

STRESS, ANXIETY & THE DYSPNEA CYCLE

Anxiety and Stress

Stress and anxiety are common feelings we all experience from time to time. When stress and anxiety are not well managed, they can have a negative impact on both your physical and emotional health. High levels of stress and anxiety can cause headaches, muscle tension, fatigue, sleep issues, stomach problems, problems concentrating, and more.ⁱ

People living with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) are more likely to experience higher levels of anxiety and stress, which can worsen their COPD symptoms like shortness of breath.ⁱⁱ



The Dyspnea Cycle

Dyspnea, or shortness of breath, is the most common symptom that people living with COPD experience.ⁱⁱⁱ Dyspnea occurs when there is difficulty breathing air in and out, which leads to a lack of oxygen. This feeling of being unable to breathe can cause panic and anxiety. Increased levels of anxiety and panic can cause shortness of breath to worsen, leading to what is called the dyspnea cycle.^{iv}

While this cycle can be hard to stop, it is important to learn how to manage your anxious thoughts and reduce your stress level.

Managing Anxiety and Stress

Learning how to manage your stress and anxiety can improve your overall health and management of COPD. First, it is important to try and identify what triggers stress in your life.

There are lots of things that can cause stress, such as:^v

- **Environmental** - COVID, life “getting back to normal” after COVID, politics/news, weather, traffic, and finances.
- **Social** - Loved ones not understanding your condition, people disregarding COVID precautions, and not feeling like you can participate in activities.
- **Physical** - Shortness of breath, fatigue, and chronic pain.

There are a few activities that are proven to be effective in helping to manage stress and anxiety.



These include:

Pulmonary rehabilitation: In addition to improving some physical symptoms such as shortness of breath and fatigue, pulmonary rehabilitation can be effective in improving mental health. Consistent physical activity releases “feel-good” endorphins, takes your mind off worries, builds confidence, and helps you cope in a healthy way.^{vi}

Because of this, pulmonary rehabilitation can improve your overall quality of life. It is important to work with your healthcare provider to identify if incorporating pulmonary rehabilitation is the right choice for you.

If you face barriers to accessing pulmonary rehabilitation services, [BHA has developed guidelines to help you do pulmonary rehabilitation activities at home.](#)

Mindfulness: According to the 2023 Global Initiative for Chronic Obstructive Lung Disease (GOLD) Report, practicing mindfulness can reduce anxiety and improve your physical health, such as lung function, shortness of breath, ability to exercise, and tiredness.^{vii} Mindfulness refers to different techniques that help you focus on the present moment, which can then alleviate negative thought patterns. It also enables you to better understand the emotional and physical feelings you are experiencing.^{viii}

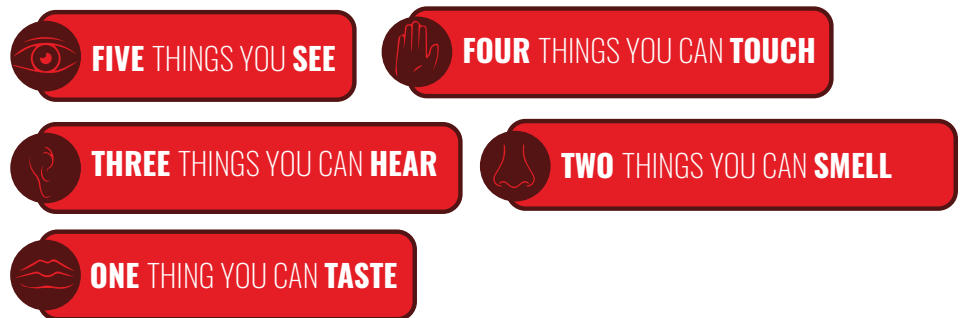
While you may not be able to eliminate all the stress in your life, recognizing what your triggers are and engaging in activities such as mindfulness or pulmonary rehabilitation can help you learn to manage your stress over time.

A few examples of mindfulness include:

Pursed-Lip Breathing: This technique helps you slow your breathing to inhale and exhale more air. Follow these steps to begin your practice:



Grounding: This mindfulness technique helps to ground you in the present moment and can ease anxious thoughts. Think of:



- i. **National Institute of Mental Health.** "Anxiety Disorders." National Institute of Mental Health, National Institute of Mental Health, Apr. 2022, www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/anxiety-disorders.
- ii. **O'Donnell, Denis E., et al.** "Dyspnea in COPD: New Mechanistic Insights and Management Implications." *Advances in Therapy*, vol. 37, no. 1, 30 Oct. 2019, pp. 41–60, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6979461/, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12325-019-01128-9>.
- iii. **O'Donnell, Denis E., et al.** "Dyspnea in COPD: New Mechanistic Insights and Management Implications."
- iv. **O'Donnell, Denis E., et al.** "Dyspnea in COPD: New Mechanistic Insights and Management Implications."
- v. **Minassian, Dr. Arpi.** "Coping with Stress in Difficult Times" – US COPD Coalition." U.S. COPD Coalition, 13 Aug. 2020, uscopdcoalition.org/coping-with-stress-in-difficult-times-webinar-recording-available/. Accessed 27 Sept. 2023.
- vi. **Mendes Xavier, Diêgo, et al.** "Effects of Home-Based Pulmonary Rehabilitation on Dyspnea, Exercise Capacity, Quality of Life and Impact of the Disease in COPD Patients: A Systematic Review." *COPD: Journal of Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease*, vol. 19, no. 1, 9 Jan. 2022, pp. 1–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15412555.2021.2020234>.
- vii. **Global Initiative for Chronic Obstructive Lung Disease. 2023.**
- viii. **American Thoracic Society.** *Practicing Mindfulness.* 2020