

Breathing Exercises to Reduce Stress

Using specific breathing techniques and exercises enables us to be mindful about the way we are breathing. By purposefully changing the way we breathe, we can change the way we feel and how our bodies react to what's going on around us.

Under normal circumstances, we inhale to absorb oxygen and exhale to rid our body of carbon dioxide through the lungs, with the help of our diaphragm muscle; but when we are stressed, anxious or upset, the way we breathe changes. Instead of deep, lung-filling breaths, we start taking short, shallow breaths. Instead of our diaphragm doing the heavy lifting, we use our shoulders to inhale and exhale, which will tighten accessory muscles and increase anxiety.

By using breathing exercises, we send a signal to our nervous system which manages processes such as heart rate and the stress response, that things are under control and that we can begin to relax. In turn, the physical effects of anxiety — racing heartbeat, shallow breathing, sweaty palms — are reduced, and our minds calm down. You can do breathing exercises when you're commuting to work, before a stressful meeting or even in the midst of an argument when you want to calm down.

Benefits of Breathing Exercises: changing the way you breathe can transform the type of breaths you take and can help you feel better almost within minutes.

1. Improve Breathing Depth: for people who are under any kind of stress, the feeling of not being able to take a deep breath is one of the earliest signs that one's breathing rhythm has changed. If the pattern continues, the lungs aren't able to expel air, the diaphragm does not engage fully and is less effective in the influx of oxygen. Eventually, the body turns to other muscles - the ones in chest, back and even neck, to keep you breathing. But as these muscles are not designed for breathing the way the diaphragm is, one will find themselves not getting enough oxygen and feeling tired and worn out — not to mention the feeling of always needing a bit more air.

As it becomes harder to breathe, people often find themselves avoiding exercise and other activities that will cause even more shortness of breath. However, this strategy fails as the body's muscles weaken, making it even more difficult to breathe — and the cycle continues.

2. Lower Blood Pressure: practicing breathing techniques and breathing exercises for stress reduction and enhancement of health can help naturally lower blood pressure, reducing the risk of cardiovascular disease.

3. Reduce Anxiety: whether you suffer from an anxiety disorder or are just confronting a challenging experience, breathing exercises for anxiety are helpful. One study conducted among musicians discovered that when they practiced breathing techniques for 30 minutes before performing, it had a positive impact on their heart rates and also left them feeling less anxious and tense than beforehand - just one session of slower breathing can have positive effects on anxiety. Breathing exercises also help ease anxiety in people who already have health challenges. One study conducted on 46 men who were hospitalized because of COPD found that practiced breathing techniques improved not only participants' anxiety, but also their shortness of breath and mobility.

4. Improve Sleep and Lower Stress: slow, deep breathing actually helps the body override the sympathetic system, which controls our fight-or-flight response and allows the parasympathetic system - which controls our ability to relax — bring our system back to homeostasis. Focusing on your breathing also forces your mind to concentrate on the task at hand, and not on whatever you're lying in bed thinking about, which can often be enough to lull you to sleep.

Breathing exercises when you are stressed act in the same way. Activating the parasympathetic system directs your body away from the fight-or-flight response that flares up when we are stressed about something and allows return to homeostasis, growth and repair. The result is a slower heart rate, deeper breathing and a greater sense of calm.

Types of Breathing Exercises to Relax: breathing exercises and techniques will help one to move out of the stress response, activate the parasympathetic nervous system and bring one back to homeostasis, growth, and repair state. Breathing exercises also strengthen the lungs. After doing the techniques for some time, you may find that your regular breathing pattern is more effective.

Just like any type of exercise or sport, practice increases effectiveness; it is just as true for breathing exercises and techniques. As you keep incorporating them into your wellness routine, you will find that you can do them effortlessly.

1. Pursed lip breathing: simple and easy to do, but extremely effective. The general idea is to breathe out for double the amount of breaths you inhale. Pursed lip breathing helps release air that's trapped in the lungs, and decreases the amount of breaths you take, while extending exhalation.

With relaxed shoulders, take a normal breath for about 2 counts. Then pucker your lips up (think of your mouth when you're about to whistle — that's what your lips should look like) and exhale for 4 counts. Do this for a few rounds.

2. Diaphragmatic breathing: also known as belly or abdominal breathing; you are training the body to let your diaphragm do all the work. Your goal here is to breathe through your nose and focus on how your belly fills up with air.

You can do this one either sitting up or lying down; I find it's nice to do while in bed to help wind down. With your shoulders back, keep one hand on your chest and the other on your belly. As you breathe in deeply for about 2 seconds, your belly should stick out a bit. Feel the air expanding your stomach and then breathe out slowly through the lips.

3. Yoga breathing: Yogis know that controlled breathing is a huge part of a yoga practice. One of the most effective is alternate nostril breathing. This is useful when you want to keep your mind from jumping around, like when you're stressed at work or trying to fall asleep, because you'll need to focus to remember what nostril you're working on.

To practice this one, start on the right side. Place your right thumb over your right nostril as you breathe in through the left nostril. Then take your right ring finger and place it over your left nostril as you exhale from the right one.

Leaving your ring finger where it is over the left nostril, inhale from the left, then switch to the right side, putting your thumb over the right nostril and exhaling through the left. It may sound like a challenge, but you'll get the hang of it. You can easily see why people do it to help focus on the present — it's hard to think of anything else when you are wondering which nostril is next.

Lion's breath: take a deep breath through the nose. When it's time to breathe out, tilt your head back, close your eyes, stick out your tongue and let the air out through your mouth, like a lion would. You can increase effectiveness by raising your arms on the inhale and then doing cactus arms (holding your arms up at 90 degrees) while you exhale.

4. Breath Pattern -- 4-7-8: this simple breathing technique is one of the best choices to help you fall asleep. Exhale through your mouth and then close it and inhale through your nose for 4 counts. You hold the breath in for 7 counts, then release it in 8 counts, and repeat at least three times.

Because you have 8 counts on the exhale, you are forced to slow down your breathing which, in turn, slows down the heart rate and helps you relax.

5. Breath counting: this is another relaxation technique that will keep your mind from "incessant chatter". Sitting comfortably with your eyes closed, take a few deep breaths, then settle into a pattern of "normal" breathing. When you exhale, count "one." The next time, count "two." Do this until you have exhaled (and counted) to five; then repeat the pattern. Do not count past five, and if you find you've lost count, start again at one. It takes concentration to keep yourself on the correct count which keeps the mind busy and allows the body to relax.