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BREATHING

Breathing is a necessity of life that usually occurs without much thought. When you breathe in, blood cells receive oxygen and release carbon dioxide. Carbon dioxide is a waste product that's carried back through your body and exhaled.

Improper breathing can upset the oxygen and carbon dioxide exchange and contribute to anxiety, panic attacks, fatigue, and other physical and emotional disturbances. The next time you're feeling anxious, there are a variety of anxiety breathing exercises to try.

Chest vs. Abdominal Breathing

Most people aren't really conscious of the way they're breathing but, generally, there are two types of breathing patterns:

- **Diaphragmatic (abdominal) breathing:** This type of breathing is a type of deep, even breathing that engages your diaphragm, allowing your lungs to expand and creating negative pressure that drives air in through the nose and mouth, filling your lungs. This is the way newborn babies naturally breathe. You're also probably using this pattern of breathing when you're in a relaxed stage of sleep.
- **Thoracic (chest) breathing:** This type of breathing comes from the chest and involves short, rapid breaths. When you're anxious, you might not even be aware that you're breathing this way.

The easiest way to determine your breathing pattern is to put one hand on your upper abdomen, near the waist, and the other in the middle of your chest. As you breathe, notice which hand raises the most.

If you're breathing properly, your abdomen should expand and contract with each breath (and the hand on it should raise the most). It's especially important to be aware of these differences during stressful and anxious times when you're more likely to breathe from your chest.

Alternate Nostril Breathing

Alternate nostril breathing (*nadi shodhana*) involves blocking off one nostril at a time as you breathe through the other, alternating between nostrils in a regular pattern. It's best to practice this type of anxiety-relieving breathing in a seated position in order to maintain your posture.

1. Position your right hand by bending your pointer and middle fingers into your palm, leaving your thumb, ring finger, and pinky extended. This is known as *Vishnu mudra* in yoga.
2. Close your eyes or softly gaze downward.
3. Inhale and exhale to begin.
4. Close off your right nostril with your thumb.
5. Inhale through your left nostril.
6. Close off your left nostril with your ring finger.
7. Open and exhale through your right nostril.
8. Inhale through your right nostril.
9. Close off your right nostril with your thumb.
10. Open and exhale through your left nostril.
11. Inhale through your left nostril.

Work up to 10 rounds of this breathing pattern. If you begin to feel lightheaded, take a break by releasing both nostrils and breathing normally.

Belly Breathing

According to The American Institute of Stress, 20 to 30 minutes of "belly breathing," also known as abdominal breathing or diaphragmatic breathing, each day can reduce stress and anxiety. Find a comfortable, quiet place to sit or lie down. For example, try sitting in a chair, sitting cross-legged, or lying on your back with a small pillow under your head and another under your knees.

1. Place one hand on your upper chest and the other hand on your belly, below the ribcage.
2. Allow your belly to relax, without forcing it inward by squeezing or clenching your muscles.
3. Breathe in slowly through your nose. The air should move into your nose and downward so that you feel your stomach rise with your other hand and fall inward (toward your spine).
4. Exhale slowly through slightly pursed lips. Take note of the hand on your chest, which should remain relatively still.

Although the sequence frequency will vary according to your health, most people begin by doing the exercise three times and working up to five to 10 minutes, one to four times a day.

Box Breathing

Also known as four-square breathing, box breathing is very simple to learn and practice. In fact, if you've ever noticed yourself inhaling and exhaling to the rhythm of a song, you're already familiar with this type of paced breathing. It goes like this:

1. Exhale to a count of four.
2. Hold your lungs empty for a four-count.
3. Inhale to a count of four.
4. Hold the air in your lungs for a count of four.
5. Exhale and begin the pattern anew.

4-7-8 Breathing

The 4-7-8 breathing exercise, also called the relaxing breath, acts as a natural tranquilizer for the nervous system. At first, it's best to perform the exercise seated with your back straight. Once you become more familiar with this breathing exercise, however, you can perform it while lying in bed.

1. Place and keep the tip of your tongue against the ridge of tissue behind your upper front teeth for the duration of the exercise.
2. Completely exhale through your mouth, making a "whoosh" sound.
3. Close your mouth and inhale quietly through your nose to a mental count of four.
4. Hold your breath for a count of seven.
5. Exhale completely through your mouth, making a whoosh sound to a count of eight.

Lion's Breath

Lion's breath, or *simhasana* in Sanskrit, during which you stick out your tongue and roar like a lion, is another helpful deep breathing practice. It can help relax the muscles in your face and jaw, alleviate stress, and improve cardiovascular function.

The exercise is best performed in a comfortable, seated position, leaning forward slightly with your hands on your knees or the floor.

1. Spread your fingers as wide as possible.
2. Inhale through your nose.
3. Open your mouth wide, stick out your tongue, and stretch it down toward your chin.
4. Exhale forcefully, carrying the breath across the root of your tongue.
5. While exhaling, make a "ha" sound that comes from deep within your abdomen.
6. Breathe normally for a few moments.
7. Repeat lion's breath up to seven times.

Mindful Breathing

Mindfulness meditation involves focusing on your breathing and bringing your attention to the present without allowing your mind to drift off to the past or future.

Choose a calming focus, including a sound ("om"), positive word ("peace"), or phrase ("breathe in calm, breathe out tension") to repeat silently as you inhale or exhale.

Let go and relax. When you notice your mind has drifted, take a deep breath and gently return your attention to the present.

Pursed Lip thoracic or chest Breathing -

Pursed-lip breathing is a simple breathing technique that will help make deep breaths slower and more intentional. This technique has been found to benefit people who have anxiety associated with lung conditions like emphysema and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).

1. Sit in a comfortable position with your neck and shoulders relaxed.
2. Keeping your mouth closed, inhale slowly through your nostrils for two seconds.
3. Exhale through your mouth for four seconds, puckering your lips as if giving a kiss.
4. Keep your breath slow and steady while breathing out.

To get the correct breathing pattern, experts recommend practicing pursed-lip breathing four to five times a day.

Resonance Breathing

Resonance breathing, or coherent breathing, can help you get into a relaxed state and reduce anxiety.⁷

1. Lie down and close your eyes.
2. Gently breathe in through your nose, mouth closed, for a count of six seconds. Don't fill your lungs too full of air.
3. Exhale for six seconds, allowing your breath to leave your body slowly and gently without forcing it.
4. Continue for up to 10 minutes.
5. Take a few additional minutes to be still and focus on how your body feels.

Simple Breathing Exercise

You can perform this simple breathing exercise as often as needed. It can be done standing up, sitting, or lying down. If you find this exercise difficult or believe it's making you anxious or panicky, stop for now. Try it again in a day or so and build up the time gradually.

1. Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose. Keep your shoulders relaxed. Your abdomen should expand, and your chest should rise very little.
2. Exhale slowly through your mouth. As you blow air out, purse your lips slightly but keep your jaw relaxed. You may hear a soft "whooshing" sound as you exhale.
3. Repeat this breathing exercise. Do it for several minutes until you start to feel better.

Sometimes people with a panic disorder initially feel increased anxiety or panic while doing this exercise. This may be due to anxiety caused by focusing on your breathing, or you may be unable to do the exercise correctly without some practice.

How to Create a Deep Breathing Practice for Anxiety

Shallow Breathing Contributes to Anxiety

When people are anxious, they tend to take rapid, shallow breaths that come directly from the chest.

This type of breathing, called thoracic or chest breathing, causes an upset in the oxygen and carbon dioxide levels in the body resulting in increased heart rate, dizziness, muscle tension, and other physical sensations. Your blood is not being properly oxygenated and this may signal a stress response that contributes to anxiety and panic attacks.

Diaphragmatic or deep breathing, on the other hand, stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system, which is part of the **peripheral nervous system** responsible for regulating heartbeat, blood flow, breathing, and digestion. Deep breathing helps you avoid the "fight-or-flight" response" (acute stress response) to mentally or physically terrifying situations.

The Wim Hof Method Breathing Exercise

The Wim Hof method breathing exercises act as a short stress response. Known as 'controlled hyperventilation', they are proven to lead to more resilience and control in everyday life. The method involves deep, rhythmic inhales and exhales followed by a retention time, holding the breath for minutes at a time.

You can perform one to three cycles.

The first cycle consists of hyperventilating for 30 (or 45) breaths, defined as respiratory movements of maximum amplitude. This period lasts approximately 1 minute and 30 seconds.

At the 30th or (45th) breath you fully exhale to residual volume, meaning you exhale all the air in your lungs and hold your breath as long as possible.

When you cannot hold your breath any longer, breaking point, you inhale as much as you can to total lung capacity and hold your breath for 15 seconds and release.

Then, if you want to, you can start the next cycle.

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Additional Reading

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