

HANDOUT 1: What Is Toilet Anxiety and Challenging It Using Relaxed Breathing Techniques

This handout provides a brief introduction to: what anxiety is and how it relates to toilet anxiety, the role of slow breathing and slow mindful breathing in reducing anxiety.

What is toilet anxiety?

- Toilet anxiety, or toilet phobia, is a term used to describe a number of issues related to using the toilet
- The most common forms of toilet anxiety are paruresis (shy bladder syndrome) or parcopresis (shy bowel syndrome)
- Toilet anxiety is a type of anxiety disorder in which the sufferer may experience concerns and fears related to being able to urinate or defecate, using a public toilet, being too far from a toilet, having an accident in public, other people being able to hear or see you use the toilet, the cleanliness of public toilets, and/or being confined in a small space
- Toilet anxiety can be associated with significant distress and reduced quality of life across a variety of domains, including education, social and relationships

What is anxiety and how does it relate to toilet anxiety?

- Anxiety is a normal, and can be a healthy reaction helping us to be on guard and ready to react in a time of danger
- Anxiety can also be unhelpful – this is when we become distressed due to the anxiety and this leads to avoidance, such as avoiding public toilets due to a fear of being spotted, being heard, etc.
- Common symptoms of anxiety can be physical (e.g., increased heart rate, sweating, muscle tension and hyperventilation), psychological (e.g., thoughts such as “Everything is going wrong” or “I’m doomed”), and/or behavioural (e.g., avoiding the situation that causes anxiety)
- When individuals experience anxiety associated with going to or being in a public toilet, symptoms can be physical (e.g., muscle tension, hyperventilation, feel dizzy), psychological (e.g., thoughts such as “people will say I smell or have something wrong

with me”, “I won’t be able to escape”), and/or behavioural (e.g., avoiding use of the toilet)

Frequent comments made about toilet anxiety:

- When I go to a public toilet, I am on guard and feel threatened by the situation
- I perceive the presence of others, the potential to be heard, and the potential to be judged by others, as really embarrassing and it causes me a lot of anxiety
- I feel anxious even thinking about going to the toilet in public
- I get all tense and find it difficult to go to the toilet in public
- What if I meet someone in the toilet I know?
- What if someone makes a comment about me while I am in the toilet?
- I feel overwhelmed just thinking about going to the toilet
- I find I avoid going to public toilets to avoid my anxiety

The key to managing anxiety: breathing and relaxation

- When anxious we tend to breathe too quickly (also called hyperventilation or overbreathing) which activates our body’s fight-flight response resulting in anxiety
- On average, a person should only need to take 10-12 breaths per minute at rest
- Relaxation is when we reduce the levels of tension and anxiety we feel in order to feel calm and safe. Relaxation is extremely important in alleviating the negative effects of anxiety
- Relaxation and breathing are important in helping overcome anxiety
- Anxiety is a normal and healthy reaction. It describes a series of changes in the body, and in the way we think and behave, which enable us to deal with threat or danger. These changes can be very useful if you have to respond very quickly
- Part of the reason we become distressed is the over-stimulation of the fight-flight response by our nervous system

Challenging anxiety by slow breathing:

Slow monitored breathing is one of the most important strategies to reduce anxiety – including toilet anxiety; this strategy helps relax muscle groups, reducing output of stress hormones and reducing overall anxiety.

- One of the problems encountered is that people only engage in slow breathing when they feel distressed; slow, monitored breathing is most effective when it is a regular and consistent practice
- Regular engagement in slow breathing reduces your everyday “baseline” of stress, giving you a buffer to better manage stress
- With practice, periods of anxiety will last for shorter periods of time

A simple slow-monitored breathing technique:

1. Give yourself permission to move away from what you are doing and sit down somewhere quiet
 2. Take in a slow, deep breath for 4 seconds, hold your breath for 4 seconds, and slowly breathe out for 4 seconds. If you find 4 seconds to be too long, use a count of 3, slowly counting 1...2...3...4... in your head
 3. Be consistent and slow. Repeat the breathing exercise 6 times
 4. After doing this for about 2 minutes, you may now notice that your body and mind have become more calm and relaxed
- If you do this slow breathing practice as soon as you notice the first signs of overbreathing, the symptoms should subside within a minute or two
 - Some people report symptoms of anxiety when they start breathing retraining. This is most likely a result of breathing a little fast or becoming too sensitive to breathing patterns when you think about them
 - Keep practicing and the anxiety will diminish

A simple slow-monitored breathing technique using a mindful approach:

1. Give yourself permission to move away from what you are doing and sit down somewhere quiet.
2. Now while you practice engaging in slow breathing (as above), focus on the air, how it feels, tastes and moves.
3. Notice how the air feels and tastes, try to imagine being with the air and following it into your lungs via your nasal passages. As you breathe out, take time to focus on the sensations and the changes to your lungs.
4. As you continue to engage in your slow breathing, you will get distracted with thoughts that come and go – don't worry, this is normal. When you identify that your mind has wandered, gently refocus on the air and its sensations.
5. Continue to engage in this mindful slow monitored breathing technique for a few minutes. After ending this exercise, take time to notice your posture and reduced tension throughout your body.

It is recommended that you practice your deep breathing throughout the day so that you have spent about 20 minutes all up. As to which one is best for you - that depends on your personal preferences for what works best for you.

The main thing is to begin with simple, shorter methods and work your way up to longer exercises.

A final comment about relaxed breathing by Dr Simon Knowles:

- The relaxation techniques found in this program are the same ones I teach patients in my private practice
- *Nine out of ten patients found that the most helpful strategy to reduce their anxiety was slow relaxed breathing*
- *Engaging in slow relaxed breathing is one of the most effective strategies in managing and overcoming anxiety*
- Relaxed breathing enables you to send signals to your brain to reduce your level of anxiety. This helps to slow and reduce unhelpful thoughts and to make them not feel as important. You will likely find within a couple of weeks of regular practice you will feel more relaxed generally.

Acknowledgements:

Thank you to Ms. Rose Tingate who put this document together adapted from a variety of sources including, IBSclinic.org.au and the treatment manual developed by Boyce et al. (2000). Cognitive-behaviour therapy as a treatment for Irritable Bowel Syndrome: A pilot study. Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry, 34, 300-9.

If you have any questions or suggestions, please feel free to email Dr Simon Knowles: sknowles@swin.edu.au

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