



Relaxation is only a breath away...

By Melissa Hernandez, LMT, Lic.#2679, CMnTPT, CES, LF

Breathing, respiration, a rhythmic process of expansion and contraction. It happens automatically whether we think about it or not. Yet it is one of the few involuntary bodily processes that is also voluntary. Our breath and our physical, emotional, and mental states are intricately connected. The quality of our breathing can have either positive or negative influences on health. Using and learning proper breathing techniques is one of the most simple yet profound ways we have of improving our well-being.

The diaphragm is the primary muscle responsible for 70 to 80% of inspiration during quiet breathing. It is a large dome-shaped muscle located under the lower ribcage. The stronger the diaphragm is, the more our lungs are able to expand, which means that more oxygen can be taken in and more carbon dioxide released with each breath. This allows for more effective oxygen transfer, slowing and deepening the breath. The vagus nerve is activated during “diaphragmatic” breathing, which then helps activate the relaxation response. Such deep breathing helps to harmonize our nervous system, regulate our bodily functions, and reduce the amount of stress in our lives. And this, of course, has a positive impact on our overall health.

Even though deep abdominal breathing is the ideal, many people keep their stomachs sucked in and tight continuously, resisting the belly-expanding portion of each breath. This breathing pattern can be the result of a number of factors such as the desire to have a flat tummy, poor posture, or increased stress and anxiety.

This type of chest breathing is a shallow form of dysfunctional breathing, otherwise known as paradoxical breathing. Paradoxical breathing is a reverse breathing pattern where the upper chest expands during inhalation while the stomach gets sucked in, leaving the diaphragm weakened and flattened and causing it to work less efficiently. During exhalation, the chest goes down. The neck and chest muscles must then assume an increased share of the work of breathing, leading to increased neck and shoulder pain.

Rapid, shallow chest breathing, or hyperventilation, results in less oxygen transfer to the blood and subsequent poor delivery of nutrients to the tissues. The lack of sufficient oxygen going to the cells of the brain can turn on our sympathetic nervous system, our “fight or flight” response, and make us tense, anxious, and irritable. This type of rapid shallow breathing, and its cyclical effect, can precipitate and perpetuate the symptoms of anxiety.

Paradoxical breathing and emotional stress usually go hand in hand. In the fight or flight response, our heart rate rises, we perspire, our muscles tense, and our breathing becomes rapid and shallow. If this process happens over a long period of time it can affect our physical health resulting in a variety of health problems, as well as muscle pain. Paradoxical breathing has many

negative effects on our physical and emotional health.

Often, efforts to deal with stress through deep breathing frequently result in shallow, faster paradoxical chest breathing which tends to make us more nervous and tense. It is important to note that the benefits from deep breathing come from learning how to breathe using our diaphragm in the breathing process. The breath can then be used to directly reverse stress, resulting in relaxation.

Diaphragmatic breathing technique

1. Lie on your back, or sit comfortably, with your knees bent and your head supported. Place one hand on your upper chest and the other on the upper abdominal area, below your rib cage just below the breast bone. This will allow you to feel your diaphragm move as you breathe.

2. Breathe in slowly through your nose allowing the ribs to slightly flare out to the sides, while the shoulders, upper chest and lower abdomen remain motionless. Your stomach may move out slightly against your hand. The hand on your chest should remain as still as possible.

3. Exhale slowly as you release your stomach muscles, letting them fall inward as you exhale. The hand on your upper chest must remain as still as possible.

Breathe smoothly, deeply, and slowly. Once you are comfortable, emphasize and lengthen your exhalation. It's what happens naturally when you sigh. The long exhalation helps turn on your “relaxation response.” Observe your breath and its rhythms. Continue for 5-10 minutes. At several points in your day, simply become aware of your breathing. By using the breath as a tool you can reduce pain, decrease stress, become more aware of yourself, and experience relaxation and stillness.

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