



**Wrightington, Wigan and
Leigh Teaching Hospitals**
NHS Foundation Trust

Relaxation and mindfulness - Breathlessness Intervention Service

Leaflet 6: Relaxation and Mindfulness

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Service: Breathlessness Intervention Service

Introduction

The information below is designed to help you manage your stable long-term breathlessness. If your breathing is getting worse, or you are experiencing breathlessness as a new feeling, it is important to seek medical advice from your GP.

Why Relaxation and Mindfulness are Helpful

Breathlessness is such an unpleasant feeling that it is natural to feel frightened, worried, or anxious when it happens. Some people may even feel panic. These feelings trigger the body's 'fight or flight' response, which is a natural response not only in breathlessness but also in other difficult, worrying, or stressful situations (for example worries about the future, finances, family).

The fight or flight response causes changes both in our body and in how we think. The physical changes in the body often include faster breathing and muscles becoming tense. These physical changes help if we need to run or fight our way out of a dangerous situation but are not helpful if we are already breathless. Changes in thinking can increase worry, leading to more physical changes and making breathlessness feel even worse. [Leaflet 5: Thinking - Managing thoughts about breathlessness](#) explains this in more detail.

Relaxation and mindfulness both help counteract the 'fight or flight' response. Relaxation aims to reduce physical tension, which can help breathing return to a more comfortable resting pattern. Mindfulness aims to bring our focus on the here and now. This change of focus can take our attention away from the changes in our body and our thoughts, giving

both our mind and body a chance to rest and relax. Relaxation and mindfulness often overlap; some relaxation exercises include mindfulness and vice versa.

Learning to Relax or Be Mindful

At first, it can feel strange to relax or be mindful, particularly if we have felt worried, stressed, or tense for a long time. Over time and with practice, relaxation and mindfulness get easier and become more effective. We find that people learn these skills best if they practice regularly. Ideally, if time allows, we recommend practicing twice a day to start with. If you have not tried relaxation or mindfulness before, or if it feels strange, we suggest using shorter sessions at first, and then build up to longer sessions as it becomes more comfortable. After a couple of weeks of practicing, you may start to notice that you start to relax more easily and become less easily disturbed by worries or concerns.

Preparing for Relaxation or Mindfulness

- Never practice when driving or operating machinery.
- Find a time and place where you are unlikely to be disturbed. Consider putting a notice on the door to remind people.
- Turn your phone off or put it on silent.
- If you fall asleep during sessions, change the time you practice. Being awake allows you to get the most benefit from the sessions, to help you learn the skills to manage stressful situations.
- You can practice alone, or you may like to practice with family, friends, or carers so that they can also get the benefit.

Additional Preparations Before Relaxation

- **Place:** Find somewhere comfortable, for example, a room with a comfortable chair, where you can adjust the light or temperature to a comfortable level, or perhaps wrap yourself in a soft blanket.
- **Position:** Get into as comfortable a position as possible, consider using cushions for support e.g., for head, neck, back, arms, or legs. Keep your legs and arms uncrossed.
- **Eyes:** If possible, allow your eyes to remain gently closed during relaxation. If you prefer to keep your eyes open, focus gently on a nearby object, or a place on the wall or floor.

When Finishing Relaxation

- Gently allow yourself to become more aware of the sounds inside and outside the room.
- Notice the relaxed feeling in your body and increased calmness in your mind.
- If possible, allow yourself a few minutes more to rest and enjoy these feelings.
- When you are ready to be more active, very gently start moving your body, stretch your arms and hands, feet, and legs. Take your time and avoid rushing. If you need to stand, stand slowly.
- You can also use relaxation in bed to help you fall asleep at night.

Relaxation and Mindfulness Exercises

There are many different exercises, so we suggest trying various ones to see which you prefer. Some exercises are very short, provide a quick boost, or are good in 'emergency' situations. Longer exercises allow deeper, more replenishing relaxation or improve mindfulness skills. Let us know if you would like to learn more. [Leaflet 9: Relaxation and Mindfulness \(Scripts\)](#) contains written exercises for you to read or get someone to read aloud to you.

Our BIS CD contains five short relaxation and mindfulness tracks for you to try. Please ask if you would like a CD. You can use a tablet, laptop, or mobile phone to play our BIS online recordings. [Link](#)

Further Information

For further help or advice contact the [Breathlessness Intervention Service](#) on 01223 274404, 09:00 (9am) to 17:00 (5pm) Monday to Friday.

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