

3-6 Breathing Exercise

Goal

Breath work, when practiced, can help to soothe anxiety and other symptoms of PTSD. This exercise is a self-soothing practice meant to help you find comfort internally and in your environment so that you can relax as needed.

Considerations

Don't use the 3-6 breathing exercise if you have any respiratory problems. If this is the case, talk to your therapist for some other exercises to choose from. Also, remember that it's always ok to take a break from an activity. Pay attention to your internal state and rest as needed.

Getting Started

First, find a place where you won't be interrupted and sit or lie down in a relaxed position. As you begin the exercise, it's best to focus all your attention internally. This may be easier for you if you close your eyes. Some people prefer not to have their eyes closed, if so, see if you can focus your gaze on a neutral spot. Please note that a full breath is considered an inhalation and an exhalation.

Materials

Pen or pencil, timer and the form that follows on the next page.

Exercise

This exercise has four parts: Noticing, Deepening, Sipping and Counting, after each activity, there is a space for notes where you can reflect on what each activity felt like.

Noticing

Begin by noticing the pace, depth and movement of the breath as you take three inhalations and exhalations (three breaths). Notice if the breath is deep, shallow, fast, slow, smooth, rough and how it feels moving in and out of your body. After three breaths write down what you observed below:

Deepening

Begin by noticing that you can make the breath deeper, smoother and slower just by focusing your attention on this task. Take three breaths again, being careful not to hold your breath at any time. When you get to the edge of a full inhalation (don't go beyond that as it will strain the body), begin to exhale, letting the body rest for a beat at the end of the exhalation before inhaling again. At the end of the third exhalation stop and note what it feels like to deepen, slow and smooth out the breath. Write your response below.

Sipping

Now you'll work with a sipping breath by imagining that there is a straw in your mouth and you're inhaling through that straw very slowly and smoothly (you will need to form your lips into an "o" shape). Notice you can bring the breath very deep into the belly while doing this. At the edge of the inhalation, begin to exhale through the nose. Do not hold or force the breath. Do this three times and make a note of what it feels like.

Counting

In this part of the exercise, you will learn to lengthen your exhalation until it eventually becomes twice as long as the inhalation. To start with, we focus on inhaling to the count of three (you can count silently in your mind) and exhaling to the count of six, pausing at the end to let your body relax. For most people, you will lengthen the exhalation over time starting with a count of three on the inhalation and reaching four, five, and six on the exhalation. The idea is not to try too hard but to let the exhalation lengthen over time with a pause to relax before taking the next breath. Continue by inhaling slowly and deeply into the belly to the count of three, then release slowly and completely to the count of four, five, or six. As you do this, stay focused on the slow, full rhythm of inhalation and exhalation. Do this five times and make a note of how it feels below.
