

BREATHING EXERCISES

MODULE 2 • BALANCED LIFE • WHOLE-PERSON PROGRAM



BREATHING EXERCISES

What is one thing you do all day, every day, no matter where you are or what you're doing? If you guessed breathing, you're correct. To live is to breathe. But did you know there are many ways to breathe? And did you know that breathing can significantly impact physical, mental, emotional, and even spiritual health?

Many people aren't aware of their normal breathing patterns and breathe inefficiently in ways that can increase pain and stress (e.g., taking shallow breaths higher in the chest). Inefficient breathing can tighten muscles, and research shows it can contribute to low back pain, neck pain, and headaches. It can also negatively impact posture, reduce oxygen flow, and increase symptoms of anxiety.

Fortunately, just like any other habit, you have the power to change how you breathe. *Breathwork* is the intentional shifting of your breathing patterns. It is mindful, conscious breathing and can help shift your mental and emotional energy. On a basic level, it's a great way to practice mindfulness. It can also reduce tension, elevate mood, boost clarity and focus, reduce stress, and calm your mind.

When you find yourself in a difficult moment, often the best thing you can do is focus on your breathing. The following breathing exercises can be used to help calm the mind and body. You can practice them no matter where you are – sitting, standing, or lying down at home, at work, or wherever you have a moment to stop what you're doing and focus inward.

For each of these exercises, sit in a comfortable position in a quiet place if possible. Close your eyes, and start by paying attention to your normal breathing as it is for the first few seconds without trying to change it.

**You have a tool that is always with you to help you center and ground --- your breath.
Take a few moments and use this affirmation to ground yourself in your breath:
*When I breathe, I inhale confidence and exhale doubt.***

BREATHING EXERCISES



Alternate Nostril Breathing

Alternate nostril breathing is a yogic breathing exercise that balances the left and right sides of the brain. It calms the nervous system and the mind as well as energizes. It may also improve lung function, lower heart rate, and improve cognitive function.

How to do it:

Note: It may be helpful to blow your nose before doing this exercise. Avoid it if you're feeling congested.

- 1| Get in a comfortable seated position. Try to clear your mind and tune in to your breath.
- 2| Hold your right thumb on top of your right nostril to prevent air from coming through that side. Inhale deeply through the left nostril to a count of four. Feel your lungs and diaphragm expand.
- 3| At the top of your inhale, release your thumb from your right nostril, and use your right ring finger to close off your left nostril.
- 4| Exhale slowly and fully through your right nostril, exhaling to a count of eight.
- 5| Inhale deeply through the right nostril to a count of four.
- 6| Close off the right nostril with your right thumb and exhale completely through your left nostril to the count of eight.

This completes one round. Repeat for another round or two and notice if you feel any shifts in relaxation or stress level.



Box Breathing

Also known as square breathing, this relaxation technique is often used by Navy SEALs, athletes, medical professionals, and those in other high-stress positions. It can help relieve stress as well as boost performance.

How to do it:

- 1| Get in a comfortable seated position. Try to clear your mind and tune in to your breath.
- 2| Slowly exhale fully.
- 3| Slowly inhale to the count of four, until your lungs and abdomen are full.
- 4| Hold your breath for a count of four.
- 5| Slowly exhale for a count of four, releasing all air from your lungs and abdomen.
- 6| Hold your breath for a count of four.

This completes one round. Repeat at least three times, or until you feel calmer.



Diaphragmatic Breathing

Your diaphragm, a dome-shaped muscle at the base of the lungs, is your most efficient breathing muscle. It's the primary muscle used when inhaling and is even more important than the lungs!

Diaphragmatic breathing, also known as belly breathing, focuses on using the diaphragm. This type of breathing helps the body use oxygen more efficiently and activates the parasympathetic nervous system by decreasing respiration, improving heart rate variability, and preserving autonomic nervous system function. In short, it can relax the body and reduce stress.

How to do it:

Note: You might find it easier to begin lying on your back with your knees supported, but you can also do this sitting or standing.

- 1| Get in a comfortable seated position. Try to clear your mind and tune in to your breath.
- 2| Place one hand on your chest, with your thumb pointing up in the middle of your chest and your pinkie in the space between your rib cage.
- 3| Place your other hand on one side of your rib cage, with your fingers pointing toward your midline.
- 4| Exhale completely through your mouth, relaxing your muscles.
- 5| Close your mouth and inhale slowly through your nose. Pull the air in deeply as you breathe into your abdomen.
 - Focus first on allowing your ribs to expand out to the sides. This creates more space for the diaphragm to move.
 - The hand on your ribs should move out to the side, and your pinkie should move away from your body.
- 6| When you've inhaled as much air as you comfortably can, pause, then exhale slowly and steadily through your mouth.
 - Use pursed lips (imagine blowing through a straw) to push the air out and "deflate" the diaphragm.
 - The hand on your ribs should move in toward your midline, and your pinkie should move in toward your body.
- 7| Pause momentarily before inhaling again to repeat, continuing the exercise for 5–10 minutes.



Equal Breathing

Equal breathing is another yogic breathing technique. It focuses on equal lengths of inhalations and exhalations. Because it's a form of deep, rhythmic breathing, it offers many of the same benefits as diaphragmatic breathing, including relaxation and improved mood, energy, and cardiovascular function.

How to do it:

- 1| Sit comfortably. Try to clear your mind and tune in to your breath.
- 2| Exhale completely and audibly through the mouth (imagine blowing through a straw).
- 3| Inhale through your mouth for a count of four. Your lungs should be fully expanded at the top of the breath.
- 4| Exhale completely through your nose for four counts.
- 5| Repeat four more times, for a total of five rounds.

You can increase the inhale to a count of five, six, etc. – whatever feels natural. Just be sure to exhale to the same count. You can also increase counts with each repetition. For example, inhale and exhale to a count of three, then four, and so on.



Wim Hof Method Breathing

This conscious “power breathing” method can positively impact the sympathetic nervous system and immune system. It induces a brief stress response that can help build resilience over time. It's best practiced first thing in the morning, or on an empty stomach, in a safe environment.

How to do it:

- 1| Sit or lie in a comfortable position. Clear your mind and tune in to your breath.
- 2| Take 30–40 “power breaths” by inhaling deeply, expanding your belly and chest, then exhaling steadily through your mouth. Each breath should last about 2 seconds, short and powerful. You might feel lightheaded or some tingling sensations, especially in the beginning, which is normal.
- 3| After the power breaths, inhale, then exhale fully and hold until you feel the need to breathe again.
- 4| Take a recovery breath by inhaling deeply and holding it for 10–15 seconds.

This completes one round. Complete two more rounds, then spend several minutes meditating. Notice how you feel.



4-7-8 Breathing

Pioneered by Dr. Andrew Weil as a way to relax the body and enter a state of rest, it can be practiced anywhere, anytime to achieve a state of calmness.

How to do it:

Note: The amount of time spent inhaling and exhaling is less important than maintaining the ratio of 4:7:8.

- 1| Exhale completely and audibly through the mouth (imagine blowing through a straw).
- 2| Inhale through your mouth for a count of four. Your lungs should be fully expanded at the top of the breath.
- 3| Hold your breath for seven counts.
- 4| Exhale completely through your mouth for eight counts, making an audible sound as you release the air.
- 5| Repeat four more times for a total of five rounds.

CREATING A ROUTINE

Try different forms of breathwork and see which work best for you. The more you practice them, the more you'll feel the benefits.

Here are a few tips:

- Try not to get too caught up in the techniques. The most important thing is to get out of your head and simply allow yourself to breathe.
- Focus on tuning in to deeper, calmer rhythms, which can help the relaxation response kick in.
- Aim to practice for 5–10 minutes once or twice daily. Choosing the same time every day creates a sense of ritual and increases the odds you'll develop the habit of practicing consistently.

Other types of breathwork involve working with a practitioner, at least to start. These include:

- **Clarity breathwork:** combines counseling with somatic exercises and breathing to help release energetic blockages and gain insight
- **Holotropic breathwork:** blends accelerated breathing with music
- **Rebirthing breathwork, or conscious energy breathing:** focuses on releasing blocked energy stored in the body as a result of birth trauma
- **Shamanic breathwork:** focuses on connecting with your inner healer
- **Transformational breath:** incorporates circular breathing and vibrational energy patterns to clear blockages

FOOTNOTES

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