

Managing your breathlessness



**Practical advice and techniques to
help you manage your breathlessness**

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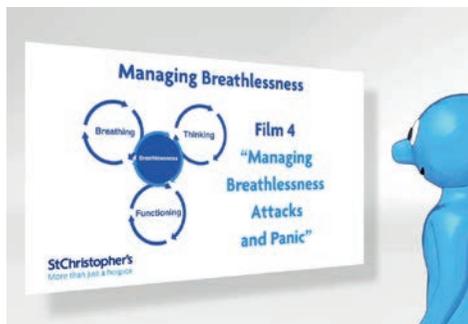
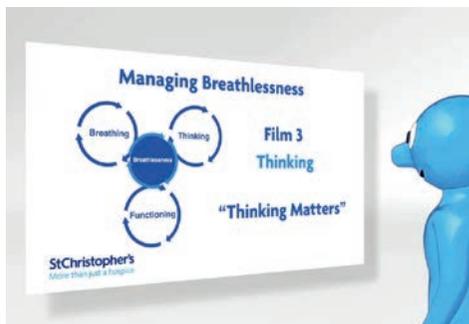
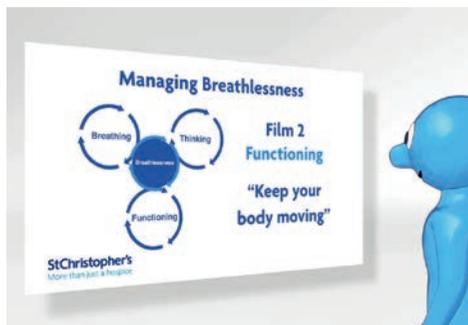
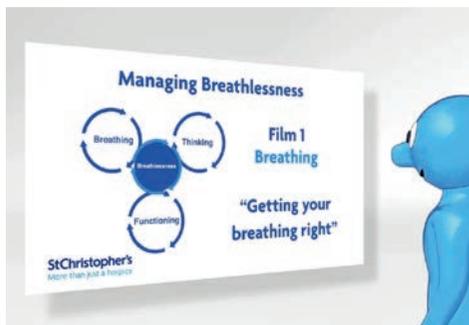
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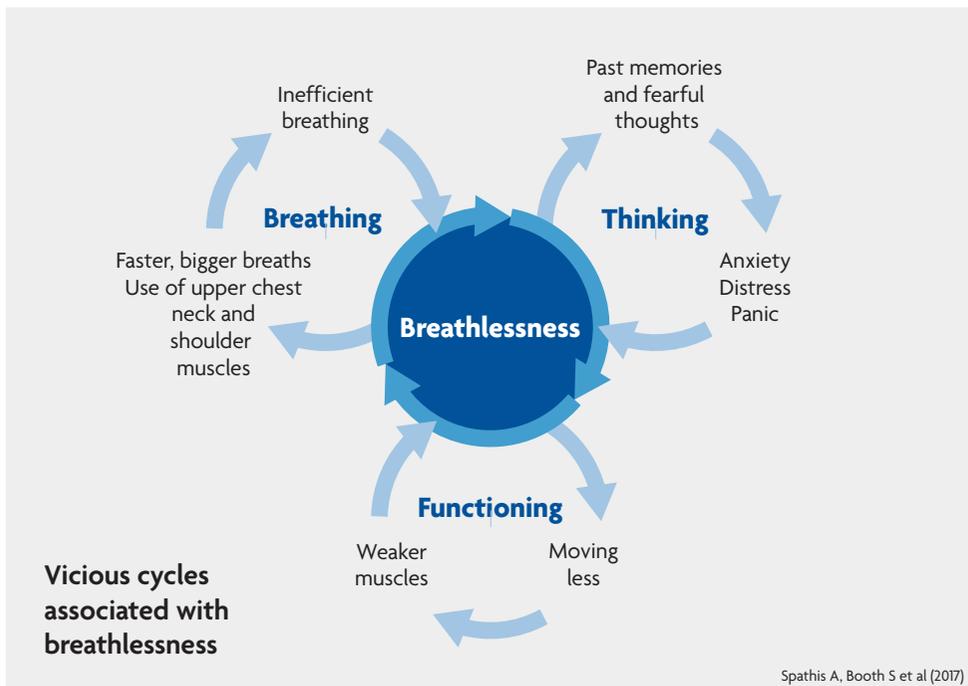
Living with breathlessness can be very distressing. Breathlessness itself can lead to inefficient breathing patterns, reduced activity and fitness, as well as anxiety and panic. Each of these effects can increase breathlessness, creating negative spirals of increasing breathlessness and distress.

This booklet will provide you with practical advice and techniques to help you manage your breathlessness.

Whilst we can't take your breathlessness away, our aim is to help you to feel more in control and get the best from your breathing.

There are also four short videos on our website that you might find additionally helpful (shown below). Visit www.stchristophers.org.uk/managing-breathlessness to find out more.





Getting your breathing right

How is my breathing different when I'm breathless?

Chronic or frequent breathlessness affects how you breathe.

When you are breathless, you tend to breathe with the help of muscles in the shoulders and neck. Breathing like this is necessary when you are breathless, but actually requires a lot of energy and can become a habit even when you are not breathless.

The muscles in the neck and shoulders can easily become stiff and painful because they require a lot of energy to keep working like this.

How can I improve my breathing?

To begin to breathe more efficiently, you need to try to use your diaphragm. The diaphragm is a large dome-shaped muscle that sits below the lungs. Its job is to expand the lungs when you breathe in and deflate them when you breathe out. It is a very efficient muscle, doesn't require much energy and doesn't get tired like the neck and shoulder muscles.

This can feel strange at first if you are not used to breathing this way. Try to practice the technique on the next page three or four times a day when sitting and resting. This will help train your diaphragm to help you breathe.



Breathing control: a technique to help get your breathing right

- 1** Find a comfortable and supportive chair. You may need to rest your head a little and perhaps have your arms supported
- 2** Place one hand on your tummy and one hand on your chest. Take a moment to feel the movement underneath each hand. Notice where the movement is – mainly in the chest or the tummy? Over time, the aim is to feel greater movement in the tummy. If you are struggling, you could try doing this in front of a mirror
- 3** Now take your awareness to your neck and shoulders, notice any tension and try to let go of it
- 4** As your shoulders relax and drop, start to be aware of the tummy rising as you breathe in and relaxing down as you breathe out.

This should not feel like hard work and the breaths do not need to be long or forced. Breathe at your natural pace. As you get the hang of this, try to add a pause at the end of the breath out. Again, this should not feel forced.

Managing a breathlessness attack

As soon as you notice that your breathing is becoming more difficult, pause and try the techniques below. Remember not to rush these techniques, and leave out what doesn't work for you. Wait until your breathing feels comfortable before beginning other activities.

- **Forward lean** You may find a forward-leaning position helpful – you can do this when you're sitting or standing
- **Focus on the out breath** Pay close attention to breathing out. As you focus on longer breaths out, you will make room in your lungs for more air to be let in. Think of this as gently blowing out a candle; try pursing your lips as you focus on breathing out

- **Fan** Use a handheld fan aimed around your nose and mouth, from about 15cm away. This can be kept in a pocket for use wherever you need it and is useful in all weather – not just when it is hot!

Please note that during the COVID-19 pandemic, St Christopher's is not recommending the use of fans unless you are by yourself in your own home

- **Flop and 'let go'** It's normal for muscles to work harder when you are breathless, but check that you are not tensing any muscles that don't need to be used. Let your shoulders drop a little, drop the jaw a little and relax your hands.



What about other times when I feel breathless?

Here is some advice if you feel breathless in particular situations:



Moving It can be helpful to breathe out during any strenuous movements.

Prepare for these by taking a breath in before you start the movement. For example: when you bend down, don't hold your breath, instead try to breathe out as you lower yourself down and always try to bend your knees and hips.



Sitting When you are sitting down, make sure you are in an upright posture with a small towel or cushion at the base of your spine to prevent slouching. Slouching makes breathing more difficult, as well as causing the spine to curve and become stiff.



Eating Try taking smaller mouthfuls so that there is always space to breathe. Keep your food moist so that it is easy to swallow. Pouch it into your cheek if you need to regain your breath.



Sleeping Support your shoulders as well as your head in bed by forming a triangle shape with two pillows which overlap under your head and then separate to support each shoulder. Keep a glass of water nearby to sip during the night, if you get a dry mouth or cough. Think about whether you need a commode or urine bottle so that you don't have to walk out to

the toilet in the night, or consider getting a bed lever to help you sit up and get in or out of bed.



Showering Try keeping the water away from your face and turning the temperature down to reduce the steam. Try opening a window. Sit down if you can, and ask for help if needed. Wrap yourself in a large towel or robe when you get out and let the towel absorb the moisture, rather than vigorously rubbing. Use a hairdryer to dry those bits you can't reach.



Stairs and slopes Take a few steps at a time and as you step up, breathe out as you step; then stop and recover with your breath in. Pause; and once you have recovered, start climbing again. You may be short of breath at the top but it will be more manageable. Consider if you need an extra bannister for support.

Keeping your body moving

Why is exercise important?

Moving and exercise makes everyone breathless, whether you struggle with breathlessness or not. Our muscles burn oxygen when we move, so everyone's breathing rate increases to replace the oxygen that's being used. If you struggle with breathlessness during exercise, like walking or climbing the stairs, there is a tendency to avoid activity because of how it makes you feel. However, this can cause a downward spiral of weakness and increased breathlessness due to lack of exercise.

Keeping moving helps to maintain your fitness and independence, allowing you to keep doing the things you want to do. Increasing your activity to make your breathing faster and deeper, even when you are breathless, is an important part of managing breathlessness.

Make a habit of doing some specific exercise each day. Your level of exercise will be individual to you and your situation. Being a little fitter will make you less breathless when you move.

Aim to exercise at a pace which does not leave you gasping – aim to have enough breath to be able to talk but not sing. If activity or exercise leaves you gasping then slow down, or stop and take a rest. Remember that you will recover after being active, follow the techniques in the 'Managing your breathlessness' section and your

breathing will return to whatever is normal for you.

What exercise should I do?

Your level of exercise will be individual to you and your situation, but you should try to make a habit of doing some specific exercise every day. Visit www.stchristophers.org.uk/videos/exercises to see some examples of exercises that can be done while standing, sitting or lying down. If you are unsure about what exercises you should be doing, please speak with a physiotherapist at St Christopher's and they will advise you.

Try to remember to look after your neck and shoulders too – practice shoulder rolls and neck stretches every day.

Managing your energy

Here are a few tips to make the most of your energy and to stop you from getting too tired.

- **Prioritise** Identify the things that you really want or need to do, so that you use your energy to achieve those things
- **Plan** Consider how and when is best to complete the activity. Do you need help, could it be done while sitting; should you conserve your energy for later in the day? Thinking through your plan means you're more likely to achieve your goal
- **Pace** Break the activity down into manageable chunks and take your time. You might want to start the activity in the morning, take a break and complete it in the afternoon.



What you think matters

Your thoughts can cause distress, panic or make you feel overwhelmed and frustrated.

The brain is meant to think, but in times of stress, when you're tired or breathless, it can fill your mind with worrying thoughts. Thoughts like 'I'm running out of air' or 'I can't get air in' are frightening and can feel like reality.

But remember that thoughts are not facts. These things do not happen – your breathing will settle despite the horrible feeling of breathlessness.

What can I do if breathlessness makes me feel anxious or panicky?

Remind yourself that anxiety from breathlessness can be very unpleasant and frightening, but it is not medically harmful. Sensations like a tight chest; dizziness; butterflies in your stomach or needing to go to the toilet are horrible but not lethal.

Frightening or panicky thoughts that you may have had in the past, such as fearing that you'll run out of oxygen or that you'll die, didn't turn out to be true. Gently remind yourself that being breathless can be frightening, but you have gone through it before and have survived. Your breathing will recover soon.

Although being breathless will significantly affect how active you can be, by keeping as active as possible, your confidence will improve and so will your feelings of anxiety.

What can I do if breathlessness makes me feel sad or low?

Breathlessness is restricting and can easily lead to a life of simply managing basic chores, and missing out on activities that might boost your mood.

Doing something you enjoy or something that gives you a sense of achievement, will brighten a day and lift mood. Try something now, even for a couple of minutes. Some of the activities that might help with a low mood are:

- reading
- listening to music
- spending time with family and friends, hobbies
- exercise and physical activity
- going outside or being in nature for a short while (even if this is in a wheelchair)
- using mindfulness or imagery
- self-care (such as haircuts, nail care and caring for yourself)
- remembering or thinking about happy times.

When you feel sad or low your thoughts tend to be more negative, so ask yourself the following questions:

- Am I only noticing what is bad?
- Am I filtering out positive things?
- What would be an alternative way of thinking about this?



- What advice would I give a friend in this situation?

Ask for professional help and support with mood from your doctor or nurse if it is a problem; help is available and works.

Try to avoid thinking about your situation over and over again. If you notice yourself doing this try to distract yourself with some of the activities above. If you can't seem to raise your mood, do ask your care team for help.

What can I do if breathlessness makes me feel frustrated?

Avoid comparing yourself to the times when you've been fitter and less breathless, people don't find it helps them. It can be more helpful to focus

on the present and think about what you are able to do.

Talk to somebody, such as a family member, a friend or another person. You may find sharing your experiences and ideas helps.

Deciding to 'let go' and use tools from relaxation and mindfulness helps, so talk to your care team if you would like further help with this.

If you would like this information in a different format, such as audio tape, braille or large print, or in another language, please speak to the Communications Team on **020 8768 4500** or email **communications@stchristophers.org.uk**.

St Christopher's Hospice is a charity and our continued work is only made possible by your generous donations. Please consider making a one-off donation or becoming a regular donor. To find out more about how you can help, please visit **www.stchristophers.org.uk/donate**.

StChristopher's More than just a hospice

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