



SELF-HELP EXERCISE: DEEP BREATHING

INTRODUCTION

When we are stressed or anxious, our muscles tense up and our breathing becomes faster and shallower. This response is hardwired; our bodies are getting ready to respond to a perceived challenge or threat (this is called the flight or fight response). Fast breathing helps us survive serious threats by rapidly supplying oxygen to our muscles.

That said, if there's no real challenge or threat, we can overbreathe. Overbreathing can bring on a number of unpleasant physical sensations, including feeling out of breath, lightheadedness or dizziness, rapid heartbeat, or chest pains.



An effective way to reduce tension and distress is to practice deep, slow diaphragmatic breathing. Learning this relaxation skill has positive benefits:

- ★ It is very easy to learn and use anytime and anywhere.
- ★ It will help you relax and manage tension and anxiety.
- ★ It will help you to manage your breathing at times when you are triggered.

IMPORTANT: Learning relaxation skills will not hurt your ability to respond to real, serious threats when you need to. This skill will only enhance your ability to take care of yourself in any situation.

The goal is to use your diaphragm to breathe while inhaling and exhaling deeply and slowly. When you breathe in using your diaphragm (a large muscle underneath your lungs near the base of your ribs), your stomach will extend all the way out as your abdomen expands. When you exhale, your abdomen will be sucked back in as your stomach returns to its resting state.

Why deep breathing works:



- ★ Using your diaphragm for deep, slow breathing is different than breathing from the top of your chest.
- ★ When you are tense or anxious, you use the small muscles between your ribs and at the top of your chest to fill your lungs. This changes the balance of oxygen and carbon dioxide in your body by bringing in too much oxygen and depleting too much carbon dioxide.
- ★ Deep, slow diaphragmatic breathing counters this process. Breathing slowly and deeply from your diaphragm will also slow your heart rate down, helping you to reduce tension and anxiety.



WHAT YOU CAN DO

Before you get started, take a moment to check in with yourself about how you are feeling right now. If you want to keep track of your progress, start by answering this question:

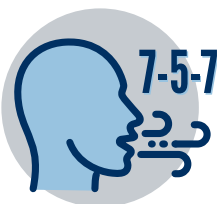
Based on the scale below, how are you feeling right now?

- 0** — I am not at all calm and relaxed; I feel completely tense and stressed out
- 25** — I feel fairly tense right now
- 50** — I feel about average
- 75** — I am fairly calm and relaxed right now
- 100** — I am completely calm and relaxed and have a strong sense of well-being

How to do the deep breathing technique:



- ★ First, find a quiet room where you won't be disturbed.
- ★ Begin by sitting in a chair with your arms at your side and hands in your lap. Relax your body and take a second to get comfortable. If you'd like, you can close your eyes and let your head come forward until it is resting comfortably.
- ★ Now, place one hand on your stomach. Place your other hand on your chest.
- ★ As you do this exercise, breathe in a slow, deep way, so that only the hand on your stomach moves, while the hand on your chest stays still. You're also going to count to make sure you're breathing slowly enough.
- ★ Inhale for seven counts, hold for five counts, and exhale for seven counts. You can adjust the number of counts at any point in this sequence depending on what feels most comfortable. The exact number of counts is not important, just be sure that you're breathing slowly and fully. When you inhale for seven counts, draw the air deep down into your stomach so that you can feel only this hand rise (and not the hand on your chest). Calmly hold that breath for five counts and then slowly and gently exhale the air through your mouth, counting to seven. As you exhale, let your body relax with each count, letting go of any tension.



- ★ Try it. Inhale through your nose for seven counts. Gently hold that breath for five counts. Exhale through your mouth for seven counts, letting go of any tension with each count.
- ★ Try it again. Slowly inhale through your nose for seven counts, drawing the air deep into your abdomen. Now calmly hold this breath for five counts and slowly and gently exhale through your mouth for seven counts, noticing the hand on your stomach fall as the air is exhaled. Feel yourself become more and more relaxed with each count.
- ★ Repeat this exercise for two minutes, adjusting the number of counts to whatever feels most comfortable. Remember to keep breathing slowly, smoothly, and deeply.

How do you feel now? Compare how you feel now to the tension you felt when you began. Do you feel more clearheaded and relaxed? Do you have more energy than you had when you began the activity?



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Having trouble with the deep breathing exercise? Here are some helpful tips:

★ Place one hand on your chest and one hand over your belly button. Breathe in and out so that only the hand on your abdomen moves, while the hand on your chest stays still.



- ★ If you are having trouble breathing from your diaphragm, try leading each breath by pushing your stomach out. By making space for the air to fill, you are creating a natural vacuum that will draw the air in.
- ★ If you are still having trouble, try practicing while lying on your back on the floor. Put an object on your belly and practice moving it up and down with each breath.

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

If at first you find the exercise difficult or frustrating, don't give up — deep breathing gets easier with time and practice. Your body may have been operating on high-alert status for a while now, so be patient as you train your body to relax and reset itself to a calmer level.



Additional tips for deep breathing:

- ★ It is important that you practice regularly, meaning at least once a day.
- ★ You may not notice much difference in how relaxed you feel after you have done the breathing exercises today, but the more you practice, the calmer you'll feel in situations that do not require you to be geared up and tense.
- ★ As you get comfortable with slow, deep breathing, try practicing it for longer periods of time and in different situations. For example, try it while you are sitting in traffic, standing in the checkout line, watching TV, or walking (you can time your breaths to your steps). The more you practice in different situations, the better you will be at relaxing yourself whenever and wherever you need to.

