Breathing techniques to help you feel calmer

Breathing techniques have been used for thousands of years as an anchor point to calm the mind. Breathing is an ‘autofunction’ built into the human body – we breathe constantly without having to decide to. Our heartbeat is another ‘autofunction’, but, unlike the heart, whose rhythm we can’t control, we can consciously control how we breathe, and therefore change how calm we feel at any given time. Sound too good to be true? When was the last time you paid any attention to your breathing patterns? Maybe if you breathed a little deeper on purpose you’d feel a bit calmer during the day!

Breathing exercises adapted from: <https://www.healthline.com/health/breathing-exercises-for-anxiety>

***Lengthen your exhale***

Inhaling deeply may not always calm you down. Taking too many deep breaths too quickly can actually cause you to hyperventilate. Hyperventilation decreases the amount of oxygen-rich blood that flows to your brain. When we feel anxious or under stress, it’s easier to breathe too much and end up hyperventilating — even if we’re trying to do the opposite.

1. Before you take a big, deep breath, try a thorough ***exhale*** instead. Push all the air out of your lungs, then simply let your lungs do their work inhaling air.

2. Next, try spending a little bit longer exhaling than you do inhaling. For example, try inhaling for four seconds, then exhale for six.

3. Try doing this for two to five minutes.

This technique can be done in any position that’s comfortable for you, including standing, sitting, or lying down.

***Abdomen breathing***

Breathing from your diaphragm (the muscle that sits just beneath your lungs) can help reduce the amount of work your body needs to do in order to breathe.

To learn how to breathe from your diaphragm:

Check-in

1.For comfort, lie down on the floor or bed with pillows beneath your head and knees. Or sit in a comfortable chair with your head, neck, and shoulders relaxed, and your knees bent.

2.Then, put one hand under your rib cage and one hand over your heart.

3.Inhale and exhale through your nose, noticing how or if your stomach and chest move as you breathe.

4.Can you isolate your breathing so you bring air deeper into your lungs? What about the reverse? Can you breathe so your chest moves more than your stomach?

Eventually, you want your stomach to move as you breathe, instead of your chest.

Practice belly breathing

1.Sit or lie down as described above.

2. Place one hand on your chest and one hand on your stomach somewhere above your belly button.

3.Breathe in through your nose, noticing your stomach rise. Your chest should remain relatively still.

4.Purse your lips and exhale through your mouth. Try engaging your stomach muscles to push air out at the end of the breath.

For this type of breathing to become automatic, you’ll need to practice it daily. Try doing the exercise three or four times a day for up to 10 minutes.

If you haven’t been using your diaphragm to breathe, you may feel tired at first. It’ll get easier with practice though.

***Breath focus***

When deep breathing is focused and slow, it can help reduce anxiety. You can do this technique by sitting or lying down in a quiet, comfortable location. Then:

1.Notice how it feels when you inhale and exhale normally. Mentally scan your body. You might feel tension in your body that you never noticed.

2.Take a slow, deep breath through your nose.

3.Notice your belly and upper body expanding.

4.Exhale in whatever way is most comfortable for you, sighing if you wish.

5.Do this for several minutes, paying attention to the rise and fall of your belly.

6.Choose a word to focus on and vocalize during your exhale. Words like “safe” and “calm” can be effective.

7.Imagine your inhale washing over you like a gentle wave.

8.Imagine your exhale carrying negative and upsetting thoughts and energy away from you.

9.When you get distracted, gently bring your attention back to your breath and your words.

Practice this technique for up to 20 minutes daily when you can.

***Equal breathing***

Another form of breathing that stems from the ancient practice of pranayama yoga is equal breathing. This means you’re inhaling for the same amount of time as you’re exhaling.

You can practice equal breathing from a sitting or lying-down position. Whichever position you choose, be sure to get comfortable.

1.Shut your eyes and pay attention to the way you normally breathe for several breaths.

2.Then, slowly count 1-2-3-4 as you inhale through your nose.

3.Exhale for the same four-second count.

4.As you inhale and exhale, be mindful of the feelings of fullness and emptiness in your lungs.

As you continue practicing equal breathing, your second count might vary. Be sure to keep your inhale and exhale the same.

***Resonant breathing***

Resonant breathing, also called coherent breathing, can help you calm anxiety and get into a relaxed state. To try it yourself:

1.Lie down and close your eyes.

2.Gently breathe in through your nose, mouth closed, for a count of six seconds.

3.Don’t fill your lungs too full of air.

4.Exhale for six seconds, allowing your breath to leave your body slowly and gently. Don’t force it.

5.Continue for up to 10 minutes.

6.Take a few additional minutes to be still and focus on how your body feels.

Breathing exercises adapted from: https://www.calmclinic.com/anxiety/treatment/breathing-exercises

Many people use breathing exercises to both stop hyperventilation and calm themselves when they're feeling high amounts of anxiety, and with the right breathing techniques, you can actually reduce the extent of your anxiety and anxiety symptoms.

Breathing exercises take practice, so don't expect them to work right away. But the more you practice, the better you'll get, and the easier a time you'll have calming yourself down during an anxiety attack or panic attack.

***Deep Breathing for Relaxation***

What is it Good For: Deep breathing is a good tool for high stress/high anxiety. Taking calm, deep breaths has a soothing effect on your body. It's not clear exactly why, but it's likely that controlled breathing combined with a few minutes away from your stressful situation gives you an opportunity to relax in a way that few people can do in the moment.

How it Works: There are different types of deep breathing strategies, but the simplest involves sitting in a chair with your back straight and your arms on the armrests. You take a deep, slow breath in through your nose lasting close to 5 or 6 seconds. You then hold for a few seconds, and breathe out slowly through your mouth, taking close to 7 seconds (breathe out like you're whistling). Repeat 10 times.

Additional Thoughts: \*\*Deep breathing can be difficult at first and not very relaxing. It takes some practice. But once you've gotten used to it, it becomes much easier. You'll find that the deep breaths calm you the most by your 10th breath and should lower your blood pressure as well. As you improve, you can lengthen the number of breaths to 20.

***Advanced Inhale-Hold-Exhale Deep Breathing.***

What is it Good For: Advanced deep breathing can be hard to master in a time of panic, so many people struggle to perform this type of exercise at first. Approach it gently and with some practice you may find that it helps you calm down much faster.

How it Works: You'll need to find a much more comfortable place for this to work, and expect it to take a considerable amount of time. Find a quiet place you can stay for at least 15 to 20 minutes. Sit like you would for deep breathing with your back straight, but try to be comfortable.

For this exercise, you will be monitoring your heartbeat to keep a good rhythm (sometimes you can feel your heart in your chest, but if you can’t, you can take your pulse at your wrist or neck, or just guess). You will do at least 10 breath cycles, and each cycle will be comprised of three stages:

•1. Inhale, count 5 heartbeats

•2. Hold breath, count 7 heartbeats

•3. Exhale, count 9 heartbeats

When you breathe in, make sure that you're breathing in through your stomach first and your chest second.

Things you can focus on while breathing

* Imagine yourself tracing a square in your mind and inhaling/exhaling every time you turn a corner.
* Imagine blowing on a candle, except rather than try to blow it out, you try to blow it just softly enough that it dances around.

Breathing exercises adapted from: <https://greatist.com/happiness/breathing-exercises-relax>

***The “4-7-8” Breathing Technique***

The method which we call “4-7-8 breathing” also requires you to be sitting or lying down comfortably. Here are the steps you need to follow:

1. Sit or lie comfortably with one hand on your stomach and one on your chest.

2.Breathe in slowly but deeply. Take 4 seconds to breathe in, feeling your stomach move in the process.

3.Hold your breath for 7 seconds.

4.Breathe out for 8 seconds, as silently as you can manage. Once you reach a count of 8, you should have completely emptied your lungs of air.

5.Repeat as many times as you need, making sure to stick to the 4-7-8 pattern.

Breathing exercises adapted from: <https://greatist.com/happiness/breathing-exercises-relax>

***Progressive muscle relaxation***

The progressive muscle relaxation method works best when you’re sitting at home, in your office chair, or even in your car. By intentionally tensing and then relaxing each muscle group one at a time, you can reduce excess tension from head to toe.

How to do it: Close your eyes and focus on tensing and relaxing each muscle group for 2 to 3 seconds. Start with your feet and toes, and then move up to your knees, thighs, buttocks, chest, arms, hands, neck, jaw, and eyes. Maintain deep, slow breaths the entire time.

Having trouble staying on track? Try inhaling through your nose, holding for 5 counts while tensing your muscles, and then exhaling through your mouth as you release those muscles.

If holding your breath ever feels uncomfortable, tone it down to just a few seconds.

Breathing exercises adapted from: <https://greatist.com/happiness/breathing-exercises-relax>

***Roll Breathing***

This method is great for those looking for a relaxation breathing exercise that can be done comfortably while sitting. Its aim is not just to relax, but also to encourage the full use of your lung capacity.

Beginners are advised to lie down, but after your first time, you should find these steps just as easy to complete this exercise while sitting:

1. Sit or lie comfortably with your left hand on your stomach, and right hand over your chest.

2.Take a deep, slow breath from your lower lungs, ensuring that the hand over your chest doesn’t move as you take the breath. Use your nose to breathe in, and exhale using your mouth.

3.Repeat this way of breathing up to 8 times. On the ninth repetition – once you have filled your lower lungs – take a breath that will move your chest up, as you would normally breathe. This will fill your entire lung capacity.

4.Gently exhale through your mouth, being sure to completely empty your lungs. While you exhale, make a small “whooshing” noise. You should notice that both of your hands move back towards your body as both your stomach and chest fall.

5.Practice this method for between 4 and 5 minutes. With each exhalation, you should be able to feel a marked difference in your stress levels.

Breathing exercises adapted from: <https://greatist.com/happiness/breathing-exercises-relax>

***Morning Breathing***

‘Morning Breathing’, as the name suggests, should be practiced once you have woken up.

This breathing exercise aims to stretch relax your muscles after a good night’s sleep. The following steps will help to minimize tension for the remainder of the day:

1.Stand up straight and, with your knees slightly bent, bend your torso forward from the waist. Your arms should be limply hanging next to you, toward the floor.

2.Take a breath in slowly and return to your original standing position. To do so, pretend that you are ‘zipping’ yourself up from the waist to the top of your neck. Your head should be the last thing to straighten.

3.Slowly exhale, and return to the bent position forward by the end of your breath. When you have finished, stand up straight and stretch your muscles as required.

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***Yogic breathing (pranayama)***

Yoga is a wellness practice with ancient roots, and breathing is at the heart of each variation of yoga.

One form of yoga, pranayama, includes multiple breathing variations that may help with anxiety. Some of these include lengthened exhale and equal breathing (both featured above), as well as lion’s breath and alternate nostril breathing (nadi shodhana).

***Lion’s breath***

Lion’s breath involves exhaling forcefully. To try lion’s breath:

1.Get into a kneeling position, crossing your ankles and resting your bottom on your feet. If this position isn’t comfortable, sit cross-legged.

2.Bring your hands to your knees, stretching out your arms and your fingers.

3.Take a breath in through your nose.

4.Breathe out through your mouth, allowing yourself to vocalize “ha.”

5.During exhale, open your mouth as wide as you can and stick your tongue out, stretching it down toward your chin as far as it will go.

6.Focus on the middle of your forehead (third eye) or the end of your nose while exhaling.

7.Relax your face as you inhale again.

8.Repeat the practice up to six times, changing the cross of your ankles when you reach the halfway point.

***Alternate nostril breathing***

To try alternate nostril breathing, sit down in a comfortable place, lengthening your spine and opening your chest.

Rest your left hand in your lap and raise your right hand. Then, rest the pointer and middle fingers of your right hand on your forehead, in between the eyebrows. Close your eyes, inhaling and exhaling through your nose.

1.Use your right thumb to close the right-hand nostril and inhale slowly through the left.

2.Pinch your nose closed between your right thumb and ring finger, holding the breath in for a moment.

3.Use your right ring finger to close your left nostril and exhale through the right, waiting for a moment before you inhale again.

4.Inhale slowly through the right nostril.

5.Pinch your nose closed again, pausing for a moment.

6.Now, open the left side and exhale, waiting a moment before you inhale again.

7.Repeat this cycle of inhaling and exhaling through either nostril up to 10 times. Each cycle should take up to 40 seconds.

***Guided meditation***

Some people use guided meditation to alleviate anxiety by interrupting patterns of thinking that perpetuate stress.

You can practice guided meditation by sitting or lying in a cool, dark, comfortable place and relaxing. Then, listen to calming recordings while relaxing your body and steadying your breathing.

Guided meditation recordings help take you through the steps of visualizing a calmer, less stressed reality. It can also help you gain control over intrusive thoughts that trigger anxiety.

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***Kapalabhati or “Skull-Shining Breath”***

This is a ‘cheering’ exercise rather than a relaxing exercise. It’s great for helping you to warm up and wake up your body and brain. It is especially effective in the morning or after a nap, to help shake off sleepiness and sluggishness.

How to do it: Begin sitting in an upright position with good posture and your hands on your knees. Take a long, slow inhale through your nose. Then exhale powerfully (also through your nose) by contracting your lower belly.

Your body will naturally inhale again, so focus mainly on your forceful exhales as you continue this fiery breathing technique. Once you’re comfortable with the abdominal contraction component, up your pace to 1 inhale-exhale every 2 seconds for a total of 10 breaths.