

# TAKE A BIG BREATH

**20 RELAXATION EXERCISES FOR KIDS**

***FOR AGES 3-7***

**By Shauna Gallagher**

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Take A Big Breath: 20 relaxation exercises for kids  
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# Foreword

In my practice, I see so many children with stress and worry. It is really upsetting to see a child overtaken by anxiety, and worse still if you are that child's parent. It can leave us feeling powerless and helpless and is a source of stress for ourselves.

Anxiety is one of the most common problems in society today. It is a sticky emotion that tends to hang around and can be difficult to overcome. Thus the relevance of this book in terms of helping parents assist children in gaining greater mastery over their own anxieties. After all, it is the child who has to face these worries, so the earlier that can be done, the better.

This book provides a holistic approach to change, to assist not only mindfulness but what I would call heartfulness, in a God centred way. The foundation of this approach is supported by scriptures and at the same time is evidence-based. Radiating out from the core changes, brought about by the presence of Jesus, Shauna Gallagher writes of a spiritually based heart change of enhanced self-esteem and kindness. These core changes can impact the mind, especially with the helpful use of imagery and distraction. This is then further supplemented by helpful physical strategies including relaxation and breathing techniques. These strategies are all important in this journey of allowing your child to grow in a God-centred direction.

Equipped with these, your child is more able to connect with their stress, understand their anxieties and through the exercises, respond in such a way that the child is freer to be him/herself.

It is a pleasure and honour to recommend this book.

Dr John Warlow. MB ChB. FRANZCP. Adult child and family psychiatrist.

# How Do Relaxation Exercises Work?

With childhood anxiety on the rise,<sup>1</sup> finding ways to help our children cope better in today's fast-paced world is paramount.

The Bible speaks often about anxiety and is therefore a great place to seek direction in such matters. John 14:27 says, "I give you peace, the kind of peace that only I can give. It isn't like the peace that this world can give. So don't be worried or afraid" (CEV).

There is also widely researched evidence that shows how various activities can help lessen anxiety symptoms. Breathing techniques<sup>2</sup> and guided imagery<sup>3</sup> not only distract the anxious person from their concerns, but also significantly reduce the physical symptoms of anxiety. They can also help to rewire the brain<sup>4</sup> so that it can learn new ways of coping with stress.

Each of the relaxation exercises in this book has been written with a particular focus in mind. These focuses have been taken from both quantitative scientific research and the Bible as outlined below:

- **Gratitude** has been shown to reduce anxiety as it can help improve relationships with others and is linked to improving self-esteem.<sup>5</sup>

God wants us to be grateful too, as it says in 1 Thessalonians 5:18, "Whatever happens, keep thanking God because of Jesus Christ. This is what God wants you to do" (CEV).

**(Exercises 1, 2)**

- **Building self-esteem** significantly improves outcomes when treating anxiety disorders.<sup>6</sup>

There is no greater value given to us than that given by God, and the Bible has many verses that show our great worth. One such verse is Psalm 139:13-14: “You are the one who put me together inside my mother’s body, and I praise you because of the wonderful way you created me. Everything you do is marvelous! Of this I have no doubt” (CEV).

**(Exercises 5, 6, 13, 14, 16)**

- **Spirituality** is often overlooked in regards to mental health but has been found to give hope and meaning<sup>7</sup>.

The Bible says in Philippians 4:7, “Then, because you belong to Christ Jesus, God will bless you with peace that no one can completely understand. And this peace will control the way you think and feel” (CEV).

**(Exercises 11, 15)**

- **Singing** improves mental health and feelings of wellbeing.<sup>8</sup>

There are many verses in the Bible about singing. An example of this is in Psalm 147:1, “Shout praises to the LORD! Our God is kind, and it is right and good to sing praises to him” (CEV).

**(Exercise 12)**

- **Imagery** improves the symptoms of anxiety.<sup>3</sup>

The Bible urges us to consider what we allow our minds to dwell on—“Finally, my friends, keep your minds on whatever is true, pure, right, holy, friendly, and proper. Don’t ever stop thinking about what is truly worthwhile and worthy of praise” (Philippians 4:8, CEV).

**(Exercises – 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10, 15, 16, 17, 18)**

- **Compassion and kindness** create a buffer against stress.<sup>9</sup>

The Bible also mentions being compassionate and kind in Colossians 3:12 where it says, “God loves you and has chosen you as his own special people. So be gentle, kind, humble, meek and patient” (CEV).

**(Exercises 13, 14)**

- **Distraction** comes in many forms (including those mentioned above) and enables us to divert negative thoughts.<sup>10</sup> Whether using specific techniques or simply concentrating on something other than your worries, anxious thoughts and symptoms can be reduced.

**(Exercises 19, 20)**

By combining God-given principles, research and the natural processes of our body, the relaxation exercises in this book can help you reduce the symptoms of anxiety in your child.



# How to Get the Most out of the Exercises

- Before beginning any exercises, take a moment to relax yourself before guiding your child through the activity.
- Focus on making this a soothing and relaxing time for your child.
- When you first practice the exercises, it will be useful to try them in a calm environment free from distractions. Once your child has grasped the concepts, most of them can be done anywhere at any time.
- Your child may find it helpful for you to guide them by following the instructions with them and showing them how.
- The most comfortable positions for doing these exercises are lying down on their back or sitting comfortably in a chair or on the floor.
- Speak in a clear but calming voice.
- Allow adequate time for each exercise.
- When guiding the breathing, watch your child's chest move to help pace your breathing counts.
- As their ability allows, encourage your child to breathe in through their nose and out through their mouth.

- Be patient if it takes your child a few times to focus on the exercise.
- If your child is distracted, just gently direct them back to the exercise.
- Adapt each exercise to your child's attention span. You may find the younger your child, the shorter their attention span. In this case, you may need to shorten some of the exercises. Similarly, if your child has a longer attention span, the exercises can be extended by adding extra, relevant instructions (this will be easy to adapt once you do the exercises).
- Many families enjoy incorporating these techniques with bedtime prayers. If you are considering this option, you will need to work out whether you want to pray with your child before or after the exercise. This may take a few sessions to work out which works best for you and your child.
- You will find the Bible verses listed on page 68.

# EXERCISES

## I. Being Thankful



## **Bible Verse: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18**

Make yourself comfortable lying on your back or sitting up straight.

Place your hands on your stomach.

As you breathe in and out, notice how your hands move up and down. See how every time you breathe in, your hands go up. And every time you breathe out, your hands go down.

Now, count the next five times your hands go up as you slowly breathe in ...

**1** in and out ... **2** in and out ... **3** in and out ... **4** in and out ... **5** in and out.

Let's do this again ...

**1** in and out ... **2** in and out ... **3** in and out ... **4** in and out ... **5** in and out.

God gives us so much, so let's think about some things we can thank God for.

Let's start with your family. Think of all the people in your family, and in your thoughts, thank God for them (pause and prompt if necessary).

Now thank God for your friends ... think of each by name.

Now think of all the activities you like to do with your friends. It's wonderful to have family and friends. They love us and we love them. God gives us family and friends to help us when we need help, and for us to help them when they need help.

God also gives us the food we eat. Think about all your favorite foods. As you think of them, thank God for giving you those yummy foods (pause to allow your child to think of their favorite foods).

There are lots of things to thank God for. He gives us so many good things.

Now place your hands on your stomach.

As you breathe in slowly, we will count as your hands move ...

**1** in and out ... **2** in and out ... **3** in and out ... **4** in and out ... **5** in and out.

Repeat this again ...

**1** in and out ... **2** in and out ... **3** in and out ... **4** in and out ... **5** in and out.

And one more time ...

**1** in and out ... **2** in and out ... **3** in and out ... **4** in and out ... **5** in and out.

## 2. Lovely Things



## **Bible Verse: Philippians 4:8**

Make yourself comfortable lying on your back or sitting up straight.

Close your eyes and place one hand on your chest and one hand on your stomach.

Notice how your hands gently move as you breathe normally.

Now take some bigger breaths and notice how your hands move up and down even more.

Now count your breaths five times ...

**1** in and out ... **2** in and out ... **3** in and out ... **4** in and out ... **5** in and out.

Let's count your breaths ten times. Ready ...

**1** in and out ... **2** in and out ... **3** in and out ... **4** in and out ... **5** in and out  
**6** in and out ... **7** in and out ... **8** in and out ... **9** in and out ... **10** in and out.

While keeping your eyes closed, think of some lovely things.

Think of as many lovely things as you can (pause and prompt if necessary).

Think about a newborn baby (pause).

Now, think about a beautiful garden of flowers (pause).

Imagine all the pretty colors of the flowers (pause).



Imagine helping someone carry their shopping—that's such a lovely thing to do. Think about enjoying some time with your friends (pause).

Imagine you are holding a cute little puppy or kitten (pause). Think about some kind words you can say to someone (pause).

Can you think of some other lovely things?

Now let's focus on your breathing again.

Place your hands on your chest and stomach again.

Keep your eyes closed.

Now take five big breaths ...

**1** in and out ... **2** in and out ... **3** in and out ... **4** in and out ... **5** in and out.

Now just breathe gently and slowly but this time we will count to ten ...

**1** in and out ... **2** in and out ... **3** in and out ... **4** in and out ... **5** in and out  
**6** in and out ... **7** in and out ... **8** in and out ... **9** in and out ... **10** in and out.