

# Life with Breathlessness

A day to day guide to managing breathlessness



**Therapy Department – 01245 514197**

# Introduction

Breathlessness is a normal response to physical activity because our muscles need more oxygen when they are moving. People with lung conditions can become more breathless at very low levels of exertion. Breathlessness can be a challenging symptom to live with and can be very limiting; however, there are strategies you can use to make living with it easier.

Learning how to have some control over difficult symptoms can reduce their impact on your life. This booklet is split into eight sections, which provide you with further information on coping strategies to allow you to live well with breathlessness.

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# 1. Positions of Ease

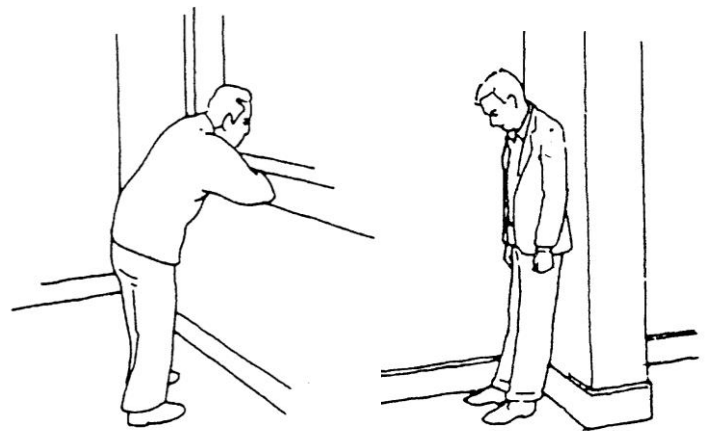
## Sitting

- Practice sitting in a chair leaning forwards, with your elbows supported on your knees or the arms of a chair, or resting on a table.



## Standing

- Practice leaning forwards with your elbows resting on a counter top, shopping trolley or chair.
- Practice leaning sideways or back against a wall or door frame. You may let your arms hang or rest your thumbs in your pocket or belt loops.



## High Side Lying

- Practice lying in bed on your side, with your upper body raised on pillows.



Images taken from St Barnabas Hospice Care website

## 2. Breathing Techniques

You may find yourself breathless completing daily tasks. Feeling short of breath can make you panic. It is important to try to relax and remember that your breathing will settle. You can use some of the techniques below to help. Your physiotherapist can advise you on this.

### Breathing Control

Sit comfortably or use one of the 'Positions of Ease' suggested above.

Place one hand on your abdomen

Breathe in through your nose, and feel your abdomen push outwards

Focus on relaxing the muscles in your neck and shoulders

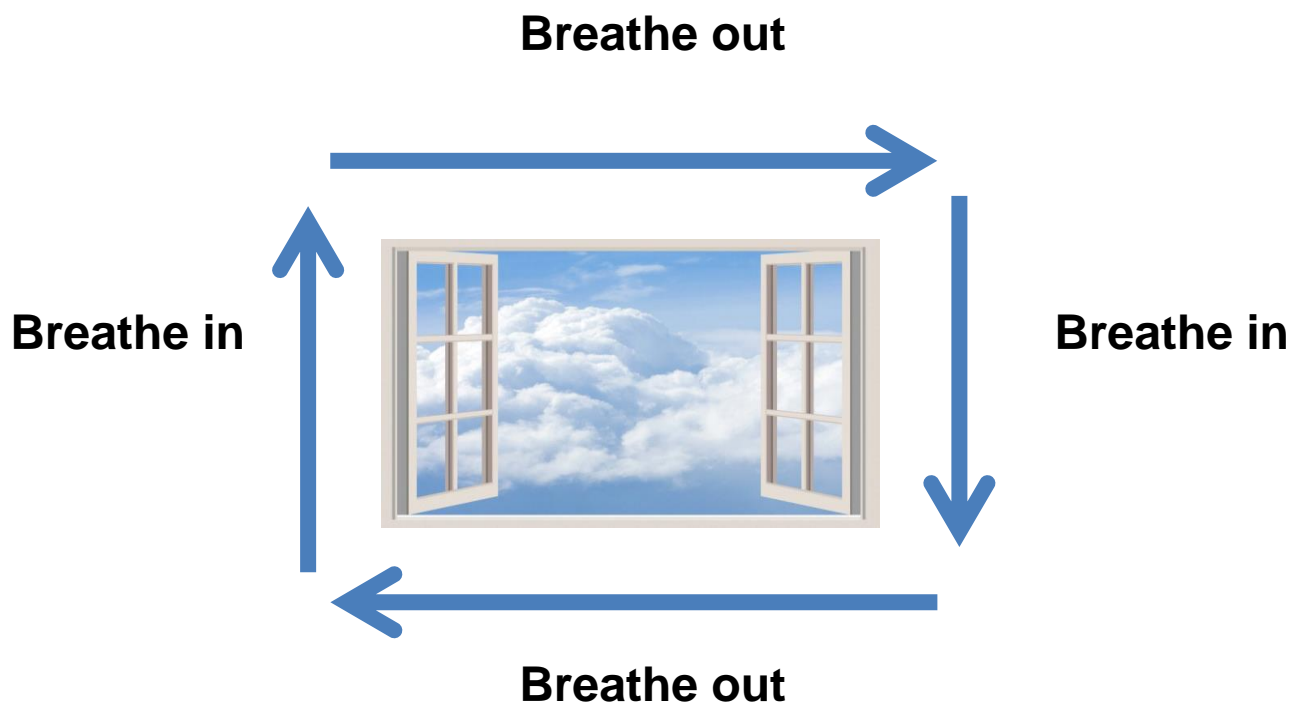
Breathe out through your mouth (you may use Pursed Lip Breathing – described below)

Try to make the out breath longer than the in breath. You can use this in conjunction with Visualisation below.

### Visualisation

You can use the 'Window Technique' to help control your breathing.

We breathe out for twice as long as we breathe in. For example: breathe in for the shorter sides, breathe out for the longer sides (follow the arrows below).



## Pursed Lip Breathing

Can be used whenever you feel breathless, and in any task.

Breathe out slowly, with your lips in a pursed position, as if you are blowing out a candle.



Image taken from  
Cleveland Clinic  
Website

## Blow as you Go

Exhale as you exert yourself. For example when lifting a heavy item, breathe in before you lift, and breathe out as you lift the item. This can be used with 'Pursed Lip Breathing'.

## Paced Breathing

This technique is best used when you are being active. It can be used with 'Blow as you Go' and 'Pursed Lip Breathing'.

It is about counting as you do an activity. You will work out which numbers work for you.

*For example:*

*Climbing Stairs - breathe in for one step, breathe out for one step (in for 1, out for 1)*

*Walking – breathe in for one step, breathe out for three steps (in for 1, out for 3).*



## Fan Therapy

The draft from a hand held fan can help ease the feeling of breathlessness. Let the cool air blow towards your mouth and nose. Alternatively, use the breeze from an open window.

### 3. Activities of Daily Living

When you are breathless everyday activities can sometimes feel overwhelming. Some of the following tips may help.



#### Energy levels

Learn to understand your energy levels and try to get to know your limits. Think about how much energy you have to use each day. Some people imagine having a jug of energy or liken their energy levels to a battery. Consider what you would like to use your energy on, but always leave something in the jar so that it is never empty. Even if you make the best plans, there is always a chance that something unexpected might crop up that uses more energy.

Using the 3 P's (**Prioritisation, Planning and Pacing**) can help you conserve energy, manage breathlessness and cope better with your daily activities.

#### ① Prioritise

Prioritise your energy for enjoyable activities to help maintain your quality of life. Choose the "must do" tasks for the day. Leave less important tasks for another day or ask for help.

#### ② Plan

Plan your week so that you can balance activity with rest periods. Schedule appointments for times best for you. Try to avoid rushing to reduce the feeling of being anxious, breathless and fatigued.

#### ③ Pace

Pace your activities and take a rest between tasks. Working at a slower pace will use less oxygen and less energy which means that you will get less breathless. Use pacing techniques on slopes and stairs.

Image taken from <http://www.thebreatheprogramme.co.uk/Managing-breathlessness/>

## Around the House

Try to avoid too much bending and twisting which can be tiring. Don't sit or stand in the same position for too long without changing your position. Think about trying to organise your home so that things are easily accessible. For example, putting a chair in a hallway or on a stair landing so you can rest when walking between rooms, or arranging your kitchen with frequently used items stored at waist height, so you don't have to bend or stretch to cupboards or shelves.



**Dressing** - Sit down when dressing to reserve energy. Choose loose-fitting clothes, especially around the waist and chest. Bring your feet up to put on socks, tights and shoes, as bending down can make you breathless.

When you undress, don't hold your breath as you take clothes over your head. Take your arms out of your top first, then quickly slip it over your head.

**Bathing** - Bathrooms can become warm and quickly fill with steam. When bathing, open a window or leave the door slightly open.

Once you're undressed, sit at the side of the bath and slowly lift in one leg at a time. After bathing, let the water drain out before you get out. Keep the water warm but not too hot. If you shower, try to keep the spray away from your face. Sit safely on a shower seat or perching stool in the shower if there's enough space. See next page for 'Equipment and Aids'.

A large towel wrapped around you, or a bathrobe, will help you get dry without vigorous rubbing and patting. Keep sitting down while you dry off.







**Going to the toilet** - If you have difficulty getting to the toilet, a urine bottle or commode (portable toilet seat and bowl) can help.

**Equipment and aids** - such as grab rails, a raised toilet seat and a bath board can make bathing and going to the toilet easier. Equipment can be purchased or loaned from the Red Cross, you can contact your GP for a referral to be advised by an occupational therapist in the community or speak to your occupational therapist on the ward in hospital.

**Eating** – breathlessness will use more energy; therefore it is important to maintain a healthy appetite.

If you get breathless while eating, take frequent small meals, rather than one large one or eat smaller mouthfuls. It can also help to avoid foods that are difficult to chew, add sauces when possible and drink sips of fluid frequently to avoid becoming dehydrated. If you have any concerns, speak with your GP.



**Walking and climbing stairs** – Consider ‘Paced Breathing’ (page 4). Move at a comfortable pace, take the steps slowly, one at a time and avoid holding your breath.

Use walking aids if they help you. You can discuss this with your physiotherapist or occupational therapist on the ward.

Ensure you stop and rest whenever you need to, it can help to have resting points at the top and bottom of the stairs.





## 4. Mindfulness and Relaxation

Stress and anxiety are common symptoms for people with lung conditions. Anxiety tends to make the feeling of breathlessness stronger, which in turn leads to more anxiety. It is important to remember that breathlessness in itself is not harmful and you will recover your breathing on resting. It is also possible to try to control the level of anxiety you are feeling and relaxation is one way of helping with this.

### Preparing for relaxation

Relaxation is not always easy, but the more you practice the easier and more effective you will find it.

Try to allow yourself to have some time each day to practice your relaxation exercise, approximately 20 minutes undisturbed.

Try to ensure the light and temperature of the room is at a comfortable level, it might also help to listen to relaxing music or sounds e.g. waves, rainfall, birds singing.

Ensure you are in a comfortable position and that your neck, shoulders and arms are as relaxed as possible. Sit or lie with your legs uncrossed and try to have your elbows supported at your side on cushions or on the arm of the chair.

Try to close your eyes. If this is too difficult, choose a spot in front of you, on the wall or floor, and keep your eyes fixed on this point. When you are more relaxed it will be easier to keep your eyes closed.

## Relaxation Exercises

### Letting go of thoughts

Close your eyes and imagine that you are sitting on the bank of a river.

You are warm and relaxed, and able to breathe freely.

You see many leaves slowly drifting downstream.

When a thought or feeling comes into your mind, try to see this as a leaf and let it drift away from you, and disappear.

When it's gone, return to gazing at the river waiting for the next leaf to float by with a new thought.

Try not to think about the contents of each leaf. Just observe it and then let it go.

Sometimes the same leaf may come up many times or several leaves will seem related to each other, or the leaves may be empty. That's okay.

Don't allow yourself to be concerned with these thoughts. Just watch them pass in front of your mind's eye.

### Two Minute Imagery Relaxation

Close your eyes. Try to imagine that you are relaxing in a peaceful and safe place. This could be a room, a beach, a park, a garden. Ideally somewhere that you are familiar with.

Imagine yourself in this peaceful scene using all of your senses. Ask yourself these questions:-

What do you see? People, animals, buildings, plants, blue sky

What do you feel? Is it warm and sunny?

What can you smell?

What can you hear? The sound of waves on the beach, people talking, children playing

Imagine this calm scene in as much detail as possible, so that you can feel that you are actually there and are immersed in deep relaxation.

## **Body Scan**

Begin by focussing your attention on your feet, trying to release the tension in your muscles.

First think of your toes, working up through your ankles to your calves and shins, over your knees and along your thighs.

Notice how loose your legs feel now.

Become aware of your tummy and then your chest. Feel the tension flowing out of your body.

Now think of your shoulders working down to your elbows, through your forearms, and into your wrists, hands and fingers.

Become aware of your fingertips.

Notice how loose your arms feel now.

Next, focus your attention on your lower back and pelvis. Try to release any tension you are feeling here.

Allow this feeling of looseness rise up your back, to the back of your chest and shoulder blades

Continuing up into your neck and scalp, to the crown of your head. Slowly begin to focus on your forehead and move down to your jaw.

Imagine that you have a giant paint brush, sweeping over your body, following the same route and creating a feeling of calm and relaxation.

Feel that every part of your body is relaxed.

## **When you finish your relaxation exercise**

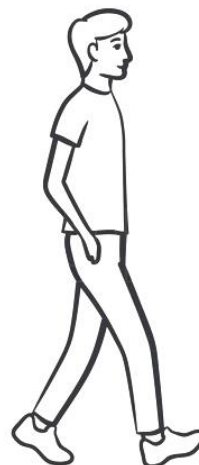
Become aware of your actual surroundings by listening to the sounds around you and be aware of how relaxed you feel.

Start to move very gently by stretching your arms and legs before moving from your position.

## 5. Exercise

Remember it is important to stay as active as you can.

Avoiding activity weakens your muscles and reduces your fitness which can lead to more breathlessness in daily activities. With exercise, overtime you will start to feel more confident in your ability to control your breathing. You may feel short of breath but this is a natural response to exercise.



You may feel more confident in exercising with a friend, or join a group exercise class.

### How can I get involved in Exercise?

- COPD Team Pulmonary Rehabilitation
  - Your physiotherapist/nurse/doctor can refer you to the team from hospital.
- Some GP services provide discounts at local gyms
  - Speak to your GP regarding this.
- Healthy Balance Classes
  - Provides strength and balance exercise classes for people who have fallen, have a fear of falling or would like to increase their confidence in moving about safely.
  - The classes take place in community venues throughout mid Essex. The classes last for one hour and are free for the first 12 weeks.
  - [Phone 0300 303 9988](tel:03003039988) to self-refer.
- CSP 'Love Activity, Hate Exercise' Campaign
  - Search [www.csp.org/uk/activity](http://www.csp.org/uk/activity) for advice on exercise for people with long term conditions.

## 6. Smartphone Apps

If you have a smart phone, you may be able to download an App to help with mindfulness and breathing control. Some of these Apps have a free trial for up to 30 days, but need purchasing after this period, so make sure you check first.

**Some examples are:**

**Headspace: Guided Meditation** – mainly for mindfulness and relaxation

**Calm** – mainly for mindfulness and relaxation

**iBreathe** – can customise your breathing exercises.

*Your physiotherapist can help direct you with this.*



## 7. Medication



Liaise with your doctors or Clinical Nurse Specialist regarding your medication.

Ensure you have your inhalers topped up in plenty of time.

Don't forget to bring your normal medication/inhalers into hospital with you, or when on holiday, or out and about.

Ask your nurse/pharmacist to check your inhaler technique.

## 8. Services in the Mid Essex Area

**Age UK (Essex)** [Tel: 01245 346106 www.ageuk.org.uk/](http://www.ageuk.org.uk/)

*Age UK provide services to support with housework and shopping, toenail cutting and befriending services.*

**Breathe Easy (British Lung Foundation Support Group Network)**

[www.blf.org.uk/BreatheEasy](http://www.blf.org.uk/BreatheEasy)

*Provides support and information for people living with a lung condition, and for those who look after them.*

**The Breathe Programme** <http://www.thebreatheprogramme.co.uk>

*Access to relaxation audio and mindfulness breathing audio. (Click on 'Stress, Anxiety and Relaxation' in menu).*

**Breathlessness Intervention Service (BIS)**

[www.cuh.org.uk/breathlessness](http://www.cuh.org.uk/breathlessness)

*A service that operates from the Cambridge University Hospitals website – including videos, factsheets and audio-clips on managing breathlessness and relaxation.*

**British Lung Foundation** [www.blf.org.uk](http://www.blf.org.uk)

*Provides information on all types of lung conditions including issues such as travel, oxygen, equipment and financial benefits.*

**British Redcross** <https://www.redcross.org.uk/>

*For equipment, wheelchair loan and further services such as; befriending*

**Carers First** [Tel: 0300 303 1555](http://www.carersfirst.org.uk/)

*Supports individuals who look after a relative or friend who needs support because of a disability, illness, addiction or frailty.*

**Farleigh Clinical Advice Line** [Tel: 01245 455478 www.farleighhospice.org](http://www.farleighhospice.org)

*Offers advice, group sessions and Easibreathe Classe for breathlessness management.*

**GP Surgery**

*Your GP can provide general advice and signposting to other appropriate services, as well as check your inhaler technique.*

**Healthy Balance Class** [Tel: 0300 303 9988](http://www.healthyliving.org.uk/) to self-refer.

*Provides strength and balance exercise classes – see page 13.*

**Health Navigator** Central Point of Access [Tel: 0300 003 1902](tel:03000031902)

*Offers support with transport to appointments, and signpost to other services in the community.*

**IAPT 'Health in Mind'** [Tel: 01376 308704](tel:01376308704) [www.northessexiapt.nhs.uk/mid-essex](http://www.northessexiapt.nhs.uk/mid-essex)

*Provides therapies for people experiencing mental health problems, such as: depression, anxiety and long term physical health conditions.*

**Living Well Essex:** [www.livingwellessex.org](http://www.livingwellessex.org)

*This is a website which gives a wealth of information on topics such as staying at home, meal provision services, community access, befriending services and legal matters.*

**Macmillan Cancer Support** [www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)

*Offers support and advice on living with breathlessness.*

**My Life My Lungs** [www.mylungsmylife.org](http://www.mylungsmylife.org)

*A website designed to teach people with conditions such as COPD and asthma, self-management techniques to use in daily life.*

**Smokefree** [www.nhs.uk/smokefree](http://www.nhs.uk/smokefree)

*Offers free information, advice and support via the helpline and website to people who want to give up smoking, or who have given up and do not want to start again.*

**Social Care Direct** [Tel: 0845 603 7630](tel:08456037630)

*Social Services in the community. Access to carers, therapists, equipment.*

**Created by Alex Bailess, Physiotherapist, and Amy Salha, Occupational Therapist**



## Contacts / Further Information

If you would like further information, regarding the evidence printed in this leaflet please contact the Respiratory Therapy Team on 01245 514197, or see the 'Services in the Mid Essex Area' section of this booklet.

Please ask if you require this information in other languages, large print, easy read accessible information, audio/visual, signing, pictorial and change picture bank format via the following link <http://meht-intranet/clinical-pages/the-big-word/>



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