

Breathe in Calm, Breathe Out Stress

SLOW, DEEP (ABDOMINAL) BREATHING CAN ALLAY THE SYMPTOMS OF:

- General stress
- Generalised anxiety
- Situation-specific anxiety eg public speaking, exams or phobias
- Panic attacks

Most people tend to breathe in a more shallow and rapid way, or hold their breath, when they are feeling anxious. Or they might gulp air in and hardly breathe out at all. Breathing that is too fast and more “in” than “out” is called hyperventilation and you can do it without realising if you are stressed or anxious. It creates more problems, altered ratios of oxygen to carbon dioxide in the blood lead to feeling light-headed and eventually dizzy. Heart rate goes up and blood pressure with it, and people often find lots of other anxiety symptoms come piling in on top, such as muscular pain or tightness of the chest. This is enough to make anyone panic!

The good news is that you can calm yourself down just by changing your breathing pattern. Learning how to breathe deeply and slowly right down into your belly is well worth the time and effort of practising, because you should feel more grounded, peaceful and mentally focused as a result.

You do have to PRACTISE deep breathing every day, preferably twice a day, for a few minutes to really get the hang of it. It is then much more likely to help you when you are feeling wound up and want to get quick results. And when paired up with physical relaxation techniques, it's even more effective at reducing stress and anxiety. Here are some guidelines and exercises to do:

HOW TO DO IT

1. Place one hand on your stomach, just above your belly button. Place the other hand lightly on your chest. Now start to breathe normally and notice which hand moves
2. Keep breathing steadily and try to concentrate on making each breath a little bit deeper. Draw it down into the bottom of your lungs. Inflating your lungs fully pushes the diaphragm muscle down, causing your stomach to push outwards. If you manage to do this, the hand on your tummy should lift slightly.
3. Don't worry if it's only your chest hand lifting, just persevere! Eventually you will get to the stage where your chest hand will stay still, or nearly still, and only your tummy hand will move (although it may take a few more practice sessions). This shows that you are using the full capacity of your lungs, not just the top part.
4. When you get to this stage, concentrate on slowing the pace of your breathing, with a little pause between breaths. Allow your body to tell you when it's time to take the next breath.

EXERCISES TO DO ONCE YOU HAVE MASTERED THE TECHNIQUE

1. **Countdown:** Take 20 deep breaths in a row, counting up to 10 and then down again to 1. Pause between each breath and say the number to yourself.
2. **444 breaths:** In for a count of 4, out for a count of 4, pause for a count of 4. When you are comfortable with this, try 555 or even 666!
3. **7-11 breathing technique:** this is especially good for when you are in an anxiety provoking situation, like before an exam or interview and you may have started to hyperventilate already. Breathe in for a count of 7 and out for a count of 11. Don't worry if you are counting quite quickly! You will get better at this with time. Repeat until you feel calmer. This is deliberately a longer count on the out breath to reverse any effects of hyperventilation that you might be experiencing. Practise it when you feel fine and then it will be easier to use in an emergency!
4. Say "Relax" or "Peace" in your head as you breathe in and out, or "Feel Fine" or "Slow Down" with the in breath and out breath.
5. **Spot relaxing:** get into a slow and steady breathing rhythm and then focus your attention on each of these body areas in turn, consciously relaxing the muscles when you breath out:
 - Face (especially forehead, eyes, lips and jaw)
 - Shoulders, arms and hands
 - Stomach
 - Pelvic floor, muscles and bottom
 - Legs and feet

Take 3-4 breaths focusing on each area before moving onto the next. When you get to your feet, focus on feeling very grounded and steady on your feet. If you are standing, don't lock your knees because if your legs are totally stiff you can feel less balanced and rooted. Repeat the whole cycle if you wish.

6. Breathe slowly, deeply and steadily, whilst imagining you are in a beautiful safe place somewhere in the natural world. Forests, mountains, lakes, meadows, beaches, waterfalls, gardens etc are all good starting points. Make it exactly how you want and if you want other people there to be with you, or pets, or certain things, that's fine – or you can have it all to yourself! Imagine every detail using all of your senses and allow yourself to feel very calm and happy in this beautiful place. Whenever you need soothing, peace and balance from now on you can come back to this special place in your imagination for another dose of good, relaxed feelings.

Web links

www.mentalhealth.org.uk/help-information/podcasts
www.bbc.co.uk/science/humanbody/sleep