



Faith Squared Music

Christ-Centered Healing Through Neuroplasticity

CONTROLLED DEEP BREATHING

Controlled deep breathing is usually the best place to start when addressing anxiety. It involves the following:

- Mastering the correct physical process of breathing for maximum success and benefit;
- Using actual counting for the breathing process—out loud as needed—to create a body tempo that will slow the heart rate down and help lift the feelings of fear; and...
- Focusing the mind on feeling the empowerment that can come when you take control of your own breathing and heart rate.

If it has never occurred to you that you or anyone else might be breathing incorrectly, remember what it is like to watch a baby breathing and then compare that with the drill sergeant/P.E. teacher mentality of “Suck it in!” A baby’s entire torso—lungs AND stomach—expand with each intake of breath, whereas “Suck it in!” implies sucking in your stomach and breath at the same time... the exact opposite of what nature intended. This backwards method is so ingrained into our society, that it contributes greatly to the tendency of many people to hyperventilate in times of significant stress. (Singers understand this. They are the best deep breathers!)

There is a muscle under our lungs, just above the navel, called a diaphragm. It is there specifically to support our lungs. The diaphragm should expand downward and outward with each breath to accommodate air coming into our lungs. Then it should then contract back in when pushing the air out. Period. If you have inadvertently trained your diaphragm to pull in and tighten up when you breathe in, I’m here to tell you you’re doing it wrong! It may take a while to retrain that muscle, so don’t be discouraged if it is challenging at first. Habits like that don’t change overnight. But it CAN be done! I have a couple of suggestions that should help.

During a moment of comparative calm, try laying down with something light, like a small book or plate, resting on your diaphragm... just above your belly button. Then slowly pull in a breath while focusing on expanding your entire abdomen and making the object rise. Hold it there for a moment before expelling your breath slowly, while then focusing on making the object descend as your abdomen shrinks. Repeat frequently until it gets easier, and with concentrated effort, it should eventually become your natural way of breathing. When that happens, employing correct breathing techniques when you need them most will be reflexive.

I had a choir teacher in high school who taught us how to do a kind of standing pushup with our diaphragms, which you can try, too. Find a wall and a sturdy medium or large-sized book, such as a hymnal or hard-cover dictionary. Place one short end of the book firmly against your diaphragm, and the other against the wall, while making sure that the flat sides (covers) of the book are parallel to the floor. With your feet not more than six or so inches apart, position yourself far enough away from the wall that you must lean slightly forward, with your weight resting on the edge of the book, in order to stay upright. Now push yourself away from

the wall, using only your diaphragm, by taking in a slow, deep breath. Hold the position for just a moment, then let yourself slowly lean back in closer to the wall as you expel your breath. Lather, rinse, repeat.

When you really learn how to employ correct breathing techniques, you'll find that the additional oxygen your brain and bloodstream receive goes a long way toward replacing feelings of panic with feelings of being calm and in control. At the very least, your heart rate will eventually slow down and it will be easier to focus your thoughts.

Now you're ready to add counting to your breathing. Counting while breathing gives you something to focus on besides what you're trying to escape, and it helps keep you on track with what you're trying to accomplish. There are many different opinions on exactly how to do this. I'll share what works well for me.

First, I count slowly up to five or six while breathing in, focusing on that expanding diaphragm. (If that feels too challenging, just count to three or whatever you can manage. Then gradually increase your counts over time as you get better at it.) I hold that breath for a slow count of two or three. Next, I breathe out to the same count I used for breathing in, and then I rest again for another count of two or three before starting all over. Even when I needed to start out counting more quickly than I wanted to, as things progressed, I was able to slow my counting down a bit more each time, until I found a more relaxed, and relaxing, rhythm. (I'm to the point now where I can use a full minute to inhale and exhale only three times. It feels awesome!)

As much as you are able, do all of this breathing through your nose... especially when you inhale.

If your mind wants to worry and fret about anything, especially the perceived causes of your stress or fear, do your best to let it go and think about nothing but the breathing. You can also think about the subtle sounds around you, how the furniture, floor, or ground feels underneath you, the temperature, the smells, etc. Be fully present in the moment. (Listening to calming music and/or nature sounds can really help here.)

And if you have to re-center yourself by doing this over and over again when your mind wanders, don't beat yourself up over it. That is part of the process. Just get back to focusing once again on only the here and now, your breathing, and the purposefulness of bringing yourself to a calmer place. (This is actually a simplified description of a form of mindfulness or mindfulness meditation. I encourage you to learn more.)

You may also find controlled deep breathing useful when you're trying to quell your temper, face a daunting task, or have a difficult discussion with someone in your life. Generally, at least three times through a breathing sequence is the standard recommendation, at least for starters.

Sometimes, if you have an understanding family member or friend close by to count out loud for you, that can be helpful. Or you might consider one of the many guided breathing meditations for free or for purchase online. Another option is to record your own voice doing the counting (during a time of calmness) and access the recording as needed.

Be careful that you don't sabotage yourself while you're trying to slow down and control your breathing (especially during the challenging moments) by saying or thinking negative things yourself or what is happening. It is a natural impulse to do so... but is a bit like tying your shoelaces together before you stand up to walk across the room. You're going to do a faceplant before you even get started! Use your thoughts and words to feed your brain and heart reassuring messages of safety while you breathe.

Keep at this, and one day you'll discover that the effective practice of controlled breathing will bring you an amazing feeling of empowerment. You don't need to be dependent on someone or something to calm you down. You can do this yourself. It's a bit like cleaning house; once you conquer that one drawer, or closet, or room... you feel much more equal to the task of conquering the rest. The same principle is in operation when you clear your mental and emotional clutter by using controlled breathing to enhance your ability to focus and take control of the moment. Believe with all your heart that you are fully capable of making this happen. Then... use that empowerment to take you to the next phase.

TAKE YOUR CONTROLLED BREATHING TO THE NEXT LEVEL

When you feel that you've come to a place of sufficient calm with your controlled breathing, you can add in a mantra, a scripture, hymn lyrics, or (what a brilliant idea!) one of the affirmation poems on this web site. Read/speak the words out loud before or after a set of slow deep breaths, or do a line or two in between breaths, or... just think them slowly in your head throughout.

And please don't stress about some perfect way to do this. Just reading from a page is a fine way to go, especially if memorizing something feels a bit overwhelming. Just listening is an excellent option as well. (Please note the links to recordings of my affirmation poems, located next to each image.)

"I Am Safe" is the affirmation that I've most often repeated to myself during intentional deep breathing sessions when I've REALLY needed to calm down. It is very grounding and comforting. I repeat each line very slowly, with the rhythm of the words calculated to match my measured breathing. After several repetitions, I ALWAYS feel better, and better equipped to tackle whatever is in front of me. Other poems that work well with deep breathing exercises are:

- In the Here, In the Now
- My Safe Place
- This Too, Shall Pass
- One Foot In Front of the Other
- I Can Do This
- I Will Trust Him to Take Care of Me
- Only Room for Light

Remember also that whether you're reading or reciting from memory, you don't have to use the whole poem. You can just choose one or two verses or lines of text consisting of just the right words that you know you need to hear and internalize at that moment in time. This is an especially great way to go during intense episodes.

I've found that a warm bathtub is a great place for this practice, or in my bed when I'm having trouble sleeping. It is also helpful in times of great stress (when I'm upset about something, or running late and stuck in nasty traffic, for instance), or just when I'm getting ready to get up and face the day. Whenever or wherever you do this, start and end with prayer. It is a game changer!

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