

Breathing Techniques

When stress, tension, anxiety or panic kicks in, the first thing to respond is our breathing. Short, shallow, high up in the chest, laboured.... It's certainly not conducive with a calm body and mind.

The need for breathing techniques

A 'Captain obvious' moment here – our brain and body needs adequate oxygen for it to feel calm, safe and remain in balance. A lack of oxygen, or too much retained carbon dioxide because we are breathing too shallowly to exhale it all out, interrupts the equilibrium of the body.

The result? The chemistry of our body goes awry. We get an imbalance of oxygen levels and a fluctuation in stress hormones, all producing the symptoms that are well known in anxiety stress and panic.

Studies show that deep breathing from the abdomen increases brain functioning, soothes the nervous system by stimulating what is known as the vagus nerve, cleanses the lungs, and promotes quality sleep.

This type of breathing kick starts the calming response in our body and reduces the fight and flight response and symptoms, so it is also an essential tool for using 'live' when we are stressed, anxious or angry. So simply put, good quality breathing is your fast track to reducing stress, anxiety and anger and the unpleasant symptoms they bring.

The key is to practice good quality breathing when we are feeling relaxed, that way; we don't need to focus on it so much or try so hard when we need it for real. It's like when we are using our body for working out. The more we use it in a particular way, the more acquainted we get with how that feels and how to repeat those results. It's the same here, that if we get into the habit of knowing how to breathe well and deeply, and find a natural rhythm that is comfortable for us, then we then have something to calibrate against to recognise when we breathing differently, so we can catch it early and interrupt the anxiety, tension or panic cycle.

Additionally, we will have become so well-trained in the breathing technique that suits us, we will be able to use it far more effectively when needed, and it also serves as conditioned response for relaxation. So simply put, good quality breathing is your fast track to reducing anxiety and the unpleasant symptoms it brings.

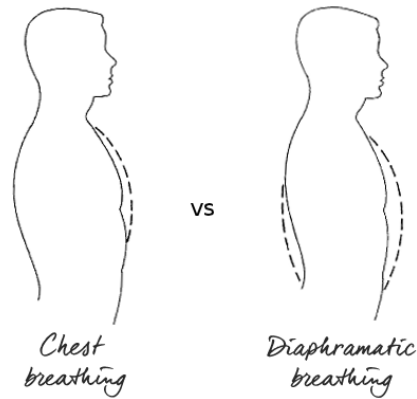
How to breathe

There are many different ways to breathe the can lead to a reduction in symptoms. Before I outline them, the most essential thing is to understand where your breathing needs to come from. The common breathing mistake we make when we get tense is breathing fast and shallow, leading to the symptoms we describe. So the key is to slow-it-right-down and breathe lower from the belly rather than the chest (see diagram on next page)

This type of breathing is commonly referred to as abdominal or diaphragmatic breathing. This is underneath your rib cage, or better still from your belly button. The tendency is to resist and tighten up, but what you are trying to teach yourself ahead of time, is how to relax the muscles to enable a full lungful of air.

Experiment with a combination of inhaling through your nostrils and out through the mouth, or finding your dominant nostril (by occluding the other one) and inhaling slowly through that nostril and then exhaling slowly through pursed lips, open mouth or if it feels comfortable out through your nose as well.

You'll find what feels right for you and works best, but it does take some experimentation and practice.



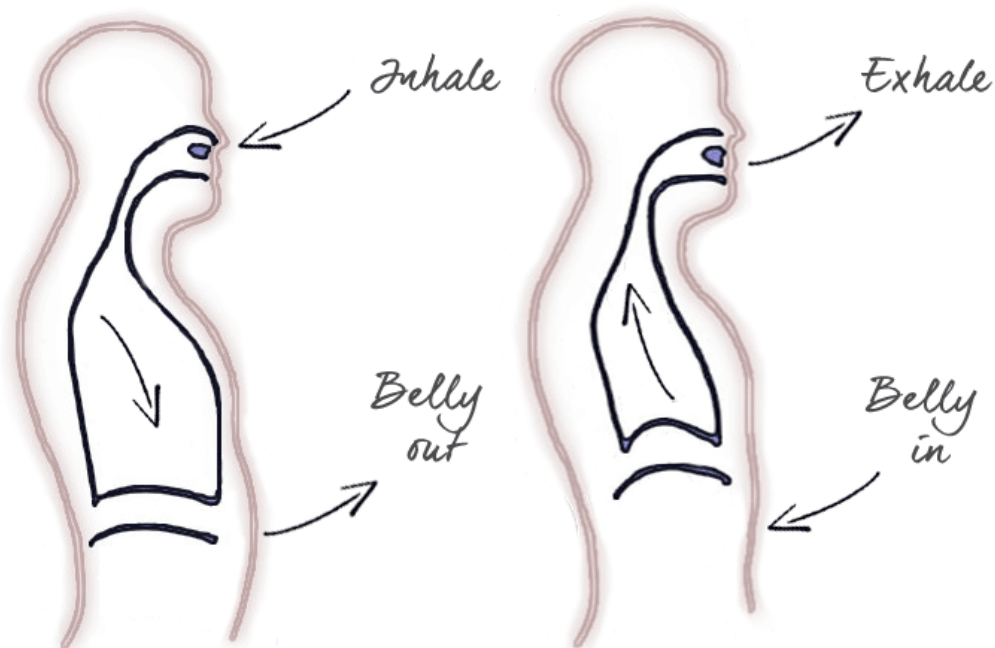
Belly-breathing

This can be easier to practice lying down to start.

Sit or lie with your eyes closed and turn your attention to your breathing. Breathe naturally, preferably through the nostrils, without attempting to control your breath. Be aware of the sensation of the breath as it enters and leaves the nostrils.

Imagine that you have a balloon inside your belly. When you breathe in that balloon can be gently pushing against your abdominal wall, forcing it outwards. Think of it like when you see children pushing the stomach out as far as they can go to pretend they are 'Mr Greedy' or carrying a baby like 'Mummy'. Or when we are jokingly showing someone how full we are after a big meal. It's not glamorous, but it is this effect that you're after!

The tendency here is most people suck their stomach up and in when they try and breathe in. This does completely the opposite and can be highly effective as one of the first breathing patterns to use when you feeling anxious or panicky.



- 🌿 Place one hand on your belly, and the other on your chest.
- 🌿 Take a deep breath for a count of four.
- 🌿 Hold your breath for a count of three.
- 🌿 Exhale for a count of four (or find a slow pattern that suits you)

The hand on your chest should remain relatively still, while the hand on your belly rises gently upward and outward. Contract your abdominal muscles to exhale, breathing out through your mouth. Experiment with this lying down with other rhythms below to find what has the best effect for you.

Different rhythms for breathing

You can find free animated images to download to your devices that guide you through these different rhythms on my site – visit the [pages blog/anxiety-tips](#)

The 4-7-8 (or relaxing breath) exercise

This breathing exercise comes from Dr. Andrew Weil; a Harvard trained medical doctor with a focus on holistic health. The exercise is described by Weil as “a natural tranquilizer for the nervous system” that eases the body into a state of calmness and relaxation.

Once you develop this technique by practicing it every day, it will be a very useful tool that you will always have with you. Use it:

- 🌿 Whenever anything upsetting happens
- 🌿 Before you react.
- 🌿 Whenever you are aware of internal tension.
- 🌿 To help you fall asleep.
- 🌿 When you are feeling anxious or nervous.

The technique

It can take some getting used to, especially if you are more used to breathing in a shallow and rapid way. But stick with it, not only will it give you a great technique it will also help teach you to slow your breathing right down. Although you can do the exercise in any position, sit with your back straight while learning the exercise. Place the tip of your tongue against the ridge of tissue just behind your upper front teeth, and keep it there through the entire exercise. You will be exhaling through your mouth around your tongue; try pursing your lips slightly if this seems awkward.

- 🌿 Exhale completely through your mouth, making a whoosh sound.
- 🌿 Close your mouth and inhale quietly through your nose to a mental count of **four**.
- 🌿 Hold your breath for a count of **seven**.
- 🌿 Exhale completely through your mouth, making a whoosh sound to a count of **eight**.
- 🌿 This is one breath. Now inhale again and repeat the cycle three more times for a total of four breaths.

Note that you always inhale quietly through your nose and exhale audibly through your mouth. The tip of your tongue stays in position the whole time. Exhalation takes twice as long as inhalation. The absolute time you spend on each phase is not important; the ratio of 4:7:8 is important. If you have trouble holding your breath, speed the exercise up but keep to the ratio of 4:7:8 for the three phases. With practice you can slow it all down and get used to inhaling and exhaling more and more deeply.

This exercise is a natural tranquiliser for the nervous system. Unlike tranquilising drugs, which are often effective when you first take them but then lose their power over time, this exercise is subtle when you first try it but gains in power with repetition and practice. Do it at least twice a day. You cannot do it too frequently. Do not do more than four breaths at one time for the first month of practice. Later, if you wish, you can extend it to eight breaths. If you feel a little lightheaded when you first breathe this way, do not be concerned; it will pass.

4-4 or 3-3 breathing

This one is as it sounds. Fit with what feels the most soothing to you.

- 🌸 Exhale and relax any tension in your body
- 🌸 Take a slow breath from your diaphragm in through your mouth, nose or one nostril for a count of 4
- 🌸 Pause for a second
- 🌸 Exhale through an open mouth or purse lips
- 🌸 Pause for a second and repeat

4-4-4-4 breathing (sometimes known as box breathing)

This is a great technique if your nervous system has kicked into fight/flight mode. It is often taught to police and military to down regulate the fight/flight response and keep them calm in high adrenaline situations.

- 🌸 Close your eyes. Breathe in through your nose while counting to four slowly. Feel the air enter your lungs.
- 🌸 Hold your breath inside while counting slowly to four. Try not to clamp your mouth or nose shut. Simply avoid inhaling or exhaling for 4 seconds.
- 🌸 Begin to slowly exhale for 4 seconds.
- 🌸 Repeat steps 1 to 3 at least three times. Ideally, repeat the three steps for 4 minutes, or until calm returns.

If you are finding the technique challenging to begin with, try counting to three instead of four. Once you are used to the technique, if preferable you can count to five or six.

Ha, ha, ha breathing

This one can be great if you have a lot of tension called up with stress or anxiety symptoms, as it seems to help release this at the same time. It involves:

- 🌸 Taking a very deep breath in through the abdomen pause...
- 🌸 Then slowly breathe out in short, sharp bursts all the way to the end of the breath as though you are saying ha ha ha ha ha.
- 🌸 (possibly have a shake of your body at the end point to release the tension and aid metabolising the adrenaline)

🌸 Then take a nice deep belly breath in and repeat or start the of the other rhythms to slow your breathing right down

A breath is for life, not just for stress and anxiety!

Try these out to see what works for you. There is no right or wrong way (other than breathing lower and slower!) so aim to find what creates the most calming effect for you and practice the techniques daily. Done regularly, you will increase what is known as your 'vagal tone' which has been proven to lower stress and anxiety, increase resilience and cognitive functioning. So breathe your way to good health.