

Breath Training Protocol

Introductory Information

- Explain that learning to pay attention to breathing, and learning to breathe deeply, can both help with relaxation and reduce anxiety. Note that when we get anxious or have panic attacks, one of the first things that happen is that our breathing becomes shallow and rapid.
- Explain that, initially, some people become dizzy when they start breathing deeply--this is a normal reaction. For this reason, they should not try breathing exercises standing up until they have become experienced and comfortable with them.
- Explain that the exercises may feel strange at first because the client will be asked to breathe into her or his belly. Most of us are used to holding our stomachs in, because of tight clothes or because we are self-conscious of weight or how we look.

Practice Breathing in the Session

- Have the client sit in a comfortable position.
- Go through the sequence below with the client--the whole process should take 10 to 15 minutes. After each step, "check in" to see how the client is feeling, and if there are any problems or questions.
 1. If the client is comfortable with closing her or his eyes, ask her or him to do so. Some persons will feel more anxious with their eyes closed, and will want to keep them open. This is entirely acceptable.
 2. Ask the client to try to stay "in the moment" while doing breathing exercises. If her or his mind wanders (e.g., thinking about what to make for dinner, ruminating over an argument with someone), she or he should gently try to bring it back to the immediate experience of breathing.
 3. Ask the client to begin breathing through the nose, paying attention to the breath coming in and going out. Ask her or him to pay attention to how long each inhalation and exhalation lasts. Do this for 5 or 6 breaths.

It is usually helpful for the clinician to breathe along with the client at the beginning of the exercise. You can guide her or him for each inhalation and exhalation saying "in" and "out" to help her or him along.

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4. Instruct the client to start breathing more deeply into her or his abdomen. This means the belly should visibly rise and fall with each breath. This sort of breathing should feel different from normal breathing, and the client should notice that each breath is deeper than normal. Do this for another 5 or 6 breaths.
 5. Ask the client to imagine that each time he or she breathes in, air is flowing in to fill up the abdomen and lungs. It goes into the belly first, and then rises up to fill in the top of the chest cavity. In the same way, when breathing out, the breath first leaves the chest, and then the abdomen. Some people find it helpful to imagine the breath coming in and out like a wave. Do this for another 5 or 6 breaths.
 6. Explain that once the client is breathing deeply and fully into the belly and chest, the next step is to slow the breath down. Ask the client to slowly count to three with each inhalation and exhalation-in for three counts, out for three counts. With practice, the client may begin to slow her or his breath even further. Tell her or him that there is no specific amount of time necessary for each inhalation and exhalation, only that she or he may try to slow her or his breathing. Do this for 5 or 6 breaths.
- Ask the client to practice this sequence at home for 5 or 10 minutes a day. She or he should choose a specific time of day (e.g., in the morning, before work or school), and make this exercise a regular part of her or his daily routine. The client should sit or lie down at home in a comfortable position, with no distractions, for this practice.
 - Eventually, the client can extend this exercise to other times in the day as well, especially when relaxation would be a good idea (e.g., before important meetings, in stressful social situations, or whenever she or he feels especially anxious). Remind the client to count during each inhalation and exhalation, since counting, itself, will come to stimulate the relaxation response.