Breathing Exercises to De-Stress and Promote Relaxation

There are many breathing exercises you can do which can help you to relax and destress, but also improve your lung function, particularly if you've suffered from a recent respiratory illness. Equally if you play regular sport, improved lung capacity will benefit your exercise tolerance. In short, breathing exercises can benefit everyone and improve your quality of life.

Where possible dedicate 10 minutes, preferably twice a day, but once is better than nothing, and particularly anytime you're feeling anxious, stressed or overwhelmed.



Caution: breathing exercises can make some people dizzy or lightheaded, especially if they are new to you. So, always work safely by lying down or sitting while you perform the exercises. Also take it slowly, do 1-2 exercises at a time initially and perform them 2-3 times through the day.

BASIC BREATHING EXERCISES

1. Stomach or Diaphragmatic Breathing

Diaphragmatic breathing is easy to do and very relaxing. Try this basic exercise anytime you need to relax or relieve stress.

- Sit or lie flat in a comfortable position
- Put one hand on your belly just below your ribs and the other hand on your chest
- Take a deep breath in through your nose, and let your belly push your hand out. Your chest should not move
- Breathe out through pursed lips as if you were whistling. Feel the hand on your belly go in, and use it to push all the air out
- Do this breathing 3 to 10 times. Take your time with each breath
- Notice how you feel at the end of the exercise.



2. Heat to Your Chest

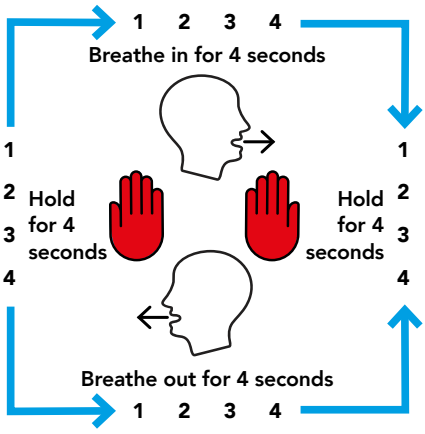
Place a heat pack, like a microwave bean bag or hot water bottle, over your chest. Wrap it in a towel so it doesn't become too hot or burn you. Now just focus on the warmth and weight. Still your mind and body and focus on your breath for a few minutes. Then slide it down to cover your lower chest and focus on pushing it upwards as you breathe in (pushing your belly up). This is excellent for bringing a sense of calm and relaxation.



3. Box Breathing

Box breathing, also known as square breathing, is a technique used to heighten performance and concentration while also being a powerful stress reliever. It may also be referred to as four-square breathing. It helps to reduce stress, increase focus and calm both the mind and the body.

- Start seated, feet supported on the floor, hands relaxed in your lap, palms facing upwards
- Slowly exhale and start thinking of the shape of a square in your mind
- Slowly breathe in through your nose for a count of 4
- Then hold your breath for a count of 4
- Slowly breathe out through pursed lips for a count of 4
- Relax with empty lungs for a count of 4
- And repeat, until you feel calmer, ideally at least 10 times.



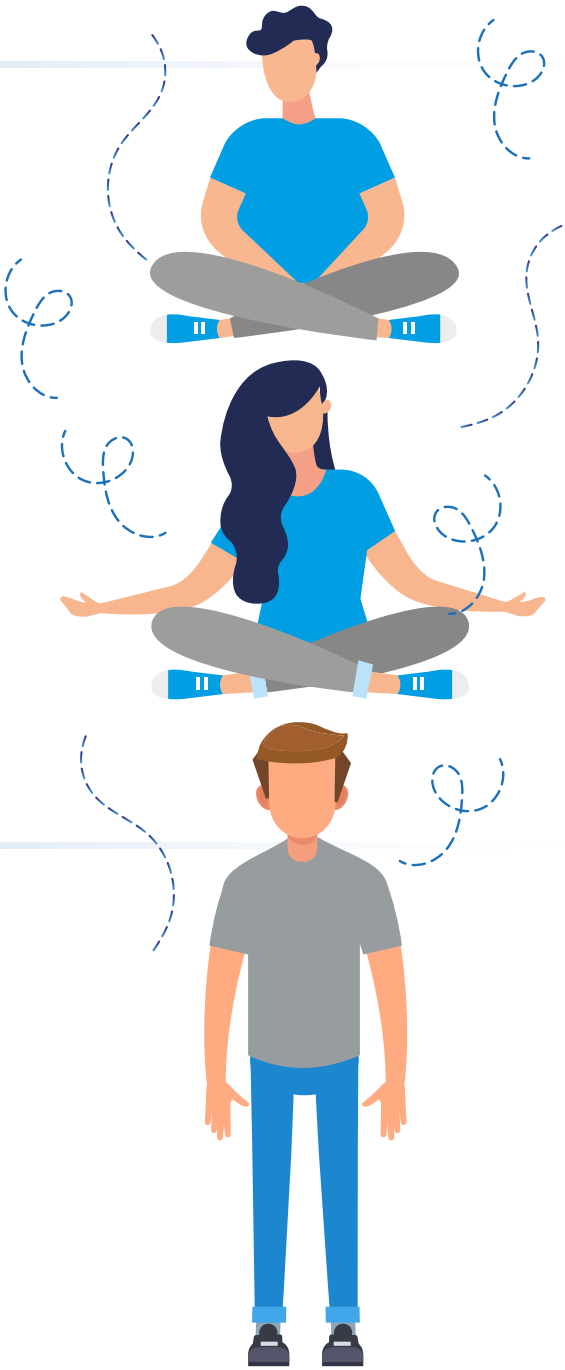
ADVANCED BREATHING EXERCISES



1. 4-7-8 Breathing

If you have mastered breathing from your belly, and box breathing, then try this exercise which is a little more advanced. It can be done sitting or lying down. It is great for relaxation and breath control.

- To start, put one hand on your belly and the other on your chest as in the belly breathing exercise
- Take a deep, slow breath from your belly, and silently count to 4 as you breathe in
- Hold your breath, and silently count from 1 to 7.
- Breathe out completely as you silently count from 1 to 8. Try to get all the air out of your lungs by the time you count to 8
- Repeat 3 to 7 times or until you feel calm, notice how you feel at the end of the exercise.



2. Roll Breathing

Roll breathing helps you develop the full use of your lungs, including the lower lobes or base of your lungs and the apical (upper) lobes of your lungs. It focuses on the rhythm of your breathing. You can do it in any position. But while you are learning, it is best to lie on your back with your knees bent. It is great for relaxation but also excellent in flushing out all the areas of your lungs.

- Put your left hand on your belly and your right hand on your chest. Notice how your hands move as you breathe in and out.
- Practice filling your lower lungs by breathing so that your "belly" (left) hand goes up when you inhale and your "chest" (right) hand remains still. Always breathe in through your nose and breathe out through your mouth. Do this 8 to 10 times.
- When you have filled and emptied your lower lungs 8 to 10 times, add the second step to your breathing: inhale first into your lower lungs as before, and then continue inhaling into your upper chest. Breathe slowly and regularly. As you do so, your right hand will rise and your left hand will fall a little as your belly falls.
- As you exhale slowly through your mouth, make a quiet, whooshing sound as first your left hand and then your right hand fall. As you exhale, feel the tension leaving your body as you become more and more relaxed.
- Practice breathing in and out in this way for 3 to 5 minutes. Notice that the movement of your belly and chest rises and falls like the motion of rolling waves.

3. Morning Breathing

Try this exercise when you first get up in the morning to relieve muscle stiffness and clear any clogged breathing passages. Then use it throughout the day to relieve back tension.

- From a standing position, bend forward from the waist with your knees slightly bent, letting your arms dangle close to the floor. As you roll downwards, one vertebra at a time image you are squeezing all the air out of your lungs. Blow out as you roll.
- As you inhale slowly and deeply, return to a standing position by rolling up slowing, lifting your head last.
- Hold your breath for just a few seconds in this standing position.
- Exhale slowly as you return to the original position, rolling downwards, bending forward from the waist.
- You can repeat this 5 times.

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