

Modified 4-7-8 Breathing Technique

There are many anti-anxiety techniques that involve breathing exercises. One that we recommend to patients is the 4-7-8 breathing technique, described initially by Dr. Andrew Weil. The technique is beneficial to anxiety disorders for a few reasons. First, it slows down and deepens your breathing. We know that anxiety disorders are often associated with rapid, shallow breathing, which usually worsen the anxiety. Consciously slowing and deepening your breathing can often short-circuit a panic attack.

This slightly modified technique also takes advantage of something called mindfulness stress reduction, which will basically help keep you in the present, focusing on the here and now. Much of anxiety centers around a perceived fear of something bad or scary that may happen in the near or distant future. The mindfulness aspect of this technique will help keep your mind from wandering too much into future thoughts that just worsen your anxiety.

Lastly, throughout the breathing exercises, you will keep your tongue positioned in a manner that can stimulate the vagus nerve, a nerve that when activated can help calm some of the cardiac symptoms that can come with anxiety, such as racing heart rate and palpitations (fluttering).

Here's how the breathing technique works:

1. First, hold your tongue position at the roof of your mouth during the entire exercise, just behind your teeth. This is what will stimulate the vagus nerve.
2. Next, breathe in through your nose for 4 seconds. Count the seconds in your head. To properly breathe in, make sure you are breathing into your abdomen, such that your abdomen is coming outward with each breath. As you are breathing in, pay attention to how your chest and abdomen feel as they are moving. Also, pay attention to the smell of the air as you breathe and the sound that you make as you breathe in.
3. Next, hold the breath for 7 seconds, counting the seconds in your head.
4. Breathe out through your mouth for 8 seconds, counting the seconds in your head. As you are breathing out, pay attention to how your chest and abdomen move as well as the sound of your breath moving outward.
5. Repeat steps 1-4 another three to seven times. If you do them much more than this, you risk feeling dizzy.
6. If your mind wanders off into the anxious thoughts while doing this, it's ok. Don't get frustrated with yourself. Just recognize the thought as neither good nor bad, and simply tuck it away and get back to thinking about your breathing. If a hundred other thoughts besides your breathing creep in, that's ok. Simply acknowledge them as just thoughts, neither good nor bad, and get back to thinking about your breathing.

To get the most benefit out of this, it is recommended that you practice this twice a day, perhaps when you first get up in the morning or when you go to bed. That way, when you get to feeling anxious, you can easily call up the breathing technique without having to recall how to do the steps.