
Information from your Patient Aligned Care Team

Abdominal Breathing

What is Abdominal Breathing?

The goal of breath-focused relaxation is to shift from quick, shallow chest breathing to deeper, more relaxed abdominal breathing. During times of stress, our natural tendency is to either hold our breath, or to breathe in a shallow, rapid manner. When we are relaxed our breathing is naturally slower and deeper. When stress is chronic, we may habitually breathe shallowly, never really discharging the stale air from our lungs. Holding in your stomach for reasons of vanity also restricts breathing. In order to take a full deep breath, we must allow our diaphragm (the muscle separating our chest cavity from the abdominal cavity below the lungs) to drop down and our abdomen to expand. If we keep our stomach muscles held in tight when we breathe, we restrict the expansion of our lungs and rob our bodies of optimal oxygen. This puts our bodies in a state of alarm that creates the sensation of anxiety. Taking a few slow, deep breaths sends the signal to our body to relax. Deep breathing is also referred to as abdominal breathing, diaphragmatic breathing, or belly breathing. Abdominal breathing is a form of relaxation that you can use any time to help you to calm yourself physically and mentally and in turn, decrease stress.

Instructions for Learning Abdominal Breathing

1. Place one hand, palm side down, on your chest. Place the other hand, palm side down, on your stomach.
2. Breathe in through your nose to a slow count of 3 or 4 (one ...two ...three... four...). Notice the motion of each hand. When you breathe in, does the hand on your chest move? If so, which way does it move (out/up or in/down) and how much does it move? Does the hand on your stomach move? If so, which way (out or in) and how much?

3. Now exhale through your nose, again to a slow count of 3 or 4. Notice again how each of your hands moves.

For the most relaxing breath, the hand on your chest should move very little while the hand on your stomach pushes out significantly on the inhale (in breath) and goes back in on the exhale (out breath). A common problem is for the chest to inflate on the in breath while the stomach stays still or even sucks in. When this happens, only the upper part of the lungs (the part behind the upper chest) is being used. When a full deep breath is properly taken, the diaphragm muscle drops down into the abdominal cavity to make room for the lungs to expand. As the diaphragm muscle drops down, it pushes the organs in the abdomen forward to make more room for the lungs. That is why the stomach goes out when you take the most relaxing type of breath.

Learning to take abdominal breaths versus chest breathing is a challenge for some people. The following tips can make it easier.

- ❖ Imagine yourself filling a medium-sized balloon in your stomach each time you inhale and releasing the air in the balloon when you exhale.
- ❖ Breathe in the same amount of air you breathe out.
- ❖ It is sometimes easier to first learn abdominal breathing while lying on your back with your hand on your stomach. It is easier to feel the stomach motion in this position versus sitting or standing.
- ❖ It is best to only practice a few deep breaths at a time at first. This is because deep breathing can make you feel light headed if you aren't used to it. If you begin to feel light headed, it is just your body's signal that it has had enough practice for now. Return to your normal breathing and practice again later. With practice, you will be able to take a greater number of deep breaths without becoming light headed.
- ❖ Start practicing this deep breathing technique when you are calm so you have mastered it and are ready to use it when you are stressed.

Key Points

- ❖ Abdominal breathing can help you achieve a state of relaxation because it has both meditative (mentally calming) and sedating (physically calming) qualities.

- ❖ Try not to get frustrated by “Worry” or “To-Do” thoughts that enter your head while you’re relaxing. Gently let these thoughts pass and return to the task at hand. Focusing on your deep breathing will help you. Sometimes, it also helps to “place” busy thoughts on an imaginary conveyor belt like those found at the airport – eventually your thought luggage will come back round where you can pick it up after your relaxation trip. Or, mentally set your concerns on a shelf until you are ready to address them.
- ❖ Practice this type of breathing for about 5 minutes, one or more times a day, most days of the week.
- ❖ Learning to focus on one of the most calming processes in the body, namely your breathing, is one of the most reliable ways to achieve a relaxed state!
- ❖ This is a great relaxation exercise to learn because you can do it anywhere, anytime you want to take the edge off your anxiety stress level.
- ❖ It is normal for this new method of breathing to feel awkward at first. With practice it will feel more natural.

Longer Relaxation Exercises

Deep breathing can be expanded into a longer relaxation exercise as well. Two examples are given below:

Three-Part Rhythmic Breathing

Inhale ... hold the breath ... and then exhale ... with the inhale, hold, and exhale each being of equal length. Inhale and exhale completely using the entire length of the lungs. Keep your shoulders and face relaxed while you hold your breath. Use a count that is comfortable for you. Repeat five times.

Breathing with Imagery

For about 30 seconds, simply relax with your eyes closed. Then start to pay attention to your breathing. Let your breathing become slow and relaxed, like a person sleeping. Feel the air entering thorough your nose with each inhalation, and feel your breath leave as you exhale. Imagine the tension is leaving your body with each out breath.

Now imagine that, as you breathe in, the air comes into your nose and caresses your face like a gentle breeze. As you breathe out, the exhalation carries away the tension from your face. As you breathe slowly in and out, tension gradually leaves your body and you become more and more relaxed.

Now imagine that, as you breathe in, the gentle air enters your nose and spreads relaxation up over the top of your head. As you exhale, imagine the tension leaving this area and passing out of our body. Then imagine the next breath carrying relaxation over your face, your scalp, and both sides of your head. As you exhale, let any tension flow out easily.

If other thoughts come to mind, simply return to paying attention to your breathing. Your breathing is slow and easy, with no effort at all. Let your body relax.

Now let your breath carry relaxation to your neck. As you exhale, tension passes out of your neck and out of your body with the exhaled air. Feel a breath carry relaxation into your shoulders. As you exhale, any tension leaves your shoulders and passes out of your body.

Now one breath at a time, focus your attention on each part of your body from the top down: your upper arms, forearms, hands, chest, back, stomach, hips, thighs, knees, calves, ankles, and feet. Imagine each breath of air carrying relaxation into each part of your body. As you breathe out, let any tension pass out through your nostrils.

This exercise takes several minutes. Do it at your own pace. When you have finished, sit quietly for a minute or two more.