

Soothing rhythm breathing (pages 135-9)

Soothing rhythm breathing (SRB) is designed to help you find your own rhythm for breathing in a way that helps you to calm your body and mind, rather than following a specific rate or pace such as those suggested in some relaxation training or breathing apps. The main reasons for this are that we all have different lung capacities and slightly different patterns in pace, depth and smoothness of breathing that we find soothing. This can also change over time, as we get more practised at feeling soothed. The key skill is to find a rhythm to breathing that you find soothing each time you do the exercise. If you do find an app / recording that helps you keep to a rhythm that works for you, that is fine too. The audio that accompanies this exercise may help.

Generally, SRB involves breathing slightly slower, slightly deeper, in a more regular pattern and with a smoother flow of air in and out of your body than you would normally do (particularly if you are in your threat system). However, your SRB may change on different days. Over time, you will learn your 'range' and the SRB you need to turn on your soothing system.

You can try engaging in soothing breathing at any time and in any place, such as sitting on a bus, or indeed standing waiting for a bus! It just involves allowing yourself a moment where you focus on your breathing and for your mind to come back to that single focus.

Once you have found an SRB that works when you are seated, you can then try to do this standing up. Keep your feet hip width apart. This helps us to feel stable and grounded. You can imagine that someone is giving you a slight push from the side, then let your legs find a comfortable position to help you stay upright. Again, explore your breath to find what helps you to feel soothed; this may be different when you are standing up.

The final variation is to find your SRB then set off on a short walk whilst trying to keep this rhythm. This does not mean taking one step for every breath! Just see how trying to walk and feel soothed at the same time feels. I sometimes use this approach to help me prepare my mind for compassion after a stressful commute to work. Many people who have tried this report that it helps them notice things around them, which can lead to further soothing using their senses. The key thing is our mindful attention to the process rather than the result.

It is not unusual for people to feel very sleepy when they do SRB – it is our body's way of telling us we need to take time to rest and restore ourselves!