



When Everything Feels Fast: Box Breathing

A simple four-count breath you can use anywhere, any time.

When anxiety shows up, your breath is often the first thing it takes. Box breathing is a gentle way to take it back. You don't need equipment, privacy, or experience to start. All you need is this page and a few quiet counts. Let's walk through it together.

What box breathing is

Box breathing gets its name from a square: four sides, four counts each. You breathe in for four, hold for four, breathe out for four, and rest for four. That's the whole thing.

Slowing your breath this way sends a signal to your nervous system that you're safe, and your body often begins to settle. Your heart rate eases, and your muscles soften. People in all kinds of high-pressure jobs use this same skill, and it works for the same reason in all of us: slow breathing tells the body the emergency is over.

When it can help

You can reach for box breathing any time, but it's especially useful in moments like these:

When anxiety spikes: your heart is pounding, your thoughts are racing, and you want something concrete to do right now.

Before something stressful: a hard conversation, an appointment, an interview, walking into a room you've been dreading.

When sleep won't come: as you lie in bed with a busy mind, the slow rhythm gives your body something quieter to follow.

It also works as a small daily practice, even on easy days. Think of it like keeping a tool where you can find it.

How to do it

Here's the walkthrough. Read it once before you try it, and remember: there's no wrong way to do this.

1. Find a comfortable position. Sitting, standing, or lying down all work. If it feels okay, close your eyes or rest your gaze somewhere soft.
2. Start by breathing out slowly, letting your lungs empty. This gives your next breath room.
3. Breathe in slowly through your nose while you count to four. One... two... three... four.
4. Hold that breath gently for four counts. No clamping down, just a soft pause, like the top of a swing.
5. Breathe out slowly through your mouth for four counts. Let your shoulders drop with the breath.
6. Rest, lungs empty, for four counts. That's one full square.
7. Begin again. Try four squares, or a few minutes, whatever feels right. You can stop any time.

Tips to make it yours

The version above is the classic one, but the best version is the one you'll actually use. A few ways to adjust it:

1. Pick counts that feel comfortable. Four isn't magic. If it feels too long, try three, or even two. A count you can do easily beats a "perfect" one you dread.
2. Skip the holds if they feel tight. If holding your breath makes you more anxious, or you have a breathing condition, just breathe in for four and out for four. That still works.
3. Trace the square. Some people like to draw a square with a finger (on their leg, a table, or in the air), one side per count. It gives busy hands and a busy mind a job.
4. Let the breath go low. If you can, breathe into your belly rather than high in your chest. A hand resting on your stomach can help you feel it.
5. Practice when you're already calm. Waiting for coffee, brushing your teeth, sitting in the car. Skills learned in calm moments are much easier to reach for in hard ones.

What you might notice

In your body: a slower heartbeat, warmer hands, softer shoulders, a little more room to think.

In your mind: thoughts may keep moving, and that's completely fine. You're not trying to empty your head. You're just steadying your body, and the mind tends to follow at its own pace.

If you feel lightheaded or tingly, shorten your counts or go back to normal breathing for a bit. It just means you were breathing a little more deeply than your body needed, and it passes. And if this practice ever doesn't feel good, you're allowed to stop. No explanation needed. Anything you notice is worth bringing to a session if you'd like to talk it through.

1. Where in my body did I feel the change first? Noticing helps your brain find that calmer place faster next time.
2. When this week would a few squares of breathing help most? Naming the moment ahead of time makes it easier to remember in the moment.

Be patient with yourself while you learn this. Slow breathing sounds simple, but reaching for it in a hard moment takes practice. Every practice counts, even the wobbly ones.

This handout is a companion to therapy, not a replacement for it. It's here to support you between sessions, and anything it brings up is always welcome in the room. If you're in crisis, call or text 988 (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline), any time, day or night.