

Patient Information Leaflet

# Breathlessness: Fact Sheet 4

## Breathlessness, Stress and Anxiety

Produced by:  
Respiratory Department

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**If you are unable to read this leaflet because English is not your first language, please ask someone who speaks English to telephone PALS on 01983 534850 for further information and help.**

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**Polish:**

Jeśli nie jesteś w stanie przeczytać tej ulotki bo angielski nie jest pierwszym językiem, poproś kogoś, kto mówi po angielsku, o kontakt telefoniczny z (PALS 01983 534850) aby uzyskać więcej informacji i pomoc

**Russian:**

Если вы не можете прочитать этот буклет на английском языке потому что не является первым языке, пожалуйста, попросите кого-нибудь, кто говорит на английском языке для телефонного (PALS 01983 534850) для получения дополнительной информации и помощи

**Turkish:**

Eğer İngilizce ana diliniz değilse, çünkü bu broşürü okumak için yapamıyorsanız, daha fazla bilgi için 01983 534850 üzerinde PALS telefon İngilizce bilen birine sormak ve yardım lütfen

**Bulgarian:**

Ако не сте в състояние да прочетете тази листовка, тъй като английският не е първи език, попитайте някой, който говори английски, за да телефонирам (PALS на 01983 534850) за повече информация и помощ

**Czech:**

Pokud nejste schopni přečíst tuto příbalovou informaci, protože angličtina není vaším rodným jazykem, zeptejte se někoho, kdo mluví anglicky na telefonní PALS na 01983 534850 pro další informace a pomoc

**Bengali:**

আপনি ইংরেজি আপনার প্রথম ভাষা না থাকার কারণে এই লফিলটে পড়তে অক্ষম হন, তাহলে আরও তথ্যের জন্য 01983 534850 নভেগিশেন PALS টেলিফোনে ইংরেজি কথা কতে জিজ্ঞাসা করুন এবং সাহায্য করুন

## **Introduction**

Breathlessness can often cause anxiety and feelings of panic. Anxiety tends to make the sensation of breathlessness stronger which in turn leads to more anxiety. Long term worry about breathlessness creates stress. Stress can also cause long-term health problems. It is important to remember that breathlessness in itself is not harmful and you will recover your breathing on resting. It is possible to reduce anxiety and manage stress. This leaflet may help you to better understand what happens when you get anxious or stressed and suggests some ways of managing these experiences.

## **How does my body react to a stressful event?**

Some anxiety is a normal experience: everybody gets anxious sometimes. This is because anxiety has a purpose and can be useful. Its purpose is to prepare the body to take immediate action. This is so important that scientists believe anxiety has helped the human race survive. This process of the body preparing to take action is known as the “fight or flight” response. In the past this ‘fight or flight’ response would have helped us to hunt and catch animals for food or run away from predators. It is still useful now. Imagine you are crossing a road and you notice a car coming toward you. Anxiety helps your body to hurry out of the way.

Anxiety can cause unpleasant sensations in the body and mind and these can often make people more worried or panic. It may be helpful to understand why these sensations happen and what they are so that you can remind yourself if you are feeling very anxious. The 'fight or flight' changes in our bodies happen because our minds sensed something is a threat to us. A threat can be any experience we have and that feels worrying to us. To enable 'fight or flight', the brain stimulates the adrenal glands, situated next to the kidneys, to produce adrenaline and release it into the bloodstream. It reaches the heart, lungs and muscles and causes them to get ready to fight or to flee. Because the body reacts to adrenaline, when you feel anxious you might experience some of the following things:

**Body:** you may have some or all of the following sensations: tensed muscles, rapid or pounding heartbeat, difficulties breathing, chest tightness, chest pains, sweating, shaky legs or hands, dizziness, nausea, dry mouth, blurred vision or the need to go to the toilet more frequently.

**Thoughts:** thinking can change when we are anxious. It is common to find yourself imagining the worst, worrying about appearing foolish, thinking you are going mad, thinking you are having a heart attack, worrying about breathlessness or other body sensations. You may find it difficult to concentrate or that your short term memory is affected.

**Actions:** behaviour (what we do) can be affected by thoughts and actions. It is common to try to reduce anxiety by doing things that control the sensations of anxiety, such as sitting down, stopping the activity that makes you anxious or by avoiding situations and people that make you anxious. Sometimes, anxiety makes it difficult for a person to sleep or they may find they sleep too much. Anxiety can also affect how we behave to others and you may find you get angry or irritable quickly because of it.

## **Stress**

Breathlessness is often part of a long term condition. Breathlessness may occur in many situations. If a person is anxious about being breathless then there may be many situations that activate the 'fight or flight' response. When a person is anxious about many things or if the threatening experience is on-going, such as breathlessness, then the fight or flight response may be activated again and again. Repeated activation of the "fight or flight" response is hard work on the body and can keep anxiety going. This creates a long-term problem of stress. Stress causes some long-term problems including:

**Body:** muscles locking up or muscle spasms which can become painful. Ongoing stress and anxiety can lead to high blood pressure. And sometimes people get frequent, long-lasting headaches. Most importantly, the immune system becomes less able to fight off infection, meaning that you can become at risk of exacerbations.

**Thoughts:** difficulties with short-term memory can become more profound. It may be difficult to pay attention and you may easily get tired from the mental effort of thinking. Thoughts can become more negative and you could feel very low in mood.

**Actions:** The process of stress is very tiring as the body has to work very hard to keep preparing to fight or flee. Chronic fatigue can result and sleep disturbance can increase. Sometimes people find that even when they do sleep, they do not wake up feeling refreshed. This is a sign that the body is working too hard. All these experiences may make it difficult to motivate yourself to do things you enjoy and sometimes people find it easier to stay at home. This can make the situation worse as it often makes people unfulfilled.

## **What can I do to ease my anxiety and reduce stress?**

### **General strategies:**

- Recognise the triggers for anxiety
  - Are there certain situations that make you feel more anxious?
- Write down the kinds of things that worry or concern you.
- Concentrate on living in the here and now: try not to worry about future events.
- Make a list of problems and try to solve them one at a time.
- Mention how you are feeling to health professionals.
- Make time every day for something you enjoy.
- Practise breathing out for longer than you breathe in. It may be helpful to count while you breathe in and count out for longer when you breathe out.

- Learn a way of relaxing that works for you. A separate leaflet is available. Please ask for this if needed.

## **Further information**

For further help and advice contact the Respiratory Team on **01983 552190, 08:30 – 16:30 Monday to Friday.**

If you require this leaflet in another language, large print or another format, please contact the Quality Team, telephone **01983 534850**, who will advise you.

**If you have any queries or concerns about the content of this leaflet please call (01983) 524081 and ask to speak to the relevant department.**

Valuables should not be brought into the hospital. If patients have to bring in valuable items they should ask a nurse to store them safely and request a receipt for the items. You may not be able to have the valuable items returned if the time of discharge from hospital is out of hours.

We are sorry but the Trust cannot accept responsibility for loss or damage to items not given for safe keeping.

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### **We Value Your Views On Our Service**

If you wish to comment on the care which you, your relative or friend has received, we will be pleased to hear from you. Please speak to the person in charge of the ward, clinic or service in the first instance or ask them to contact the PALS Team. If you wish to contact them directly, telephone on **01983 534850**.

Alternatively you may prefer to write to:

Chief Executive  
Isle Of Wight NHS Trust  
St Mary's Hospital  
Newport  
Isle of Wight  
PO30 5TG

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