

Breathing Exercises

Breathing techniques can help reduce the symptoms of stress. Breathing is something we automatically engage in, and these techniques can help to bring this automatic process into our awareness, allowing us to control the rate and volume of our breathing. There are several breathing techniques you can develop into useful coping strategies. Practicing these techniques will also give you the benefit of increasing levels of oxygen in your bloodstream, which can provide you with physiological benefits along with psychological benefits. Start by practicing at times when you are not feeling stressed so that you become familiar with them.

For all breathing techniques it is helpful to breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth to help you have even, controlled breaths. If you are not able to breathe through your nose, or if it is difficult due to congestion or other issues, it is OK to breathe in through the mouth.

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Breathing Techniques

These techniques can be done while sitting, standing or lying down. It can be helpful to place a hand on the abdomen to feel the breath filling the abdomen with each inhalation. The goal of this type of breathing is to breathe slowly and deeply, filling the abdomen before the inhalation rises to the chest. The chest will move very little when engaging in abdominal breathing. The sensation you experience with abdominal breathing is your stomach filling up with air, like an inflating balloon. Upon exhalation, the abdomen will lower, like a deflating balloon.

While practicing this technique, it is helpful to set aside five to ten minutes to engage mindfully in the technique. As your schedule permits, you may want to try this once or twice a day (for example, right after you wake up or just before bedtime). You can increase the time as you become more comfortable with this technique.

Awareness Breathing for Tension Relief

This technique builds on the diaphragmatic breathing technique. While breathing diaphragmatically, say to yourself “breathe in” upon each inhalation. Upon each exhalation, say to yourself “breathe out.” You may want to shorten this to simply “in” and “out.” As you inhale, you may notice tension building within the body. Bring these feelings into your awareness, and as you exhale, feel the tension leaving your body. When stressful thoughts or feelings enter your mind, take note of them and return to the “breathe in” and “breathe out” pattern.

The goal of this technique is relaxation, not perfection, so if you do have other thoughts, be kind to yourself and let them flow in and out with each breath. Notice the times when it is easier to focus on your breathing and the times when it is more difficult. Again, with this technique, you may want to begin by setting aside five to ten minute segments throughout the day, increasing the amount of time as you become more comfortable with the technique.

Sighing and Yawning

These are techniques that we already know how to do. Sighing and yawning are natural ways of releasing tension, and practicing these can further relieve your tension. When practicing sighing, take in a deep breath and then “sigh” it out. Repeat this two more times. When practicing yawning, open your mouth wide, stretch out your arms and yawn. Repeat as necessary.

Health Benefits of Deep Breathing

- Delivers greater amounts of oxygen more efficiently into the lower lobes of the lungs, rather than only the upper lobes.
- Drives more waste (CO₂) out of the body.

- Exercises the diaphragm at the base of the lungs, making us more efficient deep breathers over time.
- Improves flexibility and elasticity of the spine, head, neck and back.
- Lowers the levels of circulating cortisol, a stress hormone, in the body.
- Activates the parasympathetic nervous system, which helps to curb excess stress in the body.
- Increases the production of nitric oxide, an important cellular signaling molecule that functions to expand blood vessels, increase blood flow and protect organs from damage.
- Delivers more oxygen to the cells of the body, including those in the muscles and brain.
- Lowers heart rate and breathing rate.
- Increases alpha brain wave activity, which are brain waves produced during relaxation or meditative states.
- Increases brain wave coherence, which is associated with organized brain function.
- May lead to shorter recovery times and better endurance when utilized consistently.

Resources

- Anxiety and Depression Association of America: www.adaa.org/tips-manage-anxiety-and-stress

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