

Diaphragmatic Breathing

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Before getting started with the diaphragmatic breathing exercise, it'll be useful to have an idea of how many breaths you take each minute. In a moment I'll time your breathing for 30 seconds. The best body position for the beginning of this exercise is sitting up straight in a comfortable chair with both feet on the floor. When I say "begin," I'd like for you to silently count the number of complete breaths you take. So, as you inhale and exhale, that will be one, inhale/exhale two...and so on. Just keep track of the number of breaths you take. Take a second to get situated... OK, "BEGIN" <30 seconds>... and "STOP." Now take that number and multiply it by two to get your number of breaths per minute.

Most people who don't have chronic problems with anxiety tend to take about 8 breaths per minute. If your score is significantly higher than 8, there is a very good chance that you tend to take short shallow breaths from your chest. This isn't dangerous, but it can lead to higher levels of carbon dioxide and lower levels of oxygen in your blood system. Having too much carbon dioxide and too little oxygen can lead to higher blood pressure, faster and harder heart beats, muscle tension, shakiness or jittery feelings, dizziness, feeling disoriented. It can even make lights seem brighter and sounds louder. Any of these feelings will tend to increase anxiety and can even lead to panic attacks. If you are taking more than 8 breaths per minute, you are essentially hyperventilating all the time. You might even have noticed that you tend to sigh more than others do. This is your body trying to get more oxygen into your blood stream.

One of the best ways to combat this type of chronic hyperventilation or shallow chest breathing is to practice diaphragmatic breathing. This is really just learning to take slow full breaths from your abdomen instead of short shallow breaths from your chest. If you practice this just 5 minutes each day you can significantly reduce your overall level of anxiety and stress. In fact, if you practice this a couple of times each day for 2-3 weeks in a row, you will be able to "reset" your normal rate of breathing. You will be teaching your body to breath from your abdomen on a regular basis.

So, let's turn our attention to learning how to do this. It might be easier at first to practice while laying down. If this isn't possible, do the exercise sitting in a chair with both feet on the floor. Place one hand on your stomach and one on your upper chest. The goal here is to inhale in a way that only moves your lower hand, while your upper hand stays still. You might just do this for a few breaths in an exaggerated way to get a feel for it. The reason it's important to breath from your abdomen is because you will be able to fill your lungs up from the bottom up. This helps you to take a full breath that is much more comfortable, and it's a more efficient way to breath.

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In a moment, I will guide you through 10 breaths. I will count to 4 for each inhalation and then pause briefly. Then, as you exhale, try to let the air out slowly – also taking to the count of 4. SO, when I say “BEGIN” you will inhale as I count to 4, you’ll pause, and then you will exhale as a count to 4 – that will be one full breath. We will do 10. If you are used to breathing shallowly from your chest, you might find this a little bit uncomfortable at first. You might also feel a little light-headed. If this happens, just go at a pace that is a little bit quicker, maybe 3 counts in, pause, 3 counts out. Don’t let yourself get frustrated, if you can’t follow the 4 count at first, with practice you will be able to slow your breathing down.

OK. Get comfortable laying down or sitting up in a chair. Place one hand on your stomach and one on your upper chest. Remember, you only want your lower hand to move during this exercise. It is also helpful to inhale through your nose and exhale through your mouth. This way you can concentrate on the cool refreshing air coming in and the warm air leaving your body. OK... Get ready... And let’s begin... Inhale, two, three, four, pause, Exhale, two, three, four. <Go ten times>

Hopefully, you found this exercise to be relaxing. If not, don’t worry, you just need to keep practicing. The more you practice each day, the faster you will be able to “reset” the pace you breathe at, and you will be breathing more from your abdomen than you do from your chest. After a few times practicing with your hands on your stomach and chest, you won’t need to do this anymore – unless you want to. Then, you can practice anytime you have “down” time – like when you are waiting for class to begin, when you are watching TV, or you’re reading, or while you are waiting in a line... anytime you can, practice this easy exercise. Some people like to remind themselves every hour on the hour to check their breathing... slowing it down if they need to. Do whatever works for you. Soon you’ll be breathing much easier and you’ll notice how much your anxiety has decreased.