

HOW TO MANAGE ANXIETY UNDER COVID-19

BY LISA DAMOUR, PHD

WHY CONTROLLED BREATHING REDUCES ANXIETY

When our brain detects a threat, the primitive "fight or flight" system turns on and sends the heart and lungs into overdrive in order to deliver heavily oxygenated blood to our large muscles should we need to attack or run.

If the physical response feels too intense, controlled breathing is a good way to manage it. Communication between the brain and the lungs is a two-way street. Deliberately taking deep and slow breaths tells the nerves on the surface of our lungs that all is well. The lungs send this message to the brain, which quiets the anxiety alarm.

ONE TECHNIQUE: SQUARE BREATHING

One particularly good technique is square breathing. Inhale slowly for a count of three, then hold your breath for a count of three, then exhale slowly for a count of three, and then pause your breathing for a count of three before beginning the cycle again.

If you are prone to getting anxious often, or to have anxiety become very intense very quickly, use calm moments to get comfortable with square breathing. This will make it easier to slip into square breathing when your anxiety ramps up.

UNDER COVID-19, HEIGHTENED ANXIETY IS NORMAL AND EXPECTABLE

Anxiety is a healthy, protective emotion meant to alert us to the presence of danger. Feeling anxious about COVID-19 is entirely appropriate, especially if you find yourself in uncontrolled settings or around large groups of people. Anxiety is uncomfortable, and it's supposed to be. By getting our attention, it helps us to be cautious under risky conditions.

MANAGING ANXIETY WHEN IT BECOMES TOO INTENSE

Anxiety sometimes becomes too intense. Luckily, anxiety usually unfolds in a step-wise, predictable pattern. And at each of these steps, there are things we can do to bring anxiety under control.

ANXIETY SEQUENCE	INTERVENTIONS
1: THE BODY ACTIVATES Heart rate rises and breathing becomes quick and shallow.	USE CONTROLLED BREATHING.
2: THE MIND INTERPRETS We take the physical changes as signs that the situation has gone out of control.	VIEW THE PHYSICAL CHANGES AS READINESS TO DEAL WITH A CHALLENGE.
3: THINKING IS HIJACKED We become fixed on the risks and lose sight of our ability to manage them.	PAUSE, OBJECTIVELY EVALUATE THE RISKS AND WHAT YOU CAN DO TO MANAGE THEM.