



Oasis Mental Care

EMOTIONAL TOOLKIT

4-7-8 Breathing

*A guide to calming the body
when the mind is racing*

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Psychoeducational material. It does not replace medical or psychiatric care.

TO BEGIN

What this technique is

4-7-8 breathing is a slow breathing pattern popularized by physician Andrew Weil and inspired by *pranayama* exercises from the yogic tradition. You breathe in for a count of four, hold for seven, and breathe out for eight.

What makes it useful is not the exact count but something simpler: lengthening the exhale and slowing the pace shifts the body into a different gear. Breathing is one of the few automatic functions we can influence on purpose.

What we know about how it works

When we are anxious, breathing becomes fast and shallow. Breathing slowly — around six breaths per minute or fewer — produces measurable changes: heart rate drops, blood pressure drops, and heart rate variability rises, which is an indicator of nervous system regulation.

These effects are well documented for slow breathing in general. A systematic review that pooled more than two hundred studies found consistent increases in heart rate variability during and after practice.

The mechanism most often proposed involves the vagus nerve and the parasympathetic nervous system — the one responsible for rest and digestion — although research still describes this as a likely model rather than a settled fact.

What to expect, and what not to

- It can help you bring down arousal in an anxious moment, and help you fall asleep if practiced before bed.
- Practiced regularly, it is associated with lower reactivity to stress.
- **It is not a treatment** for an anxiety disorder, and it does not replace medication or therapy when those are indicated.
- If you are in a crisis, this guide is not the right resource. Call or text **988**.

How to do it

Sit or lie down comfortably. Consistency matters more than depth: gentle and regular beats forced and occasional.

1

Place your tongue

Rest the tip of your tongue on the roof of your mouth, just behind your upper front teeth. Keep it there throughout, exhaling around it.

2

Empty your lungs

Exhale completely through your mouth, letting the air out with a soft sound, like a long sigh.

3

Breathe in for 4

Close your mouth and inhale quietly through your nose while counting to four. Let your abdomen expand before your chest.

4

Hold for 7

Hold the breath while counting to seven. Without tensing your neck, shoulders or jaw.

5

Breathe out for 8

Release the air through your mouth, with that soft sound again, counting to eight. The long exhale is the part that matters most.

6

Repeat three more times

That completes one cycle. Do four cycles in total and stop.

Two things before you start

Do not do more than four cycles in a row during the first month. That is the recommendation from the physician who popularized the technique, and it prevents the lightheadedness that can come from holding your breath longer than usual.

If you feel dizzy, stop and breathe normally. Mild lightheadedness the first few times is common and comes from changes in blood carbon dioxide, not from lack of oxygen. If it happens, shorten the hold: you can count faster as long as you keep the 4-7-8 ratio.

If you have a respiratory or cardiac condition, or you are pregnant, check with your health professional before practicing it regularly.

TWO WEEKS

Practice log

Writing down how you feel before and after is what turns the exercise into useful information. With two weeks of records, you and your provider can see whether something changed, instead of relying on memory.

Use a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 is completely calm and 10 is the most intense anxiety you have felt.

How to keep what you write

This document can be filled in on screen. **When you are done, save or download it:** if you close the window without saving, what you wrote is lost.

We suggest including the date in the file name — for example *log-2026-08-15.pdf* — so you can find it later and bring it to your appointment.

Date or period of this log:

Day	Time	Before (1-10)	After (1-10)	How I felt
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6				
7				
8				
9				
10				
11				
12				
13				
14				

What I noticed over these two weeks

References

- *Effects of voluntary slow breathing on heart rate and heart rate variability: a systematic review and a meta-analysis.* Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews, 2022. Review of more than two hundred studies on slow breathing and heart rate variability.
- *Breathe better, live better: the science of slow breathing and heart rate variability.* 2025. Review of slow breathing, vagal tone and autonomic regulation.

- *Slow-Paced Breathing: Influence of Inhalation/Exhalation Ratio and of Respiratory Pauses on Cardiac Vagal Activity.* Sustainability, 2021.
- Randomized controlled trials of the 4-7-8 technique in specific populations — surgical patients and people with tinnitus — show reduced anxiety compared with control groups. Evidence specific to this pattern remains limited compared with evidence for slow breathing in general.
- Weil, A. The technique was popularized by Dr. Andrew Weil, who describes it as derived from *pranayama* exercises.

Sources last reviewed: August 2026. If you are unsure whether this technique is right for you, bring it up at your next appointment.