

Breathe Away the Symptoms of Presentation Anxiety

By Hank Walshak

It's presentation time.

Your heart moves into fast forward. Your hands grow cold, your legs feel like lead, and your mouth goes dry. Your vision becomes a bit unfocused and your thinking gets cloudy. You can't seem to slow down. Worst of all, you feel like you're going out of control.

"Reactions like these are responses of our body's 'fight or flight' system," said anxiety disorder expert Michael Greenwald, Ph.D. Based in Pittsburgh, he has been helping people with presentation anxiety for more than 20 years.

According to Greenwald, our bodies become physically aroused when we become anxious, dealing with a threat by activating our nervous, cardiac, and respiratory systems.

When we become anxious, we begin to breathe faster and from the upper chest. Typically, the faster we breathe in this way, the more agitated we become. Conversely, the slower we breathe from the diaphragm, the calmer we feel.

When we are relaxed, we breathe eight to 10 times a minute. When we get anxious and hyperventilate, we may breathe 18 to 24 times a minute. (Meditation can slow breathing to about four times a minute.)

Greenwald said, "Breathing from the diaphragm is one of the most potent ways to calm down when stressed out with presentation anxiety."

Greenwald suggests the following four approaches for learning how to breathe from the diaphragm.

1. The two-hand method. Sit upright (but relaxed) in a chair with one hand on the lower abdomen — with the small finger of the hand about an inch above the navel — and the other hand resting on the upper chest.

Start by visualizing an image of breathing down a pipe through your nose and into a balloon in your lower abdomen. Breathe at your normal rhythm and let the balloon inflate by letting your breath come into the lower abdomen. Then exhale gently.

Count as you breathe, counting "one" when you inhale. Just before you exhale, count "two" and relax. Keep counting up to 10 and then repeat the process. You'll find that gently observing your breathing and counting will also help allay anxiety.

2. The two-book method. Start by lying down on the floor on your back. Place one paperback book on your lower abdomen and one on your upper chest. Then breathe naturally, count your breaths, and let the air come in to move the book that is positioned on your abdomen.

As you begin to breathe from your diaphragm, you will see the book on your abdomen rise and fall; the book on your chest will remain still.

3. The face-down method. Lie face down on the floor, breathe, and count your breaths. This method immobilizes the upper chest and you have to breathe from your diaphragm. Try this approach until you feel comfortable with it, then graduate to the two-book and two-hand methods.

4. Diaphragm breathing practice. Greenwald recommends practicing diaphragm breathing for 10 minutes twice a day in a relaxing environment.

He also recommended that you scan your body for any changes, which might include:

- Your breathing slowing down.
- The locus of your breathing shifting from the upper chest to the abdominal area.
- Your shoulders relaxing.
- Your hands getting warmer.

As with any skill, diaphragm breathing takes practice. But if your presentations make you anxious, you'll find it well worth the time. ■

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