

Anxiety and the breath

There are many things to consider which may be informing your anxiety and I am not going to presume I know what they are, but I can give you some tips to change your breathing patterns and potentially your way of thinking about things which will help to alleviate it. All of what I am saying may not refer directly to you or your situation but there may be some elements which could strike a chord.

You're not alone being anxious

Firstly, you're not alone in being so incredibly anxious so do not beat yourself up about being anxious as this will only aggravate the situation. If you think about it – the feeling of being constantly anxious has arisen from being extremely conscientious and dedicated to your studies over a long period - the symptoms of anxiety did not occur overnight although it may have felt that way. Feeling out of control and on edge all the time is your body's way of asking you to address the situation – but you can't address it with the same mental model that got you there in the first place. So, you need a different approach.

Hard work to curb the 'what if's' is not a good thing

Hard work and commitment are good attributes, but they do tend to make us live at an intensity which is not healthy particularly if it is over an extended period. It's almost as if as soon as we achieve well, we become fixated on never doing anything less than that; or we set ourselves a target which places us under enormous strain. This way of being has a focus on the outcome and not on the process and as a result we hardly ever enjoy the learning and invariably we are disappointed with the result – always wanting to do better.

Enjoy the process and the outcome will take care of itself

This focus on the outcome means that we do not give sufficient attention to the present and our mind jumps to the what if's constantly. There is a whole range of what ifs and I am sure I don't need to give any examples of them here. However, the constant what if question when you have rationalised there is no need to go down that road, constitutes a belief system which manifests in certain habits. These habits; thinking particular thoughts and working (studying) and reacting in certain ways are the ones that need changing. We need to bring our attention to the present and let go of the past and the future.

Gateway to giving attention to the present is through the breath

The breath is, as the cliché goes – the very essence of life. It is our strength and energy. Believe it or not our breath or the way in which we breathe is informed by our mental and emotional state. Neurons are constantly sending messages to the brain through our breathing patterns even when we are not conscious of it. The breath can trigger an adrenalin boost instantly for example and place us in the flight or fright zone. The good news is that we can change the messages consciously and with not much effort either.

Amygdala is an emotional barometer

The amygdala is a little almond shaped organ which lies close to the hippocampus both of which form part of the limbic system in the brain. The limbic system is the emotional epicentre and is situated at the base of the brain.

All stimuli have to pass through the limbic system to get to the rest of the brain. Why I mention the amygdala is because it is critical in regulating our emotional reactions and is very sensitive to the breath. The breath on the other hand can induce an adrenalin boost or be an antidote for its spurt. Short sharp breaths for example can trigger panic, send the blood pressure soaring and even boost the immune system with additional antibodies preparing for attack. Over time this pattern of living with 'the tiger in the room' (imaginary fear of some sort) is harmful for us and wears us down, we become exhausted and drained.

Your belief system is more powerful than the breath – if you let it be so

If we can train ourselves to give attention to the present through an awareness of the breath and a conscious deployment of this amazing phenomenon of life, we can be more powerful in every single way. However, we need to change the underlying belief system if we want to change the habit of giving everything we do the same critical level of importance – as if it is a life or death situation.

You may recall the well-known quote from Will Smith which goes something like this:

'Fear is a thought, don't get me wrong danger is very real, but fear is a thought that you have constructed'

Separate the emotion from the information – build self-trust

Essentially our task is to separate these two. Whenever we feel anxious we need to remind ourselves that we are not in danger and to breathe deeply and slowly.

See this reflection as a chance to change your habits. You can 'reset' the position of rest or balance so to speak so that your reactions are more in keeping with the reality of the situation. You need to find pleasure in not being stressed, but still being productive. You have to release judgement of yourself and replace it with trust. These are important factors in successfully changing your habits.

An exercise with the breath as the first step in acquiring a fresh perspective

Use it in an exam to calm you down

Let's do an exercise with the breath. Set your timer for just three minutes and sit in a place where there will be no distractions. That means no distractions 😊

The objective of the exercise is to lengthen the outgoing breath – it is the slow exhale which triggers relaxation, lowers blood pressure and deactivates the adrenalin which panic and stress sets off. With the slow exhale the amygdala has a chance to create emotional harmony. You can easily do this if you hit a blank in the exam or suddenly feel overwhelmed. Better still, do this while waiting for start of the exam.

Sit on a chair with your feet firmly on the ground and your back up against the back of the chair, your palms facing downwards on your thighs.

1. Feel the soft breeze of the air on your upper lip as you inhale
2. Feel the pressure of your tummy on your belt or blouse as you fill your lungs with air
3. Gently let the air out – but not all at once...slow and even
4. At first it may be difficult to elongate your outgoing breath, it will come with practice
5. Breathe in only as you need the air, don't force anything
6. Let the air out gently once again
7. Think of the fresh oxygen entering your lungs and your blood stream as a fresh beginning, revitalising your being
8. As you let go of the breath in exhalation think of releasing toxic waste from your bloodstream – thoughts that are damaging or destructive - let those go too
9. If your attention wanders away from your breath – to other thoughts that enter your mind don't pass judgement on yourself just draw your attention back to the breath; tell yourself that this is where you would rather put your attention right now
10. Repeat the exercise of breathing for as long as the timer permits

The breath is a gateway to giving attention to the present

With practice you can give attention to the process rather than the outcome of your learning and gain control over your destiny; as opposed to thinking of your future with trepidation in the present and so compromising your power to influence the outcome.

Reflect on the experience of the breathing and then repeat it later in the day.

You are in control of how you breathe and therefore in control of your responses

Three things are important to remember:

- o You can influence your body's response to your stressors through the breath
- o You are more than your habits **but**
 - o ***You must change your underlying belief system***
 - o ***To change your habits***

I hope that this has helped.

When you feel the effectiveness of this breathing exercise, you will begin to change the mindset that is holding you back from giving attention to the present and thereby improve your performance on all levels.