

Breathing for Stress Relief & Optimal Immune Function

Have you ever noticed how you breathe when you're at your most relaxed? Or how you breathe when you're at your most stressed? Typically, the more relaxed you are, the fuller, and deeper your breath is. When your body is experiencing this type of breathing, you are using your diaphragm muscle the way nature intended.

The more stressed you are, the shallower and quicker your breath is. With this type of breathing your body will be recruiting different muscles in your upper shoulders, and neck. Notice how you will be hunched over to breathe this way. This form of breathing causes tension and triggers your "fight or flight" response, and stress hormones flow through your body. (Ferris, 2018)

The major stress hormone is cortisol. Having too much cortisol in your system can cause trouble sleeping, inflammation, high blood pressure, and it can have an effect on how your body uses carbohydrates, fats, and protein. (Cadman, 2020)

Keeping stress under control is an important part of staying healthy. Deep, mindful breathing signals to the body to rest and recover, allowing for a very proactive immune system. Intentional breathing is an important wellness tool that you can do anywhere, anytime- and it's free!

Physical Benefits of Effective Breathing

As you breathe in and your diaphragm contracts, it provides a light massage to your internal organs. The abdominal breath has various benefits. There is enhanced availability of oxygen to the cells of the body; therefore, we function better physically and mentally. Effective breathing acts like a sedative on the nervous system and stabilizes the rhythm of the heart. Deep breathing can also increase energy levels and strengthen the immune system by reducing stress.

Abdominal Breath

Breathe in and out through your nose. Place one hand on your abdomen and one hand on your



chest. Practice isolating the breath in the abdomen so the chest does not move. Gently push your abdomen out as you inhale, as though you are pulling air into the lungs. Now exhale, as though you are pushing air out of the lungs. This is your abdominal breath. This can take time to learn, so be patient and practice with peace and calm, rather than trying to force the breath.

Audible Breath

In audible breath we breathe in and out throughout the nostrils, half closing the epiglottis and producing a soft sound from the throat on the exhalation. Imagine you are trying to fog up a mirror with your breath, only softer and with your mouth closed. Audible breath is both calming and energizing at the same time, clearing the mind and increasing focus and energy.

The Complete Breath

The complete breath combines all three levels of breathing, Abdominal, Thoracic (using the intercostals to expand the ribcage) and Clavicular where the chest, collar bone and shoulders are raised. To practice this breath, breathe in slowly; expand the abdomen, then the ribcage, then the chest, collar bone and shoulders. Breathe out slowly in the same manner, letting the shoulders, collar bone and chest descend, then the ribcage, and lastly drawing the belly in.

1 2 3

Breath Control



When we are stressed or excited, our rate of breathing increases. When we are resting and calm, our breathing is slow and rhythmical. Reciprocally, by controlling the pattern of our breathing, we can influence our mood.

Through breath control, we can tap into an unlimited source of energy.

Typically counts of 2, 4 or 8 are used.

Inhale for 2, 4, or 8 counts

Hold (optional) for 2, 4, or 8 counts

Exhale for 4, 8, or 16 counts

Hold (optional) for 2, 4, or 8 counts



The exhale is twice as long as the inhale. The pace of the counting is what's comfortable for you. Holding the breath is optional, but eventually incorporating it into the practice will be beneficial.

Tips for Practicing Breathing Techniques

Before you start any breathing exercise, empty your lungs as completely as possible. This will create more space for new air. When the lungs have been properly emptied, it's the body's natural instinct to then inhale from the abdomen. When practicing some of the techniques for the first time, you may start to feel a little lightheaded. This is likely due to the increased oxygen that the brain may not be accustomed to receiving. If this occurs, allow yourself to breathe slowly and naturally for a few minutes, and any light headedness should subside.

Works Cited

Cadman, Bethany. 2020. How to remove cortisol from the body naturally. *Medical News Today*. [Online] January 15, 2020. [Cited: March 23, 2020.] <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/322335>.

Ferris, Emma. 2018. How Deep Breathing Techniques Can Boost Your Immune System. *The Breath Effect*. [Online] December 26, 2018. [Cited: March 23, 2020.] <https://www.thebreatheffect.com/immune-system-breathing-techniques/>.