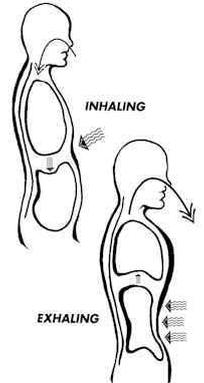


Calming belly breathing for stress reduction

More and more we are finding that the way we breathe can regulate our mind and emotions. Most psychologists today use some kind of breathing practice to help their client. We normally breathe automatically, but when we become more mindful of our breath, we can learn to breathe intentionally to calm our minds. We can change how we feel by changing the way we breathe.

When we are very stressed, we breathe differently than we are at rest. During a difficult emotion, we breathe faster and in a shallow way (shallow upper chest breathing) because the stress response/sympathetic nervous system is engaged. If we become really anxious, or even experiencing an anxiety attack. Those symptoms are very distressing, leading to feelings of loss of control, dread and gloom, causing even more anxiety or panic. When you feel stressed, you can calm yourself by breathing out intentionally (long breath out with mouth open initially) a few times. This will enable you to slow your breathing rate and regain some focus, where you can start engaging with a belly breathing practice.



When we are stressed, we tend to breathe in 3 ways that maintain the stress response: (1) from the upper chest, (2) we breathe at a faster pace and (3) with larger inhale than exhale. The purpose of intentional calming belly breathing is to reduce the stress response, by reversing this way of breathing with a slower belly breathing pattern, where we exhale longer than we inhale to restore a sense of calm. This is a practice you can do anywhere. Start practising for a few minutes often through the day, many times a day, on the hour, around mealtimes, before you go to bed or as you wake up, so that belly breathing becomes natural and easy for you. It will assist in reducing stress in difficult moments as well as reduce overall anxiety. The aim is not to eliminate the anxiety entirely, but to reduce its intensity so it is more manageable, and can still function effectively.

So during the day, when you feel stressed or overwhelmed, stop, focus on taking a long breath out, a few times, with your mouth open, as if you were blowing a balloon. Then when you have slowed your breathing a little, and can better concentrate, you can start pacing your breath as shown below to restore a sense of calm.

How we can reverse the stress response with our breath.

To start, place one hand on the abdomen and one on the chest. It may be easier to practice this initially, lying down. **First**, take a long exhale, softening the shoulders.

Secondly, the aim is to belly breathe, using the abdominal muscles. See if you can, take a long exhale while pushing your belly down gently, slowly, and then take a small gentle inhale, slowly, expanding your belly as you breathe in, as if you were blowing a balloon in the abdomen, with minimum movement of your chest.... and then slowly exhale, belly contracting. Observe that your hand is rising up with your abdomen each time you are breathing in and going down each time you are breathing out. When you breathe in, you do not need to take a big breath in, but instead take a small, gentle breath in, just enough to raise the belly as you breathe in.

Thirdly, the aim is to have a longer exhale than inhale and to slow the breathing rate. While using your abdominal muscles as above to breathe, you can pace your breathing by counting to calm the mind. Initially, gently, slowly breathing out while counting to 5-7, then breathe in, gently, slowly to the count of 3-4, then gently holding your breath to the count of 2 and then breathing out again to the count of 5-7 and so on... Continue this for a few breaths. When you finish, become present, observing your surroundings, your thoughts, the sensations in your body, your emotions and then return to your activity, proceeding with what is important for you, feeling calmer. This breathing will also help to recover faster after exercises when you are out of breath.

You can listen to the "Calming Belly Breathing" audio for 9 min or 17 min on Bloomfield Psychology:

<https://www.bloomfieldpsychology.com.au/resources/free-mindfulness-meditations>

This advice is of a general nature only and does not take into account particular conditions. For further assistance contact a general practitioner or psychologist.

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