

Deep Breathing

Deep breathing, or abdominal breathing is a breathing technique that is associated with physiological changes that have been termed the “relaxation response”, a term coined by Herbert Benson¹. The relaxation response is associated with a number of biological and chemical changes in the body and brain. Proper breathing and relaxation training can help you trigger the relaxation response and counter the effects of stress on your body. A person cannot be completely stressed and completely relaxed at the same time. Therefore, the stronger one’s ability to relax, the better they are at reducing the negative effects of stress.

People with anxiety and tension have different breath patterns from non-anxious individuals. Anxious people breathe from their chest rather than the more relaxed abdominal breathing that non-anxious people do. Chest breathing is a more shallow breathing pattern. It may result in rapid breathing (hyperventilation), over-breathing (breathing out too much carbon dioxide), or holding in your breath. Through biochemical mechanisms that we will not get into here, this can lead to symptoms such as feeling jittery or nervous, increased heart rate, dizziness, disorientation, feeling disengaged.

Deep breathing is a skill. It is a type of breathing we do naturally as infants, and also while we sleep, and sing. In an awake and non-musical state, however, it is a skill; it requires time and commitment to practice, and one can improve its effects with consistent effort.

Spend a minute paying attention to your breath. Do you breath through your nose or your mouth? When you breath in and out does your chest move? Do your chest and your abdomen move or just your abdomen?

There are four steps to deep breathing:

1. Breathing in and out of our nose
2. Creating even regular breaths- so that your breath in matches your breath out
3. Taking long, deep, complete breaths
4. Abdominal breathing

Now try this: assess on a scale of 1-10 (one being very calm and 10 being extremely tense) how tense you feel right now.

Step 1: Close your eyes and breath in and out through your nose. As you do this focus on the process of breathing. Think about how the air feels, where you breath goes. Notice the temperature of your breath. What is your tension like now?

Step 2: Count silently in your head as you breathe in and out . You want your breath to be even and regular. What ever the number is as you breathe in, try with each subsequent breath to make the number match it as you breathe out. So for example if you breathe in on a count of four, you

¹ Benson H, Beary JF, Carol MP. The relaxation response. *Psychiatry* 1974;37:37-46.

want to also breathe out on a count of four. As you count in your head make sure that your pace is calm, maybe not quite as long as a full second but nearly.

Step 3: Extending you breath. Try to make your breath out the longer breath by increasing the exhalation number by one digit, and then make the inhalation count match this new number. So if you were breathing in on a count of four and exhaling on a count of four, try to exhale on a count of five, and then try to inhale on a count of five. Do this until you can comfortably reach this new number and the rhythm seems natural. Continue to do increase you breath until you reach the highest comfortable number (for most women it is somewhere between 6-8 and for most men between 8-12). If it does not feel comfortable even with a lot of practice try moving down a number.

Step 4: The abdominal breath is the hardest part. Try picturing a small balloon in your stomach, as you breath in, picture the air going through your nose, down your throat, into your chest and reaching that small balloon inside your gut. Fill the balloon up, just a little as you breathe in, and then empty the balloon out as you exhale. You can also try to close your eyes, and as you breathe notice where the breath goes, how it fills your lungs. Do they fill from the top down or the bottom upward? Try to make you breath go in your nose, down your throat, through your chest, and fill your lungs up first from the bottom, then middle, and finally the top.

Practice this, it will take a while to feel comfortable and do its trick. Try doing it daily in a quiet environment at first, with very little distraction and with your eyes closed. As you get better you will be able to do this in noisy, crowded or stimulating environments, and still produce the same response. The more you practice the better you get. The better you get, the more effectively it will control your autonomic response; et voila! Tension is gone!