

### BREATHING AWARENESS

If you've ever breathed a sigh of relief or gasped in pain, you know that even our language recognizes a close connection between the way we breathe and how we feel. In fact, when you understand how respiration interacts with your mood, you can train your breathing to help you handle your emotions. The right breathing technique can calm you when you're feeling tense, enable you to really focus on a task or keep you from blowing up at someone. It can also help dramatically change the way you sound, since breathing patterns are the foundation of vocal production.

You experience this powerful mood / breathing connection every time you get highly emotional. When you're depressed or sad, your breathing tends to be very shallow with frequent sighs. When you're feeling anxious, frightened or angry, you unconsciously have pauses of varying lengths between your breaths, or even hold your breath.

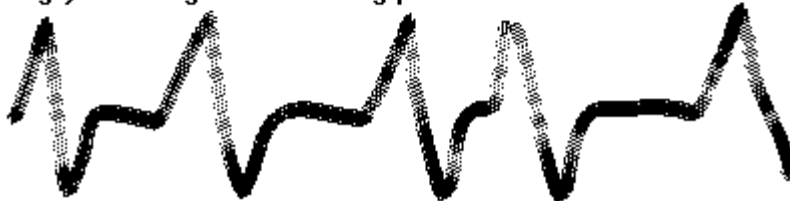
**Relaxed, calm mood - regular, even breathing**



**Sad, depressed - shallow breathing with frequent sighs**



**Angry - holding breath or long pauses between breaths**



Athletes, martial arts practitioners and singers all know that breathing is key to physical performance. The way we breathe - whether it's short, shallow breaths through the chest or deep, slow breaths from the diaphragm - directly communicates with the powerful vagus nerve that runs through the chest cavity

up to the brain. The vagus is linked to nerve receptors in the lungs, and is connected to the limbic center in the brain, which controls our emotional reactions. Making your breathing calm and steady, instead of shallow, jerky or full of prolonged pauses, can help make your mind calm and steady and can help you achieve increased relaxation, concentration and vocal control.

### **BREATHING TO RELAX: Chest vs. Diaphragm Breathing**

If you often feel tense, you may be breathing from your chest rather than from your diaphragm. The diaphragm is the strong, cone-shaped muscle that forms the floor of the chest cavity which helps move oxygen in and out of the lungs. To check your pattern, place your hand on your upper chest. If it rises when you inhale and contracts when you exhale, you're chest breathing.

This type of breathing pattern is very common, and less effective. It gets in huge amounts of air at once and activates the fight-or-flight alarm reaction - good in an emergency but not otherwise helpful. Chest breathe regularly and you keep your body in a state of chronic stress. Chest breathing fills only the upper lungs, where oxygen-absorbing blood cells are sparse. The result: you breathe faster to meet your body's oxygen needs and cause the limbic center of the brain to dump stress-related chemicals into the blood stream, such as adrenaline.

In contrast, diaphragmatic breathing tells the body: "Everything is calm and all right ...you are in control", because air goes into the lower lungs, which are rich in oxygen-extracting blood cells. The vagus nerve, going from the lungs to the brain, then transmits a message of relaxation, and you are able to breathe more slowly. The next time you are feeling pressured or stressed, practice this type of breathing.

To breathe from the diaphragm, place one hand on your upper stomach, keeping your entire hand above your bellybutton. Inhale while you imagine you're filling a small balloon inside your stomach. Your stomach should gently rise as you inhale (as the diaphragm pushes down to make room for the expanding lungs) and fall as you exhale (as the diaphragm moves up to the lower chest to push the air out of the lungs). Your upper chest and shoulders should stay motionless. Once you're breathing from the right spot, focus on making your breath as even and steady as possible. You'll find your tension dissipating within about two breaths. With practice, this skill becomes automatic.

Be aware that at first, this breathing pattern may feel unusual or strange. It may even feel backwards to you! If that's the case, it means you have been chest breathing so long, you've forgotten how to "belly breathe". If you've ever observed a sleeping infant, however, you saw that they innately belly breathe

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from the diaphragm. That's how we all begin but stress causes us to move the breathing pattern up into the chest.

You can further expand your stress-busting expertise by slowing your exhalation. Since exhaling slows the pulse rate, when your breathing becomes balanced and even, slow your rate of exhalation until you are breathing out twice as long as you breathe in. Count to six as you exhale and three as you inhale, and do ten to twenty repetitions of this breathing pattern in meetings, traffic or when otherwise stressed out. The workplace today forces us to over-schedule our lives.

Calming your breathing pattern allows you to take time for yourself so you have the resources to deal more effectively with others.

### RELAXATION EXERCISES

#### Take a deep breath and relax.

The simplest way to relax and focus is to simply take a deep breath, from the “belly” or diaphragm. Try it this way - take a deep breath in through the nose and release completely and silently through the mouth, like a sigh of relief. You want to be sure to release all of the air -- push it all out. Place your hands on the belly so that you can feel how it flattens as you release the air in the lungs. Allow the next breath to flow in through the nose. Notice the expansion of the belly. If you don't feel that expansion, try the exercise again. Do this deep breathing exercise 2 or 3 times. Continue breathing through your nose and releasing the air more gently allowing your natural breathing rhythm to take over. Continue to focus on filling the belly with air first before filling the chest. “Melt” the tension in the neck and shoulders with each breath – let them relax a bit more with each breath. A few minutes of deep breathing will help release body tension and relieve mental stress.

#### The Ten-to-One Countdown

(From *Minding the Body, Mending the Mind*, by Joan Borysenko)

This is great as a 3 minute relaxation exercise when sitting in traffic or at your desk. Start with abdominal (diaphragmatic) breathing. On an exhale, breathe out, silently repeating the word *ten*, letting go of tension as if it were a wave moving from your head, down your body, and out through the soles of your feet. Imagine the feeling of letting go. On the next breath, repeat the technique, counting *nine* on the out breath. Count down to *one*, if you lose count, don't worry. Pick up wherever you think you are.

**Tension Release - a great way to fall asleep if you are laying awake trying to solve a problem or chewing on an issue**

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Begin with your toes and move up through the body isolating each major body part. Start by squeezing or tightening the body part as hard as you can for approximately 10 seconds. Then release and relax. Remember to isolate each section keeping the other parts of the body completely relaxed. Keep breathing slowly, deeply and steadily as you do this exercise.

### Inhalation for relaxation

This is one that will also help you relax and go to sleep when you are stressed. Inhale gently but very rapidly and deeply through your nose. Repeat this 10 times. You may feel a different sensation in your head when you do this – it's called oxygen in the bloodstream and it's a good thing! Following this rapid inhalation, breathe deeply and slowly 5 more times. Repeat this as many times as you desire – or until you fall asleep!

### Centering - this is a great way to relax yourself while waiting to give a presentation

Take your attention or focus out of your head and drop it into your lower abdominal area, around your diaphragm. What you're doing is putting the center of gravity lower, which makes you more stable and calm. Keep the stomach muscles loose and relaxed and breathe from the diaphragm.

## Muscle tension S-T-R-E-T-C-H-I-N-G

Like any physical activity, interactions need a good warm up. If you don't warm up the muscles, your tension will make them move excessively (rapid hand movements, tapping foot, etc.) or not enough (flat facial expression, no gestures, etc.).

The following are great stretches for you to use in private. They involve both large muscle (arms, shoulders, waist) and fine motor movement (facial musculature, fingers and hands). Use diaphragmatic breathing while doing the warm ups (belly breathe). Do any combination of these exercises, repeating 5 times each.

### LARGE MUSCLE PREPARATION

- **head rolls** - roll head completely around (don't do if any serious back or neck issues exist)
- **shoulder rolls** - roll in forward direction, then reverse

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- **windmills** - make large arm circles, then reverse direction
- **scissors** - wave arms back and forth across chest, holding them straight and stiff
- **shoulder squeeze** - grasp hands behind you, pull shoulder blades together - hold 5 seconds, then release on an exhalation
- **side bends** - lean from waist to side, holding 5 seconds - repeat on other side
- **waist rolls** - bend forward from waist, roll upper body around completely
- **akido jump** - bend knees, keeping back straight and use a broad stance - jump up and plant feet firmly as you slowly straighten the knees
- **centering** - vision lead weights at the level of your waist to keep you more grounded
- **gesture holds** - hold a karate chop gesture out for 3 seconds first with one hand, then with both hands. Practice slow, sweeping gestures from side to side.

### FINE MUSCLE PREPARATION

- **hand flex** - rapidly open as widely as possible and close hands as tightly as possible. When hands are tired, shake them out and repeat process.
- **facial flex** -
  - PART A** "Home Alone" - raise brow as high as you can, and simultaneously open mouth as widely as you can. Hold for 10 seconds.
  - PART B** "Prune" - squeeze mouth into a tight pucker, and furrow brow into a tight frown. Hold for 10 seconds.
  - PART C** alternate between parts A and B as fast as you can 10 times exaggerated vowels - say the vowels (a, e, i, o, u) as widely as you can 5 times
- **foot flex** - this is a great way to offload excess tension while sitting or standing and keep your legs planted. Squeeze toes toward arches, then curl toes up 5 times.

When you feel a "buzz" or a "burn" in your muscles, it's a good sign. It means there is increased blood flow and the muscles are going to be more relaxed. With the muscles warmed up, they'll be more likely to do what you want instead of what they want!

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