Managing Anxiety with Diaphragmatic Breathing

The keynote speaker at the inaugural Skin Cancer Champions Patient Advocacy Summit was clinical psychologist Dr. Cristina Pozo-Kaderman, director of Psychosocial Oncology Grand Rounds at the Center for Palliative Care at Harvard Medical School and head of the Young Adult Program at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. Her work focuses on providing psychological support to individuals coping with cancer.

In her talk, Dr. Pozo-Kaderman discussed **diaphragmatic breathing**, also known as "belly breathing" or "abdominal breathing", as a technique to help manage anxiety. The diaphragm is a large muscle located beneath the lungs that helps you breathe by contracting as you inhale and relaxing as you exhale.

What are the benefits of diaphragmatic breathing?

Diaphragmatic breathing can promote relaxation, help lower heart rate and blood pressure and encourage slower, more efficient breathing.[1]

Diaphragmatic breathing can help with anxiety by stimulating the vagus nerve, a nerve that regulates the relaxation system (parasympathetic nervous system) in your body.

How to practice diaphragmatic breathing[1,2]

1. **Find a comfortable position.** Many find diaphragmatic breathing easiest when laying down on their back. It can be practiced laying down, standing, or sitting in a comfortable position.
2. **Place one hand on your stomach, above the belly button, and the other hand on your chest.** This will help you feel the rise of your abdomen as you breathe.
3. **Breathe in through your nose, allowing your belly to gently expand.** You should feel the hand on your abdomen rise, while the hand on your chest remains still. Breathe in smoothly and slowly.
4. **Breathe out through your lips gently.** You might purse your lips and imagine you are slowly blowing out birthday candles.
5. **Repeat**

This technique may feel unusual at first as many people are used to using their chest to breathe, rather than their abdomen. The more you practice breathing with the diaphragm, the stronger the diaphragm muscle will become.

Practical tips for diaphragmatic breathing

Dr. Pozo-Kaderman emphasized that diaphragmatic breathing can be helpful during moments of heightened anxiety, but it must be practiced when you are calm and relaxed to be effective.

Imagine an anxiety attack is like being on a roller coaster. It would be relatively difficult to complete a task, such as reciting the alphabet backwards, for the first time while riding a roller coaster. But if you had practiced reciting the alphabet backwards every day, you would likely find it much easier to do while on the ride. Diaphragmatic breathing works similarly. By practicing when you are calm, you develop a tool that you can turn to in periods of heightened anxiety.

Many health care organizations recommend practicing diaphragmatic breathing daily to experience the greatest benefits. Johns Hopkins recommends practicing for 30 minutes once daily.[2] Cleveland Clinic recommends practicing for 5-10 minutes, 3-4 times per day.[1] If this sounds like a lot, remember that any amount of time spent practicing diaphragmatic breathing can be beneficial.

References

1. Cleveland Clinic: Diaphragmatic Breathing https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/articles/9445-diaphragmatic-breathing
2. Johns Hopkins Medicine: Diaphragmatic Breathing https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/all-childrens-hospital/services/anesthesiology/pain-management/complimentary-pain-therapies/diaphragmatic-breathing