

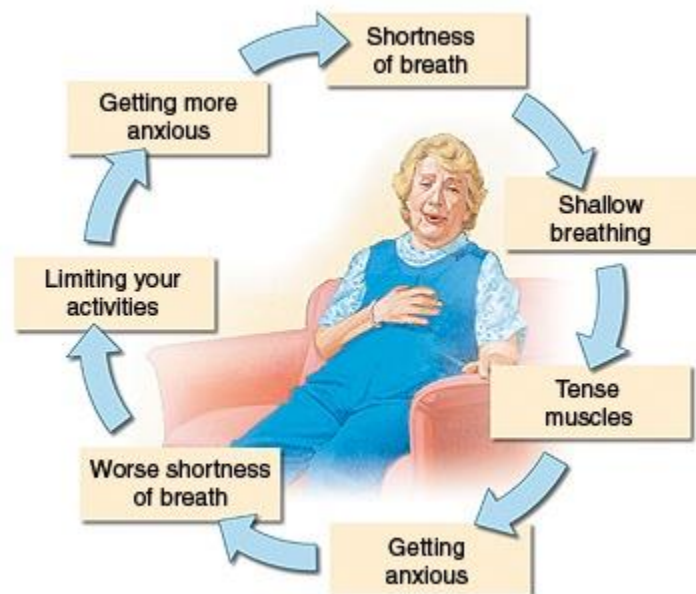
Breathlessness

Ms Iris Hoiting, Project Officer

“It’s like a vicious circle. Your breathing gets bad so you get anxious, then you get afraid, and your breathing gets worse, which makes you more afraid. The COPD feeds the anxiety and the anxiety feeds the fear” (quote from one of the participants in a study conducted by [Willgoss et al., 2012](#), on the experience of anxiety in COPD patients).

Cycle of breathlessness

For people suffering from COPD¹ the quote above will sound all-too-familiar, as dyspnea, or breathlessness, is a common symptom experienced by COPD patients. Being short of breath is an unpleasant, scary feeling that can impact daily activities tremendously. People who are experiencing shortness of breath are prone to panic, which will make the situation worse. This way, breathlessness and anxiety are connected through a vicious cycle, as expressed by the patient quoted above, and illustrated in the picture below.



(Image:<https://oxygenandbronchodilatordelivery.wikispaces.com>)

¹ Breathlessness is also a common symptom for patients suffering from advanced heart failure, disease of the nervous system, or patients at the end of life

² *Living well with COPD* has outlined multiple positions in their [learning tool](#) for managing breathing and saving energy.

What can you do?

Some suggestions that may prevent sudden breathlessness are: 1) Try changing your position² to make it easier for you to breathe, 2) Take some rest in between activities, to prevent yourself from getting out of breath, or, 3) if talking is hard for you when you notice that you are feeling short of breath, agree upon a signal with your family members that indicates you are out of breath and that you need help.

Planning and strategizing your actions when experiencing breathlessness, and preventing it from getting worse, is very important³. To help you with this, health providers often work with a COPD action plan, which will be filled out for, and together with, each patient.⁴

Besides having an action plan ready, we have listed some easy breathing techniques below that may help you overcome your breathlessness, and may prevent a sudden breathlessness crisis:

a) Pursed lip breathing

Whenever you find yourself being short of breath, pursed lip breathing requires three easy steps that can help slow down the pace of breathing.

1. Breathe in through your nose.
2. Purse your lips.
3. Breathe out slowly through your mouth.

A [useful instruction video](#) was uploaded by the [American Lung Association](#). The video demonstrates the pursed lip breathing technique step by step.

b) Belly breathing (or diaphragmatic breathing)

Another technique that can help you slow down your breath and calm you down, is belly breathing. For this technique, sit or lay down, and follow these next steps:

1. Place your hands on your stomach.
2. Breathe in slowly through your nose and feel your stomach move outwards.
3. Breathe out slowly through pursed lips.
4. Concentrate on your breathing while you repeat step 1, 2, and 3 for up to ten minutes.

³ Also, studies have shown that, even during non-acute phases of COPD, certain intervention strategies can lessen the sensation of breathlessness significantly, as well as decrease respiratory rates and levels of anxiety. Please see [Bausewein et al.](#), 2008, for an extensive overview on alternative interventions for breathlessness.

⁴ A clear COPD action plan can help you self-manage your COPD whenever you are experiencing COPD flare-ups. An action plan will provide you with guidelines that enable you to talk with your health care professional about your feelings, your medication use, and other important medical issues. An example of a COPD action plan, as well as its instructions, can be found here: <http://www.respiratoryguidelines.ca/updated-cts-copd-action-plan>

Another useful instruction [video](#) uploaded by the American Lung Association, demonstrates the belly breathing technique step by step.

c) **Handheld fan**

There is [evidence](#) that a hand-held fan may stimulate an effective breathing pattern, and alleviate your experience of breathlessness. Additionally, the hand-held fan may increase the feeling that you are in control over your own breathing, and improve breathlessness mastery. When there is no fan available, try to sit in front of an open window, as this may improve your breathing as well.

An example and more information on how to use the handheld fan can be found [here](#).

COMFORT

Lastly, the [American Thoracic Society](#) published an efficient set of guidelines for dealing with sudden breathlessness, and preventing a sudden breathlessness crisis. The society has outlined a simple [action plan](#), based on the acronym COMFORT, that can guide you as a patient, and/or your family, in a situation in which you are experiencing sudden breathless. Based on this action plan:

- C**- Call for help, remain calm. Know who you can call, and how/where you can reach them.
- O**- Observe what the breathlessness is like and, if possible, ask the patient.
- M**- Medication. Know which medication to use, and where to find them.
- F**- Fan to face, or open window.
- O**- Oxygen therapy, if this has proven to be effective in the past.
- R**- Reassure the patient, stay with him/her if they want, use relaxation techniques (music, mantra, meditation, massage).
- T**- Take your time and don't rush. Stay with the patient, but remember that it is normal if he/she does not want to talk during a breathlessness crisis.

Experiencing breathlessness can be scary, and as Willgross et al.'s study has shown, you are not the only one experiencing these fears. Try to remember, however, that breathlessness doesn't always pose an immediate threat, but can be overcome with the right strategies and a clear plan, which you can discuss and agree upon with your health care professional.