
Anxiety, Panic and COPD

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a feeling of worry or unease about something you are not sure about or cannot control. Anxiety can be mild to severe. It can be brief, such as only a few seconds, or last longer, such as a day.

When you are anxious, you may:

- feel breathless
- have chest pains or feel tightness or pressure
- have a feeling of choking or smothering
- feel dizzy or lightheaded
- have blurry vision
- feel numb or tingling in parts of your body
- have a dry mouth
- feel nauseated or have an upset stomach
- feel irritable or cranky
- feel jittery or startle easy
- have trouble sleeping
- have muscle tension or soreness
- have trouble concentrating
- have hot flashes, cold chills or sweating

It is common to worry about these feelings you cannot control. You may panic! During a panic attack, you may feel like you are having a heart attack, losing your mind or that you may die.

What is good about anxiety?

- Anxiety is a body's "Alarm System".
- Anxiety is good when you need to protect yourself from danger.
- For example, if a car were speeding toward you blasting the horn, you would feel anxious. Feeling anxious would make you jump out of the way.
- This is called "Fight or Flight". Anxiety is there to tell you to either defend yourself or get away from the situation.

The purpose of anxiety is to protect you, not harm you.

Why does anxiety make it harder to breathe?

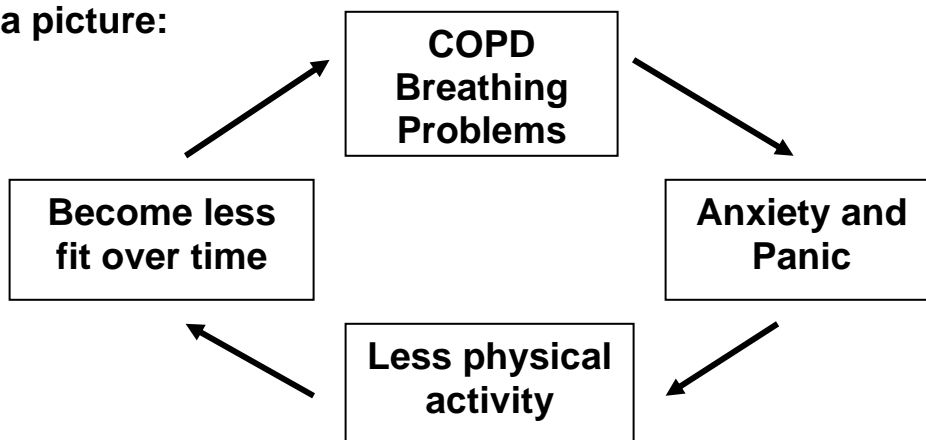
When you are anxious your body tries to help you get oxygen to your tissues in order to fight or run away. Your breathing becomes faster and shallow to get more oxygen fast.

When you have COPD:

- you may feel anxious and then have trouble breathing or
- you may have trouble breathing and then feel anxious about this

When this happens, you may stop following your exercise program. This can lead to becoming less fit. This then leads to having more trouble breathing and the cycle keeps going around.

Here is a picture:



What are the common fears and worries with COPD?

Anxiety and panic are very common with COPD. Below is a list of some of the ways that “too much worrying” can show up. Check off each item that applies to you:

<input type="checkbox"/> I have trouble getting to sleep because I am worrying
<input type="checkbox"/> I can be sitting quietly and suddenly become short of breath
<input type="checkbox"/> I almost always worry about when I am going to have trouble breathing
<input type="checkbox"/> I seem to be getting more and more frightened to leave the house
<input type="checkbox"/> I would rather stay home so I can avoid being exposed to “dangers” such as germs, perfumes or accidents
<input type="checkbox"/> I am frightened of getting onto elevators, airplanes or bridges and go out of my way to avoid them
<input type="checkbox"/> I walk around feeling as if something bad is going to happen

What happens when you “take a break” from COPD?

Some people with COPD feel depressed and want to take a break from being sick. Here are some signs of “taking a break”. Check any that apply to you:

<input type="checkbox"/> I often do too much in a day and pay for it with worse symptoms the next day or two.
<input type="checkbox"/> I try to use as little medication and oxygen as I can, even when my doctor wants me to use more.
<input type="checkbox"/> I sometimes pretend that I do not have COPD, even when I know it is important to let others know.
<input type="checkbox"/> When I am feeling “hassled” by my COPD, I drink alcohol or take street drugs as this lets me forget about my problems.
<input type="checkbox"/> I tend to stay home and avoid going out or staying connected with my family and friends.

Is there an ideal level of worry?

Yes, there is an ideal level of worry. At this ideal state, you understand that you have a chronic and challenging illness. You also know there are things you can do that help and hurt yourself.

Over the course of COPD you will likely go through times when you worry too much and times when you do not pay enough attention to your illness.

These ups and downs are very normal.

It is important to find just the right amount of worry so you can keep your life and your illness in balance.

Tips to Control Anxiety and Panic Attacks: ~ Calm your breathing, body and mind ~

When you are huffing, puffing and panicking, you need to believe that this moment will pass. You will be all right.

Calm your breathing:

- Use your breathing techniques.
- Remember **S.O.S. for S.O.B.** Slowly bring your breathing back to normal.
- Pace yourself.
- You are becoming an expert at this!

Calm your body:

- Use relaxation techniques to reduce muscle tension and relax your shoulders, neck and whole body.
- Help turn off the “false suffocation alarm.” Say to yourself, “I am breathing relaxation into me. I am breathing tension out of me”.
- You are becoming an expert at this!

Calm your mind:

- Replace “worry thoughts” with “calming thoughts.” Here are some ideas:
- “I am becoming calm.”
- “I can handle this because I have handled this before.”
- “My breathing is slowing down.”
- “I can get over this.”
- “I have been breathless before and I survived.”
- “I have started to slow down my breathing.”
- “My breathing is slowing down.”
- “I am calm and steady.”

Avoid worry thoughts:

This may take practice. Avoid saying things like:

- “My breathing could get out of control”
- “I will die of suffocation”
- “I am going crazy!”
- “I am losing control!” or “I am losing my mind!”
- “I wouldn’t make it to the hospital!”
- “What will happen now?”
- “I have totally lost control!”
- “I cannot (or will not be able to) stop it ever!”

More healthy ways to help:

You may have to try a few ways to see what works best for you.

- Talk to your doctor, pharmacist or educator to see if any medications could be causing any of your symptoms such as feeling jittery.
- Sit in front of a fan or have air blow around you.
- Ask for help from your family and friends. Advise them to stay calm and close. Staying calm gives hope and helps settle symptoms. They can also turn fan on or get a cool moist face cloth for you.
- Seek help from a trained professional such as a psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker or nurse counsellor to learn how to deal with problems like anxiety disorders.
- You may need to talk to your health care professional about medication that can help you.

My "Take Control" Worksheet

When you have a major problem with breathing, what are your worry thoughts?

What do you think or do when you have an increase in your symptoms?

What are your calming thoughts that you like and may work for you?

How would you calm your breathing?

How would you calm your body?

Notes:

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