

## Learn How to Breathe Yourself Stress Free

Taking time out to focus on your breathing is important in combating stress and maintaining a calm environment emotionally and mentally at work. The more you practise the deep breathing and relaxation techniques the more effective they will be. Like any learned skill you will find that if you are well practiced that your body will respond automatically using these techniques.

Deep abdominal breathing is often used to calm people and is a very simple way of relaxing quickly and easily. Shallow breathing (or chest breathing) causes a constriction of the chest and lung tissue over time, decreasing oxygen flow and delivery to your tissues. Deep, rhythmic breathing expands the diaphragm muscle, the cone-shaped muscle under your lungs, expanding the lung's air pockets, invoking the relaxation response, and massaging the lymphatic system.

Deep breathing is the fastest way to trigger your parasympathetic nervous system, through what some practitioners call the relaxation response. Trained deep breathing can relieve trauma symptoms and relax people quickly and easily in situations where they experience stress and anxiety.

The sympathetic nervous system, which is stimulated in times of stress and anxiety, controls your fight or flight response, including spikes in cortisol and adrenaline that can be damaging when they persist too long.

Chronic stress depletes the body of nutrients and destabilizes brain and endocrine chemistry. Depression, muscle tension and pain, insulin sensitivity, insomnia, and adrenal fatigue among scores of other conditions are all related to an overworked sympathetic nervous system. What counteracts this mechanism? The parasympathetic nervous system.

Breath is the fastest medium by which these systems can communicate, flicking the switch from high alert to low in a matter of seconds.

When someone is frightened or stressed, they tend to hold their breath or take rapid, shallow breaths - the heart pounds and muscles clench as the adrenaline kicks in. When the stressful situation is resolved, they let out a deep breath, signaling to the brain that everything is okay again. If deep breathing continues, the heart rate decreases, the lungs expand and the muscles relax. Equilibrium is restored.

### How to practice deep breathing:

- Take time out once or twice a day to practise your breathing and relaxation
- Focus on taking deep abdominal breaths and breathing through the nose
- Count to 4 as you breathe in and 8 as you breathe out, you may find that you can count to less or more, that's fine. Most important is to get a rhythm going and to empty your lungs completely with each out breath. Always make sure that your out breath is longer than your in breath.
- When you have reached a good rhythm you can count down from 5 to 1 and begin to use self-hypnosis and visualisation techniques if you wish. Or you can just continue to be present and focus on your breathing.

## Visualisations

Visualisations are used to help you relax and calm you or to instigate positive physical responses in your body.

### How to use visualisations

Focus on your breathing, count down from 5-1 feeling your whole body go loose and limp. Imagine a warm relaxing feeling moving down through all the muscles in your body.

When you have a good rhythm with your breathing, and you feel relaxed you can begin to use visualisations.

Here are two visualisations to get started with but once you get used to using them you can create your own.

### The compassionate self:

We know that we can all feel a lot better when comforted by friends – but research shows that you can also have the same effect when you *imagine* the process of being comforted. The same brain chemistry is triggered in a real situation as it is in an imagined situation. This puts you in a very powerful position, with practice! This technique is ideal if you feel self critical or rubbish about yourself generally. Imagine that you are sitting with some-one (real or imaginary) who knows you intimately, likes you deeply and really understands you. They are here to soothe you, help you feel better. What do they look like? What do they do or say that makes the difference? How do they say it? In what tone of voice, with what expression on their face? How do they convey their caring and understanding. See this – their reassuring smile, feel this – their hand on yours, hear this – their gentle, loving voice, and your mind will respond as if you are really in this situation. Your brain will release soothing hormones, which will calm you and help you move through your stress or self-criticism, or whatever you are struggling with. Be careful that the image does not give you any advice or comment on your behaviour – they simply understand you and empathise with you in a warm, loving manner.

### The objective observer:

Here, you will mentally rehearse something that you want to get better at, or do differently next time – like sports players do. Research shows that mental rehearsal makes a real difference to your performance, because it changes the neural pathways in your brain. Think of a situation that you want to change for the better. Imagine observing your behavior as you go about the situation, and then imagine seeing yourself do it exactly how you would want to be in that situation. See yourself, feel yourself, and hear yourself dealing with this just perfectly – with no judgment, just pride. Notice the change in your behaviour. Enjoy the achievement. The more you practice this mentally, the more easily it will translate into practice. It is ideal for situations that don't happen that often, but that you want to feel calm and in control of when they do happen.