

Your breath tells the body what to feel. When breathing speeds up to meet a worry that isn't there, the body gets the signal that something is wrong.

Many people who live with anxiety also have a breathing pattern that quietly amplifies it. This resource explains the link in plain language and offers a short, evidence-informed practice you can use alongside any care you are already receiving.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Breathing, anxiety and the loop you may not have noticed

When the breath becomes faster, shallower or more chest-led, the body releases more carbon dioxide than it produces. With less carbon dioxide circulating, blood vessels narrow and the brain receives a different signal mix to the one it usually works with.

That signal mix can produce real physical sensations: lightheadedness, tingling in the hands or face, chest tightness, a racing heart, or the strange feeling of not getting a full breath. Many people then read those sensations as evidence that something dangerous is happening, which makes the breathing speed up further. The loop closes quietly and feels like anxiety itself.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

The 2020–2022 ABS National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing reported that 17.2% of Australians had a 12-month anxiety disorder, with rates higher in young women. Recent meta-analyses are associated with reduced state anxiety and changes in heart rate variability when people practise slow paced breathing at around 5 to 6 breaths per minute (Yu et al., 2023).

A faster breathing pattern is not a flaw or a personal failing. It is the body doing what it has learned to do, often over years, in response to worry, pressure or busyness. It can change. Slowing the breath does not remove anxiety, but it gives the nervous system a different signal to read, one the body has not learned to associate with threat.

PACING YOURSELF WITH THE SCIENCE

The strongest research evidence shows that slow breathing changes physiology and is associated with self-reported reductions in anxiety. The largest placebo-controlled trial published to date found that intentional breathing practice helped, but the specific pattern mattered less than expected (Fincham et al., 2024). Translation: a steady, doable practice matters more than a perfect technique. This is not a substitute for psychological therapy when therapy is needed.

WHAT YOU CAN TRY

A practice that fits in five minutes

Begin with noticing, not changing. Once you can see your own pattern, the practice has a place to go.

Ask yourself:

- 1 **When you feel most anxious**, where do you feel it in the body, and what is your breath doing?
- 2 **Sitting quietly now**, is your breath in your chest or your belly? Is it through your nose or your mouth?
- 3 **If you slow it gently**, in through the nose, longer out through the nose or mouth, what shifts in the next minute?

THE GOAL

To give the body **regular practice with a slower rhythm**, so it has a different reference point to return to. Not to switch off anxiety on demand.

Other things that may help:

- **Aim for around 5 to 6 breaths a minute.** Inhale through the nose for about 4 seconds, exhale gently for about 6.
- **Practise when you are calm, not only when you are anxious.** A few minutes most days helps the body learn the rhythm before it is needed.
- **Keep it gentle.** A long, forced breath can be activating; a steady, comfortable breath is the aim.
- **Notice without judging.** If the breath feels short or stuck, that is information, not failure.
- **See your GP first if symptoms are new or unfamiliar.** Chest pain, breathlessness or lightheadedness can have other medical causes that deserve attention.

A Awareness

Noticing your own breathing pattern is the first piece of work. Many people are surprised how often the breath is held, sighing, or shallow without their realising.

B Breath

A slower, longer-out-than-in pattern at around 5 to 6 breaths a minute is associated with measurable changes in the nervous system across studies in healthy and anxious adults.

C Consistency

Short daily practice is associated with the most consistent benefits. The body learns from repetition more than from intensity.

If you need support now

LIFELINE

13 11 14

24 hours, 7 days · Crisis support and suicide prevention

If you are experiencing thoughts of suicide or self-harm, please contact Lifeline (13 11 14) or attend your nearest emergency department.

BEYOND BLUE

1300 22 4636

24 hours, 7 days · Anxiety, depression and mental health

MINDSPOT

1800 61 44 34

8am–8pm Mon–Fri · Free online assessment and treatment

This resource is for general information only. It does not constitute clinical advice and is not a substitute for consultation with a registered health professional. Please speak with your GP or a registered psychologist about what is right for your situation.

References: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023, National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing 2020–2022 · Fincham, Maddock & Roberts, 2024, Scientific Reports, 14, 7746 · Janssens et al., 2024, Breathe · Schiele & Domschke, 2021, Translational Psychiatry, 11, 478 · Wada et al., 2024, Respiratory Investigation · Yu et al., 2023, Mindfulness, 14(5), 1025–1043.