

Coping with Breathlessness

Clinical Psychology

It is not uncommon for people with chronic health conditions to experience changes in their emotional state. For some people these feelings can last for a short time whereas for others they experience anxiety or depression.

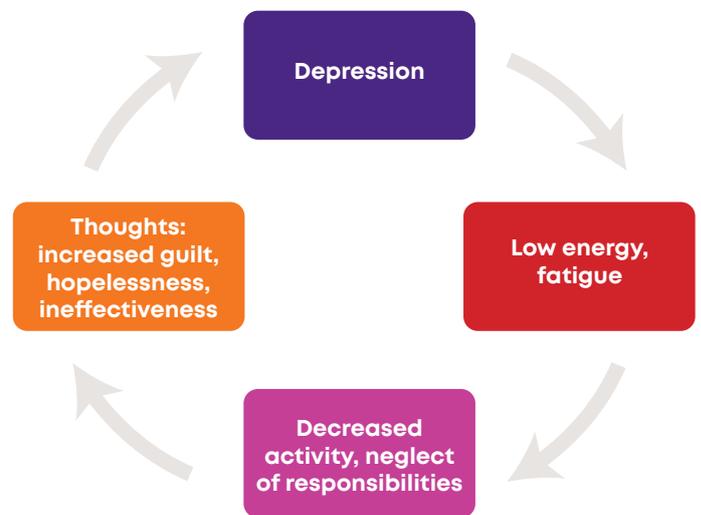
In Australia in the wider community about 1 million people experience depression and 2 million have anxiety¹ in any 12 month period. Evidence suggests people with breathlessness can be more prone to anxiety and depression.

What is Depression?

- Depression is a word we hear a lot these days, and its meaning is different for different people. For a person to have clinical depression they need to meet a “formal criteria”. People with clinical depression may have some or all of the following symptoms:
- low mood for longer periods usually two weeks or more, or
- loss of interest or pleasure from activities they used to enjoy
- changes in appetite or weight
- fatigue or restlessness
- difficulty with concentration or attention
- poor sleep
- feelings of hopelessness or worthlessness, and
- thoughts of self-harm.

Often when people are diagnosed with a chronic illness they can fall into a cycle of depression:

- when people experience breathlessness they will often also experience low energy and fatigue
- to cope people reduce activity and may have to give up some or their responsibilities or enjoyable activities
- often when this happens people can feel guilty, hopeless or ineffective
- these feelings that often result in depression.



It should be noted that many of these symptoms also occur as part of your breathlessness, such as low energy, poor sleep or changes in weight or appetite.

Working your way out of this cycle

Many people report that by attending the breathlessness group they can increase their activity, this in turn can lead to feeling more hopeful and effective which can improve depression or low mood. When this happens they may experience greater energy and motivation which can assist in maintaining and increasing activities in the long term. The most important thing to remember is that giving up all your enjoyable activities can lead to low mood so it is important to do a couple of pleasant activities each day.

¹ <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/the-facts>

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is very common in people who suffer from breathlessness. Most commonly people experience worry about their symptoms and the future of symptoms of panic directly related to their breathlessness. The fight-or-flight response is central to the symptoms of panic people experience.

What is the fight-or-flight response?

Imagine you are at the park and a big dog runs at you bearing his teeth. You have a few options, you can run or you can fight but if you are going to do either of these two things your body needs to be prepared. This is where the fight-or-flight response comes in.

The fight-or-flight response is our bodies acute stress response that is activated in the presence of a stressor or threat. This response is a physical response designed to prepare the body for danger.

When the fight or flight experience is activated, people may experience include:

- Racing heart
- Rapid breathing
- Hot flushes
- Jelly legs
- Dizziness, feeling unreal
- Gastrointestinal symptoms, including stomach upset or diarrhoea

Because being breathless is very threatening this stress response may be activated simply by noticing that you are short of breath. It can also be activated by worrying thoughts about shortness of breath or needing to perform a task that may lead to shortness of breath.

For many people these symptoms often come on very quickly and “out of the blue” and as a result it is difficult to understand what is happening.

When you find that you are breathless and anxious you can improve the situation by:

- Recognising that you may be in this panic cycle.
- Changing the way you thinking about your breathlessness.
- Trying a controlled breathing strategy such as pursed lip breathing or simply slowing your breathing down.
- Distracting yourself until your breathing returns to normal

It is important that if these symptoms of panic continue that you seek assistance from your health care team or a psychologist as these symptoms can be treated and over-time improvements can be made.

For more information contact

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