

Breathing & Mind Exercises for Relaxation & Stress Relief

Breath work anchors us in our bodies and helps break the loop of mental scatter and chatter that often accompanies worrisome and stressful situations. **Diaphragmatic breathing**, or, “**belly breathing**,” involves fully engaging the stomach, abdominal muscles, and diaphragm when breathing. **Belly breathing** is an easy and effective way to lower stress in the body. During **belly breathing** you inhale through your nose and direct the breath into your lower abdomen, so that your belly inflates a bit with each inhale. During exhalation, your belly sinks towards your spine as the exhaled air is pushed up and out. The more that you practice, the more natural it will start to feel.

By contrast, shallow chest breathing has a non-relaxing effect on the body because it triggers the flight-fight-freeze response and increases cortisol production. This is useful when one is escaping from a dangerous situation, but unhelpful when one is trying to relax and settle the mind. Habitual shallow chest breathing conditions the body to be in high alert mode and is counterproductive when trying to achieve a state of calm.

Six Different Breathing Exercises for Stress Reduction

(try them out and discover which ones are the best fit for you)

1. Close your eyes. Take in a big breath through your nose and then audibly sigh it out through your mouth. Repeat this 3-10 times and express any sounds that want to emerge with your exhale.
2. Close your eyes. Count the length of your inhale breath, then exhale that number plus one or two. For example, if your inhale breath is 3 counts long, exhale to the count of 4 or 5. If your inhale breath is 4 counts long, exhale to the count of 5 or 6. The relaxation response is triggered when your exhaled breaths are longer than your inhaled breaths.
3. Close your eyes. Inhale through your nostrils and breathe at your natural pace for several rounds of breaths. Once you have achieved a rhythmic breathing pattern, imagine that with each inhale you are breathing in a calming color of light. With each exhale, visualize that color of light filling your body and permeating your tissues and cells. Continue breathing this way for as long as desired.
4. Do the same exercise as above, but instead of inhaling a color, imagine inhaling a sound that soothes your nervous system (e.g., the sound of ocean waves, rain, the sound “ahhh”, etc.). Breathe in the sound, and with your exhale feel and hear that sound vibrating within the cells of your body. Breathe this way as long as desired.

5. Close your eyes and count your breaths from 1-12 like this: Say to yourself, “I am inhaling, 1, belly expanding, 1...I am exhaling 1, belly releasing 1...I am inhaling 2, belly expanding 2...I am exhaling 2, belly releasing 2...I am inhaling 3, belly expanding 3...”. If you lose your place, start over again.

6. Close your eyes and establish slow rhythmic breathing. As you inhale through your nostrils visualize your body being filled with pure, clean air. Exhale through both your mouth and the soles of your feet as you feel gravity pulling out anything that you want to release from your body or mind. Continue this cleansing breathing for 10 rounds.

7. CBT (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy) technique to help calm a panic attack:

With your eyes open, name 5 things that you can see, then name 5 things that you can hear, then name 5 things that you can feel against your skin. Next name 4 things that you can see, 4 things that you can hear, and 4 things that you can feel. Continue this way naming 3 things, ...then 2 things...and finally naming 1 thing. that you can see, hear, and feel. By the time you are finished you should feel more grounded and calm.

8. The following is from Dr. Herbert Benson’s book, The Relaxation Response

Steps to Elicit the Relaxation Response:

1. Sit quietly in a comfortable position.
2. Close your eyes and choose an arbitrary word that has a neutral meaning to you.
3. Deeply relax all your muscles, beginning at your feet and progressing up to your face. Keep them relaxed. [Relax your tongue—and thoughts will cease.]
4. Breathe through your nose. Become aware of your breathing. As you breathe out, say the neutral word silently to yourself. Breathe easily and naturally.
5. Continue for 10 to 20 minutes. You may open your eyes to check the time, but do not use an alarm. When you finish, sit quietly for several minutes, at first with your eyes closed and later with your eyes opened. Do not stand up for a few minutes.
6. Do not worry about whether you are successful in achieving a deep level of relaxation. Maintain a passive attitude and permit relaxation to occur at its own pace. When distracting thoughts occur, try to ignore them by not dwelling upon them and return to repeating your neutral word.
7. With practice, the response should come with little effort. Practice the technique once or twice daily, but not within two hours after any meal since the digestive processes seem to interfere with the elicitation of the Relaxation Response.

