

Breathing Relaxation Exercise

Stress can be experienced from three areas, our life experiences, body and thoughts. Once stress takes hold, we may get used to the amount of tension we experience, but our body continues to feel the effects. Reducing stress can help increase our ability to manage the most challenging life circumstances.

While we may not have much control over various life circumstances, we do have control over our reaction to the stress. Reaction to problems, demands and dangers set off our involuntary fight or flight response. Our bodies do not recognize the difference between a real danger, such as a physical attack and a fear or worry. Any type of threat is registered in our bodies and the fight or flight response is triggered.

When the stress response is triggered, various changes occur in the body. The centers which control our reaction to confront (fight) or escape (flight) the threat begin to accelerate and as a result other parts of the body also speed up. The pupils become larger so vision is improved; muscles tense in preparation to run or fight; and blood courses through the head so more oxygen goes to the brain to improve thinking.

Chronic stress occurs when the body is not given relief from prolonged triggering of the inborn response and health problems can result. One way of managing the pattern of lingering stress is as simple as breathing!

Controlled breathing is one stress-busting technique which we can use anytime and learn easily. Controlled breathing is the deliberate, focus effort to tip the nervous system out of the fight or flight, survival reaction and into a relaxed state. The body cannot be in a state of relaxation and stress at the same time.

When we feel stress and anxious, what happens to our breathing? Typically, people begin to take shallow, quick breaths which come from the chest instead of from the diaphragm, the dome shaped muscle at the bottom of the lungs. When breath comes from the chest, instead of from the diaphragm, breath is coming from the upper parts of the lungs instead of the lower section.

Shallow breathing triggers the fight or flight response and the body is signaled to react. Less oxygen gets into the bloodstream during shallow breathing. The change in oxygen level causes more warning signals to the brain, leading to more anxiety, triggering more shallow breaths—a vicious cycle.

Deep breathing from the diaphragm, on the other hand, is slower, fuller and promotes more oxygen into the bloodstream. Diaphragmatic breathing is seen then the stomach rises when inhaling and falls when exhaling.

To figure out which way you are breathing, lie on the floor and put your hand on your stomach. Breathe in and out. If your hand is still when placed on your abdomen, then you are breathing from your chest. If your abdomen rises, you are breathing from your diaphragm.

To practice deep diaphragmatic breathing try the following exercise at least once a day for three minutes. Once you are comfortable with the technique, increase the time from 5 to 15 minutes a day.

Exercise:

- Sit straight in a chair without arm rests, feet flat on the floor. Put your hands comfortably in your lap.
- Inhale through your nose until you feel your abdomen rise and expand.
- As you take in a slow, controlled breathe, picture your lungs filling with air. As you inhale, count very slowly from one to four. Some people find it helpful to imagine a balloon expanding as they fill their lungs with oxygen. Be sure your stomach and shoulders stay relaxed.
- Exhale slowly through your nose so that it takes to the count of four to release your breathing completely.
- Continue the process of slow, deep breathing in and out for at least three minutes.
- Focus your thoughts on your breathing. Notice how your shoulders and back, belly and legs feel. If your thoughts start to wander, gently shift your attention back to your breathing. This step is often the most difficult, so be patient. As you get more comfortable with the breathing exercise, concentration on your breath becomes easier.

I would love to hear what you think and about your progress.
Be patient and practice! Keep in touch by phone 847-276-2662 or email
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