

Breathing for Pain

You will be aware that pain triggers a stress response as pain is most commonly an expression of threat to the painful body part. As with other threats, we are wired to FIGHT, FLIGHT or FREEZE. In order to prepare the body for fight, run, or hold very still, our breathing gets switched into a “stressed” pattern.



This is a hardwired response we are all born with and you can observe it on yourself or others around you at any time moderate to severe pain is triggered. It involves a sucking in of air (inhalation). Following the initial inhalation, we either hold our breath or breathe shallowly, often fast, but either way our chest remains in the inflated position, presumably trying to hold as much air as possible for the task ahead! Sometimes we even suck in air when we see another person being hurt! This change in breathing can be maintained until the pain eases and is usually followed by a “relieved” sigh or blowing out of air when the pain has settled again.

However, if the pain does not settle, our breathing may remain in this short, shallow upper chest pattern. It is likely to return to more normal over time, but may not return to a fully relaxed pattern, involving mostly the diaphragm muscle (refer to information on diaphragmatic breathing) whilst pain is present. This is why so many people with chronic pain have altered breathing patterns and often struggle to breathe diaphragmatically. So you can see that chronic pain has a powerful impact on our body and how it functions.

Unfortunately, the way we breathe influences our body and paradoxically, WHILE we breathe faster and in the upper chest we CAN'T relax. This is why it can be frustrating to be told to “breathe deep” when pain is severe, as sometimes we simply can't! Our body and breathing is in a stressed state and our chest is inflated, so getting more air in to activate the diaphragm can be a challenge. This is also one of the most frequent mechanisms by which pain interferes with our ability to get to sleep and remain asleep, as good sleep requires us to physically relax.

Breathing for Pain Technique

Our best chance of breaking the cycle of pain, stress and poor breathing is to...

... BREATHE OUT

When we breathe out longer and slower, we trigger a range of changes:

- We create space in our lungs to take a deeper breath next time
- Our muscles can relax
- And by slowing the breathing down, we can trigger a RELAXATION response
- We therefore take a small step towards reducing our pain

Breathe Out

1. Purse your lips
2. Blow out slowly
3. Breathe in through your nose, trying to also fill your lower chest / abdomen
4. Purse your lips and breathe out as slowly and long as possible
5. Remind yourself to relax as you are breathing out. Find a phrase like “let it go” or “blow it out”, “relax” or “slow down”
6. Pause for a small moment
7. Return to breathe normally and carry on with “life”

Whakahā

Whakakōrutia ō ngutu

Āta whakahā

1. Kia hā kina mā tō ihu, ka ngana anō ki te whakakī i te wāhi whakararo o tō poho me tō puku
2. Whakakōrutia ō ngutu ka āta whakahā ai, kia pōturi rawa, kia roa rawa anō
3. Me whakamahara i a koe anō kia mauri tau i a koe e whakahā ana
4. Kimihia tētahi kiānga pēnei i ēnei: ‘tukuna’, ‘whakahātia’, ‘kia mauri tau’, ‘kia āta haere’ rānei
5. Kia tau mō tētahi wā poto
6. Kia māori anō te hā, ka hoki ai ki ngā mahi o te wā

Thankfully this does not take much time or any resources, but we do need to REMEMBER to do this.

You are recommended to practice this little breathing exercise several times daily, especially at times when you notice an increase in your pain.