



Supporting someone
with breathlessness

Stress, panic and breathlessness

Breathlessness can be upsetting and frightening for both you and the patient but may not, in itself, be harmful.

Breathlessness can be *triggered* by:

Activity – e.g. getting washed and dressed

Environment – e.g. hot or cold weather, dust, aerosols

Emotion – e.g. feeling stressed or upset

Infections – see [Managing infections](#) on the website for more information.

or there may be no obvious trigger

What is stress?

Stress is a normal feeling we all have from time to time. It is usually a combination of worrying thoughts (often about the future), feelings or emotions and bodily changes like tight muscles, shallow, faster breathing and an increased heart beat.

Stress and breathlessness – an unhelpful cycle

Stress, worry and breathlessness can feed each other in an unhelpful cycle.

What you can do to help the patient

We can't take away stress completely, but there are things we can do to manage stress levels when they start to feel out of hand.

Have a look at [Ways to ease breathlessness](#) on the website and talk about them with the patient. Think about which of these strategies you both might find helpful.

Remember that when the patient is breathless they may find it difficult to talk. Being calm yourself, and giving the patient space, can help.



Have you tried...?

Ways to ease breathlessness

Many of the ways you can ease breathlessness are also helpful for reducing stress too. Pick and choose the strategies below you think will work for you. It's a good idea to practise using these when the patient is feeling ok.

- **Handheld fan / cool moving air** – make sure the patient has a handheld fan, or open a door or window.
- **Positions to ease breathlessness** – help the patient find positions that ease their breathlessness
- **Rectangle breathing** – try this short, helpful technique – you can do this together
- **Medication** – make sure the patient uses their reliever inhaler, if they have one. If this makes their mouth dry, sipping cool water can help
- **Acupressure** – using the palm of your hand, firmly stroke down the patient's arm all the way to the end of the thumb. Gently rub the top-middle of the patient's back
- **Relaxation** – explore ways you and the patient can relax and manage stress everyday

For more information on these strategies, visit the website page [Ways to ease breathlessness](#).

Have a look at our videos

There are two videos for this support topic over on the website that you may find useful:

- '[Panic, breathlessness and emotions](#)' where you can learn from Dr Sara Booth, a specialist consultant, on why feeling breathless can lead to feeling panicked and stressed.
- '[Helping ease breathless](#)' where you can learn how stress can affect breathlessness and helpful techniques carers have used to help ease breathlessness in patients.