

Breathing exercises to help calm the body and mind

We know that nothing is surer to elicit an eye roll than to recommend breathing exercises, but they do actually work, and can be a really helpful tool. Though they may seem simple on paper, it can be difficult to master breathing exercises, so they require regular practice.

When exposed to stress or panic, the human body is quick to respond with the fight or flight response. Adrenaline is released which causes racing heart rate, shortness of breath and feeling of intense anxiety. This response is rapid, within a few seconds, but takes several minutes to de-escalate. That means any breathing techniques need to be put to use as early as possible and for at least 3-4 minutes to have an effect.

There are two main recommended breathing exercises you can begin with - '5 Good Breaths' and 'Box Breathing' - which are explained below.

5 Good Breaths

The 5 Good Breaths approach is the simplest exercise, and is always a good one to begin with.

As the name implies, this means taking 5 good breaths to calm the nervous system. That means 5 deep breaths, in through the nose, out through the mouth, with a pause at the bottom of each breath.

The aim here is to give yourself the opportunity to keep control of the situation and create some space so that you can use other techniques from here, as needed.

Box Breathing

Invented by the US Navy Seals, Box Breathing is an exercise that focuses on the pause between breaths.

This involves breathing in a box pattern - inhaling, pausing and holding the breath for the same amount of time for each side of the box. As you feel your heart rate slow in between breaths, you can lengthen the sides of the box (say, from 2 to 3 counts) to slow your heart rate further (see diagram). This technique requires practice, so you should try it first at times when you're not feeling anxious, and practice it regularly.

