing:

Getting started: Place one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach. Take a slow deep breath, and pay attention to which hand moves. When breathing from the diaphragm only the stomach hand should move up and down (or mostly). It can help to think of how babies sleep, how their tummy moves up and down. Or you might imagine your stomach as a balloon, filling with air and expanding as you inhale, then letting out the air and shrinking as you exhale.

Slow down your rate of breathing: Take in enough air to fill the space, then let it out slowly. Sometimes breathing out through the nose is easier because it is a smaller opening, which will help to control the rate of exhalation. Pause briefly after exhaling before inhaling again. Some people tend to hold their breath too long at first; the pause should come after exhaling. Imagery can be helpful in maintaining a slow and steady rhythm. For example, a wave is a helpful image for some. The image of climbing up a slide (inhaling) and then sliding down (exhaling), and briefly





pausing at the bottom before climbing up again, has been helpful for some people.

Meditational component: In order to help slow your thoughts and focus attention on breathing, count your breaths as you inhale, and think "relax," "calm," or some similar thought as you exhale. Continue counting your breaths until you get to "10" and then start over at "1." It is perfectly natural for other thoughts to come into your mind. Try not to get angry or frustrated, just allow the thoughts to pass through your mind and bring your attention back to counting as often as you need to. Some people find it helpful to concentrate mostly on the physical sensation of their breathing, others on the counting or "relax" statement. Experiment with different methods, and do whatever works best for you.

Practice: Practice is essential to develop this skill so that it becomes something you can use to decrease distress in stressful situations. You should practice the technique in a comfortable, quiet place where you will not be disturbed. Take a few seconds to relax, then practice the breathing exercise for at least 5 minutes. This should be practiced at least twice a day. When beginning to learn this skill, it is best not to practice when you are already distressed. The idea is that if you practice the breathing when you are in a calm state it will become a habit that can then be called upon when you are distressed. As you become more skilled at it, you may begin practicing using it in mildly distressing situations, such as when feeling impatient while waiting on line.

