

Department of **PALLIATIVE MEDICINE**  
Department of **RESPIRATORY MEDICINE**

# Managing Your Breathlessness



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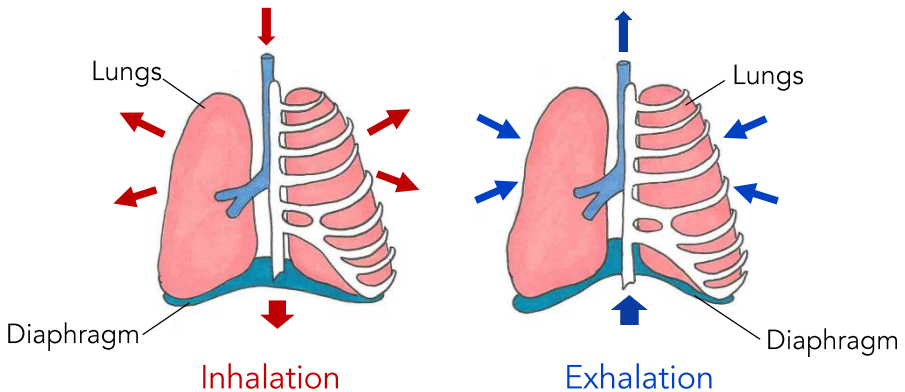
# Causes of Breathlessness

## What Happens During Breathing

Breathing involves the movement of oxygen and carbon dioxide into and out of the body. Adequate intake of oxygen and removal of carbon dioxide is important to maintain body function.

Breathing consists of inhalation (breathing in) and exhalation (breathing out). When breathing in, the breathing muscles contract and cause expansion of the chest, allowing oxygen into the lungs.

When breathing out, the breathing muscles relax and cause an increase in pressure in the chest, allowing carbon dioxide to move out of the lungs.



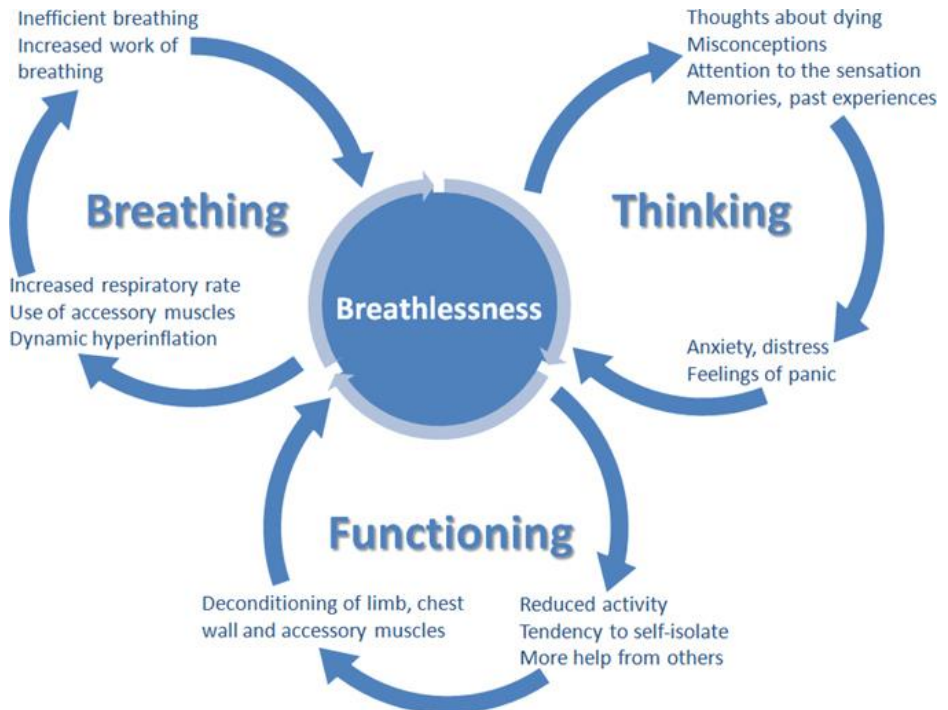
## Causes of Breathlessness

Physical, environmental, psychological, and social factors can contribute to the feeling of breathlessness.

Common causes include:

- Lung conditions such as asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, interstitial lung disease, pneumonia
- Heart conditions such as heart failure
- Psychological conditions such as anxiety

# Effects of Breathlessness



Reproduced with permission from the Cambridge Breathlessness Intervention Service.  
Spathis et al. The Breathing, Thinking, Functioning clinical model: a proposal to facilitate evidence-based breathlessness management in chronic respiratory disease.

Breathlessness can impact your thoughts, the way you breathe, and how you go about your daily activities. The increase in breathing rate increases the workload of the lungs, and can cause your breathing pattern to become inefficient.

Breathlessness can make you feel more tired and reduce your ability to perform your usual activities. Breathlessness can also cause you to feel anxiety or panic, and can lead to longstanding anxiety or depression.

# Tips to Control Breathlessness

Besides the medications prescribed by your doctor, here are some tips to help you control or improve your breathlessness.

## Thinking:

- 1) Mindfulness
- 2) Hand exercises
- 3) Visualisation

## Breathing:

- 1) Positioning
- 2) Breathing techniques
- 3) Using hand-held fan

## Functioning:

- 1) Guidelines to conserve energy
- 2) Methods to conserve energy

If you are experiencing moderate to severe breathlessness, your doctor may prescribe medications to relieve your symptoms related to the breathlessness. This may include opioid medications, anxiety-relieving medications, and/or antidepressants.

# Thinking

## Mindfulness

The practice of mindfulness involves an intentional focus on one's emotions, thoughts and sensations in the present moment.

### Potential benefits:

- Improvement of physical health
  - Relieves stress, reduces chronic pain, improves sleep
- Improvement of mental health
  - Helps one to accept or think positively about unpleasant experiences, rather than react with aversion and avoidance.

### **Simple mindfulness exercises you can do anytime**

- Take a moment to notice the beauty around you.
- Pause and pay attention as you go about your daily activities.
- Be grateful – write down one thing you are grateful for everyday.
- Take a moment to notice how you feel.
- Focus on your breathing – pay attention to your breaths as the air moves in and out of your nose.

# Thinking

## Hand Exercises

These exercises involve pressing several points on the hands and head, to relieve anxiety and clear your mind.



1) Hit both hands side by side on the thumbs 36 times.



6a) Hit your left fist into the right palm 36 times.

b) Hit your right fist into the left palm 36 times.



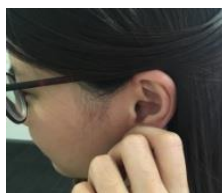
2) Hit both hands side by side on the external edge of your palms 36 times.



7) Hit the back of both hands against each other 36 times.



3) Hit your wrists against each other 36 times.



8) Rub both earlobes 36 times.



4) Hit the angles of both hands against each other 36 times.



9a) Rub your palms to make them warm.

b) Cover both eyes with your palms. Roll your eyeballs clockwise 6 times, and anti-clockwise 6 times.



5) Interlace the fingers of both hands and rub them against each other 36 times.

c) Repeat a and b.

Adapted from: Chan CLW. An Eastern Body-Mind-Spirit Approach – A Training Manual with One Second Technique. Hong Kong: Department of Social Work and Social Administration, University of Hong Kong, 2001.

# Thinking

## Visualisation

- Get into a comfortable position and let your body be as relaxed as possible. Let your shoulders and arms sink down. Close your eyes.
- Now, imagine a relaxing scene, a place that makes you feel happy and secure. This could be your favourite place, a garden, the beach, or somewhere from your imagination.
- Enjoy this scene for a few minutes. Then begin to bring your attention back to the place you are in. Notice the feeling of relaxation that you are experiencing. At your own time, open your eyes.



- Visualizing soothing colours and their related images can also be relaxing. For example:
  - Think of the colour green.
  - Imagine the green of a large grassland.
  - Imagine the green of a quiet forest filled with trees.



# Breathing

## Positioning

Positioning helps to relieve shortness of breath by improving the movement of your diaphragm. You can go into the following positions when you are feeling breathless:



While sitting, lean forwards, fold your arms, and rest them on a table.



While standing, lean your hips against a wall, bend forwards, and rest your hands on your thighs.

Try to avoid raising your shoulders or tightening your neck muscles while in these positions.

## Breathing Techniques

In addition to positioning, these two breathing techniques can also help to relieve breathlessness:

### 1) Breathing Control

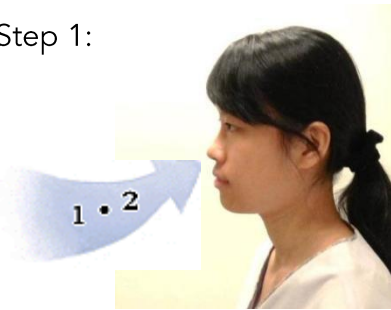


- Relax your upper chest, shoulders, and arms.
- Breathe in through your nose and breathe out slowly through your mouth.
- Feel your stomach move in and out as you do.

# Breathing

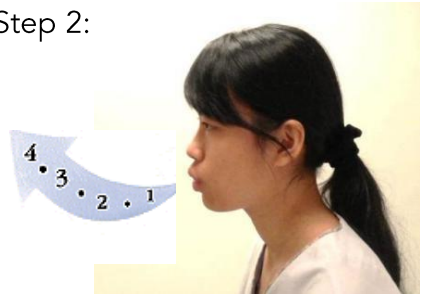
## 2) Pursed Lip Breathing

Step 1:



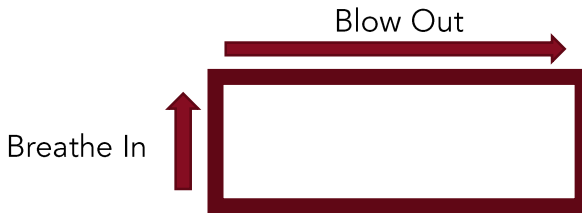
Breathe in through your nose.

Step 2:



Breathe out slowly through a small hole between your lips.

You may also imagine a rectangle and try to breathe around the rectangle. This will guide you to blow out longer breaths.



## Using Hand-held Fan

- Get into a comfortable sitting or standing position.
- Hold the fan approximately 15 cm from your face
- Aim the air towards the centre of your face.



This technique will help to relieve your breathlessness.

# Functioning

## Guidelines to Conserve Energy

- 1) Prioritise activities you would like to do in a day and reschedule the less important ones to another day.
- 2) Plan and schedule your day or week, e.g. plan to mop the floor today and perform grocery shopping the next day
- 3) Alternate between light and heavy activities throughout the day.
- 4) Break down individual tasks into multiple steps, and take frequent rest breaks when engaging in a task.
- 5) Slow down when speaking, laughing, eating or coughing – these actions can interrupt regular breathing, causing shortness of breath.
- 6) Push or slide objects instead of lifting them, or use a trolley.
- 7) Pace your breathing when engaging in a task or climbing the stairs.
- 8) Exhale when effort is required to perform a task e.g. when trying to pick an item up from the ground, inhale when squatting down (with your back kept straight), and exhale when getting up.
- 9) Place commonly-used items in easy-to-reach areas – avoid bending down or reaching overhead.
- 10) Perform tasks in the sitting position when possible.

# Functioning

## Methods to Conserve Energy



### Cooking

- Sit down when preparing ingredients.
- Place a chair nearby to take a break when needed.
- Push or slide objects across tabletop, instead of lifting.
- Serve food in smaller portions instead of carrying fully-loaded pots and pans.



### Grocery shopping

- Plan a shopping list to buy what you need.
- Use a shopping trolley.
- Take a few breaks if the travelling distance is long.



### Mopping

- Use a mop with a handle to drain the water, or a spin mop.
- Take a break after cleaning each room.

### Sweeping

- Use a vacuum cleaner or a dry wiper mop, instead of a broom.
- Use the momentum of the whole body while sweeping.

# Functioning

## Methods to Conserve Energy



### Dressing

- Wear loose clothing.
- Sit on a chair to wear pants.
- Use a long-handled reacher to reach for clothing.



### Showering

- Sit down to shower.
- Use warm water to shower – not too hot or cold.
- Shower when the weather is not cold.
- Use long-handled sponge to wash back and legs.
- Ensure toilet is well-ventilated.
- Break down steps e.g. wash upper body, take a break, then wash lower body.



### Toileting

- Use a urinal or commode if you experience difficulty in walking to toilet at night.
- Pace your breathing when defecating.

# Monitoring Your Breathlessness

You can monitor your breathlessness level using the following scale. This will help you to know when to seek help, or when to use any breathlessness strategies.

0	No breathlessness at all
1	
2	Mild breathlessness
3	
4	
5	Moderate breathlessness
6	
7	
8	Severe breathlessness
9	
10	Maximal breathlessness

Resting

Exercise

Take a break!

We hope that with all these techniques that you have learnt, your quality of life will improve and you will be able to manage your breathlessness with more confidence.

Feel free to speak to a healthcare professional if you have further questions.

This educational material is brought to you by:

- Department of Palliative Medicine
- Department of Respiratory and Critical Care Medicine
- Department of Care and Counselling
- Department of Nursing
- Department of Occupational Therapy
- Department of Physiotherapy

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