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Short of breath due to anxiety

Anxiety itself can already be troubling, but when that anxiety affects the way you feel about your own health, it becomes a tremendous burden. It's not uncommon for many people suffering from anxiety and anxiety attacks to worry about their physical health, and often one of the main contributing symptoms is a shortness of breath. Shortness of breath is a common symptom of an anxiety disorder. In this article, we'll take a look at the causes of shortness of breath, how to cope with it, and how to overcome it. When it Doubt, See a Doctor Before we begin, those that struggle with shortness of breath should always consider first seeing a doctor. Anxiety is a frequent cause of this condition, but there are several health issues, unrelated to anxiety, that can cause shortness of breath. These include common conditions like asthma and allergies, as well as other conditions that may affect your lungs and heart Still, even when shortness of breath is originally caused by a health condition, it can still lead to anxiety. The experience of breathlessness can trigger worrying thoughts about your health, such as “I’m going to pass out”. This can lead to developing greater anxiety which, in turn, can actually cause symptoms of hyperventilation and trouble breathing to increase, causing further discomfort. . Causes of Shortness of Breath Anxiety related breathing issues tend to be a result of hyperventilation. Hyperventilation is also known as "overbreathing," and it occurs when your body is receiving too much oxygen and is expelling too much carbon dioxide. Even though the body needs oxygen, healthy carbon dioxide levels are still important. When you are taking in too much air you are also letting out too much carbon dioxide. This can cause your body to feel like you're not breathing enough. Disrupting the balance of oxygen and carbon dioxide in the body by overbreathing can lead to symptoms such as dizziness, tingling and headache. Anxiety hyperventilation is often caused by one of two issues: Breathing too fast, such as during an anxiety attack when your body is in fight/flight mode. Breathing too fast means that the air you inhale isn’t in your body long enough to be converted to CO2, while breathing out fast expels whatever CO2 was still stored. Thinking about your breathing, which may cause you to take in more air then you need. The latter is common in people with health anxieties and panic attacks. These individuals are often concerned about their health so they focus on their breathing and try to consciously control it. Ultimately, they try to take in too much air in order to feel their chest expand for a full breath. The body often doesn't actually need that much air, and shortness of breath occurs. Shortness of Breath and Other Physical Sensations Unfortunately for many people, shortness of breath is often accompanied by other unpleasant bodily experiences. Hyperventilation and anxiety, can lead to other issues like chest pain, dizziness, and lightheadedness. These are a side-effects of increased carbon dioxide in the blood. These symptoms usually reduce as normal breathing resumes. Yet the harmless but uncomfortable sensations are often misinterpreted as signs of serious illness. This can become a further trigger for anxiety, leading to even worse breathing difficulty. If you have anxiety, it's also possible to have shortness of breath even when you're not consciously feeling anxious. That's because over time anxiety can start to alter the way you breathe. This can become a habit, and cause hyperventilation without any triggers. Part of overcoming shortness of breath may require re-learning how to breathe correctly. Coping With Shortness of Breath From Anxiety Those that are experiencing severe shortness of breath may still want to see a doctor. Shortness of breath is a common effect of anxiety, but only a medical professional can give you an accurate diagnosis. For those whose shortness of breath is caused by anxiety, you'll need to take two approaches: Short term coping. Long term coping. In the short term, you'll need to recognise that you may be hyperventilating and try to consciously avoid the temptation to over-breathe. During an panic attack, you may simply need to wait it out - they generally peak after 10 minutes and subside soon after. Traditionally breathing into a paper bag was suggested, but there are other more successful ways that you can control your breathing. You can try the following: Slow, Stomach Breaths Slowing your breathing so that you're actually breathing a bit less quickly can be a big help. Often when we’re anxious we take short, shallow breaths into the chest. Try instead to breathe in and out slowly into the lower part of the body. Feel the muscle under your lungs, the diaphragm, moving downwards and your belly expanding. Don't worry about yawning or filling up your chest with air. Instead, breathe into the abdomen, hold for a few seconds, and breathe out slowly through your mouth. This should help you maintain better CO2 levels. Distractions Recall that for many people, shortness of breath is caused by focusing your attention on your own breathing. Distractions can put breathing back in your body's control. Activities such as turning on the TV or calling someone you know can help, or playing a mind game such as trying to name a country for every letter of the alphabet - anything to distract your mind so that your body takes control of your breathing again. Go Walk Similar to distractions, walking (and jogging, although jogging can be hard for people going through an anxiety attack) gets your heart rate up a bit, and challenges your body to breathe normally. Often the mind and body go back on autopilot and you get natural breaths again. It may also provide you with the distractions you need, especially if there is enough around you visually. Shortness of breath, when related to anxiety, will go away once your breathing returns to a normal rate. If you can control overcompensating by trying to get too much air, you should be able to get your breathing to feel natural again. Long Term Treatment for Shortness of Breath In the long term, the key is to get both your breathing and your anxiety under control. Breathing strategies tend to focus on "retraining" the mind to breathe correctly.If you have been experiencing anxiety you may have become very used to breathing too quickly. Many experts recommend deep breathing exercises. They're a form of relaxation exercise that involves sitting still and learning to breathe slowly through your stomach instead of your chest. These exercises can be lead by an instructor, or you could find a script on a relaxation CD or video. Research suggests that practicing breath training will help your body learn to breathe better, and ultimately prevent hyperventilation. Yoga and meditation also have deep breathing components, and these can help you retrain the way you breathe. Still, the most important treatment is going to be learning to control your anxiety. Only by managing your anxiety and limiting its symptoms will anxiety-related shortness of breath go away, and will it become possible to reduce any stress you experience during shortness of breath episodes. Anxiety is a very treatable condition. You can learn to control this anxiety by: Educating Yourself - The best thing you can do is educate yourself on anxiety. The more you learn as much about anxiety as possible. With anxiety, knowledge is power. You can try exploring this site, for example, where we have countless articles about anxiety including our anxiety guide. Self-Help Techniques - There are several self-help techniques that can assist you with anxiety reduction. For example, deep breathing, journaling, and progressive muscle relaxation can all help reduce anxiety. See a Mental Health Professional - There are those that try to avoid psychologists and psychiatrists because they think it either won’t work or are too uncomfortable. But therapy and some medications can be quite valuable. If you find yourself really struggling, don’t count out the value of clinical intervention. Anxiety is very treatable. With the right techniques, you can overcome your anxiety, manage your symptoms, and experience a better quality of life. Home Anxiety Symptoms Sensations OverviewExperiencing shortness of breath (dyspnea) or other breathing difficulties can feel scary. But it’s not an uncommon symptom of anxiety.Many people worry that a symptom affecting their breathing must come from a physical issue. In fact, your mental health affects your physical health in a number of ways.While anxiety can cause shortness of breath and other physical symptoms, it’s important to acknowledge that experiencing shortness of breath for other reasons may also create anxiety.Here’s what you need to know about this symptom and when to see your doctor.Anxiety is your body’s natural fear response. This is known as the the fight-or-flight response. Your body reacts in physical and mental ways to prepare you to either fight or run from the situation.Shortness of breath is one of those responses. You may feel like you can’t catch your breath, tightness in your chest, or like you’re suffocating or hungry for air.Studies have shown a strong association between anxiety and respiratory symptoms, including shortness of breath.Other symptoms that can occur during this response and as a result of anxiety include:faster breathing (hyperventilation)chest tightnessbreathlessness or a feeling of suffocationfeeling like you have a lump in your throatmuscle tensionheart palpitations (feels like a stronger, faster heartbeat)feeling faint, dizzy, or unsteadynausea or stomach discomfortrestlessness, irritability, or feeling on edgeShortness of breath and other physical symptoms happen in the fight-or-flight response to protect you. With anxiety, you may not be running for your life. But your body still responds as if you are.You experience chest tightening, shortness of breath, and faster breathing because your body is trying to get more oxygen to your muscles, preparing you to run. Your heart rate increases and you may feel hot as more blood pumps to your muscles, preparing you to fight.All of these symptoms are normal body responses designed to save your life.Of course, you probably aren’t often running or fighting for your life — from wild bear attacks or men with chain saws. But your body still reacts to your trip to the crowded grocery store, your work presentation, and other anxiety-provoking events as if you were.When you’re experiencing shortness of breath from an anxiety attack, it may seem counterintuitive that your breathing is what you should focus on. But by focusing on your breathing, you can get it under control and the right amount of oxygen into your lungs.Experts recommend practicing diaphragmatic breathing. This is a type of breathing technique that uses your diaphragm. The diaphragm is the most efficient breathing muscle we have. When you’re experiencing shortness of breath, you’re generally breathing from your mouth or chest. Diaphragmatic breathing can: slow your breathing ratedecrease your demand for oxygenuse less effort and energy to breatheHere’s how to practice diaphragmatic breathing:Sit up comfortably in a chair or lie back on a flat surface, like your bed, with your head supported.Place one hand on your upper chest and the other below your rib cage. This will allow you to better feel your diaphragm as you breathe.Breathe in slowly through you nose so your stomach moves out against your hand.Tighten your stomach muscles. Let them fall inward as you exhale through your nose or your mouth (depending on what’s easier for you).Continue to take deep breaths in and out, feeling your stomach rise in and out. Do this for 5 to 10 minutes a day.Tips: You’re less likely to experience shortness of breath or hyperventilation while breathing in and out through your nose. It’s also normal to get tired or feel like it’s a lot of effort when you first begin this breathing practice. With more practice, this breathing technique will become automatic and easy.“The more you can slow down the physical sensations during periods of high anxiety, the more you can use your rational mind to assess what is going on.” — Elke Zuercher-White in “An End to Panic”You can also try these anxiety-relieving techniques:Grounding techniques. One type of grounding technique involves clenching body parts and slowly releasing them. Focus entirely on these sensations.Mindful distractions. Find something to distract your mind from panicking to help you calm down. Try describing things around you to keep your focus on something else. What color is your couch? What is its texture? Talk to yourself. Now that you know these symptoms are a part of your body’s automatic response, remind yourself this. In the moment of panic or anxiety, tell yourself “I can’t breathe because my body is trying to get more oxygen” or “I’ve been evaluated and my heart is fine.” Talking to yourself rationally can pull you out of the anxiety.Exercise. It may seem strange to exercise in the midst of an anxiety attack, but going for a quick run or expending some of that built-up energy may actually work for you. Your body is preparing itself to run anyway — you might as well take advantage of it.Self-care. You can practice self-care in simple ways. Drink herbal tea (but avoid caffeinated tea, as it can increase anxiety). Light candles with a pleasant aroma. Write down your feelings. Turn on some soothing music.Shock yourself. Shocking your system by dipping your face in a bowl of ice water is actually a technique recommended by therapists to help pull you out of a thought spiral.If you notice shortness of breath before experiencing a full-blown panic attack, learn to recognize it and don’t ignore it. Start focusing on your breathing before the anxiety escalates.For long-term strategies, consider seeing a mental health professional. They can evaluate your needs and teach your coping mechanisms that’ll work for you.Practicing your breathing daily, other forms of mindfulness, and taking up relaxing yoga may also help.The main way to prevent shortness of breath and other physical symptoms of anxiety is to practice techniques and learn your triggers when you’re not experiencing them. You don’t prepare for an earthquake during an earthquake; you prepare beforehand. Anxiety is the same.One of the most helpful preventive techniques is to maintain a thought log. In a thought log, you write down the automatic thoughts you had in your last moment of anxiety or panic. It’s helpful for discovering triggers as well as helping you reflect on your anxiety in a calmer state.You can also write down what sensations you’re experiencing while you’re experiencing them. This can help your doctor understand what’s going on. There are several types of thought logs. Check out this one focusing on dysfunctional thinking or a general anxiety tracker. You can even make your own by recording:the datethe specific trigger (the situation or physical symptom, such as shortness of breath)the automatic thought (what you think will happen due to this physical symptom or situation)how strongly you believe this thought (1 to 100 percent)If you’re experiencing shortness of breath, your automatic thought may be that you must have a serious health condition. In the moment, you may have believed it — almost 100 percent.However, after challenging this thought now in your recording, you only believe it 20 percent. Recording, reviewing, and challenging these thoughts is an essential way to prevent future anxiety.You can also use an app to track your anxiety.Practicing regular meditation may also help you reduce your anxiety. Numerous studies have shown that meditation can reduce anxiety symptoms to help treat anxiety.You can also practice mindfulness in everyday activities to help you become more aware of your body and what makes you anxious. Try a mindful eating exercise or a mindful walk around the block.Finally, consider working with a mental health professional to come up with more strategies. They can help you work out negative thought processes that occur when you’re experiencing anxiety, especially if this anxiety is severe or causing you great distress.Shortness of breath and other symptoms of anxiety can mimic other conditions. It’s a good idea to monitor your symptoms and get a checkup with your doctor to rule out any other conditions.Getting a physical to ensure you don’t have any other issues can also alleviate some of your anxiety. For instance, in a panic attack, many people believe they’re having a heart attack. This fear only increases their panic.Other causes of shortness of breath include:exercisealtitude changestight clothinga sedentary lifestyleOther conditions where you may experience shortness of breath include:If you experience shortness of breath consistently, or when unconnected to anxiety, see your doctor.Seek emergency medical attention if you experience symptoms of a heart attack, including:tightness or pain in the chest, neck, jaw, back, or armsfatigueliightheadedness, nausea, or vomitingdiscomfort in your arm or shouldersweating more than usual without a logical reasonIt’s important to remember that anxiety attacks can’t kill you. You won’t suffocate, won’t stop breathing, and won’t die from an anxiety attack. An anxiety or panic attack won’t turn into a heart attack, either.If you’re worried about your physical health, get checked out. Once you’ve been cleared of any physical reasons for your shortness of breath, hold onto that clean bill of health as a reminder when you’re back in an anxious moment.See a mental health professional for further help and assistance with coping techniques.

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