

## ❖ What Are Breathing Exercises?

Under normal circumstances, we inhale to absorb oxygen and exhale to rid our body of carbon dioxide through the lungs, with the help of our diaphragm muscle. But when we're stressed, anxious or upset, for example, the way we breathe changes. Instead of deep, lung-filling breaths, we start "over breathing" and taking short, shallow breaths. Instead of our diaphragm doing the heavy lifting, we use our shoulders to inhale and exhale, which can make anxious feelings even worse.

By using breathing exercises, we send a signal to our nervous system, the part of our body managing things like our heart rate and our stress response, that things are OK. In turn, the physical effects of anxiety — racing heartbeat, shallow breathing, sweaty palms — are reduced, and our minds calm down. Best of all, unlike yoga or meditation (which I still absolutely recommend!), you can do breathing exercises when you're commuting to work, before a stressful meeting or even in the midst of an argument when you want to calm down.

## ❖ What are deep breathing exercises?

Deep breathing exercises, often referred to as thoracic expansion exercises aim at getting the biggest breath of air possible into the lungs to help move any secretions (phlegm) that may be present at the bottom of the lungs, and increase lung volumes.

Deep breathing exercises form a stage of the active cycle of breathing exercise, and tend to be carried out in a sitting position. It is advised you place your hands on your lower rib cage so you can feel the air entering the bases of your lungs, keeping your shoulders still, you are aiming for as much movement of your ribs upwards and outwards as possible.

### • 4 Benefits of Breathing Exercises

1. **Improve COPD:** For people with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease, or COPD, that feeling of not being able to take a deep breath is one of the earliest signs of the disease, though it's often confused with aging.
2. **Lower Blood Pressure:** For folks with high blood pressure, practicing breathing techniques and breathing exercises for anxiety can help naturally lower blood pressure, reducing the risk of cardiovascular disease.
3. **Reduce Anxiety:** Whether you suffer from an anxiety disorder or are just confronting a nerve-racking, anxious experience, breathing exercises for anxiety can be really helpful.
4. **Improve Sleep and Lower Stress:** If you're lying in bed with thoughts racing and have run out of sheep to count, breathing exercises for sleep can help send you to dreamland.

## ❖ Different Types of Breathing Exercises to Relax:

Not all breathing exercises are the same, but I especially love the ones that help the body relax and quiet a busy mind. The cool thing is that aside from helping you unwind and distress, breathing exercises also strengthen the lungs. You might find that after you've been doing the techniques for some time that your "normal" breathing is more effective, too.

**1. Pursed lip breathing:** This one is super simple and easy to do, but extremely effective. The general idea is to breathe out for double the amount of breaths you inhale. Pursed lip breathing helps release air that's trapped in the lungs, and decreases the amount of breaths you take, while extending exhalation. With relaxed shoulders, take a normal breath for about 2 counts. Then pucker your lips up (think of your mouth when you're about to whistle — that's what your lips should look like!) and exhale for 4 counts. Do this for a few rounds.

**2. Diaphragmatic breathing:** Also known as belly or abdominal breathing, this is the granddaddy of breathing exercises, as you're training the body to let your diaphragm do all the work. Your goal here is to breathe through your nose and focus on how your belly fills up with air. You can do this one either sitting up or lying down; I find it's nice to do while in bed to help wind down. With your shoulders back, keep one hand on your chest and the other on your belly. As you breathe in deeply for about 2 seconds, your belly should stick out a bit. Feel the air expanding your stomach and then breathe out slowly through the lips.

**3. Yoga breathing:** Yogis know that controlled breathing is a huge part of a yoga practice. One of my favorites is alternate nostril breathing. This is a great one when you want to keep your mind from jumping around, like when you're stressed at work or trying to fall asleep, because you'll need to focus to remember what nostril you're working on. To practice this one, start on the right side. Place your right thumb over your right nostril as you breathe in through the left nostril. Then take your right ring finger and place it over your left nostril as you exhale from the right one.

**4. 4-7-8:** This deceptively simple breathing technique is lauded as one of the best ones to help you fall asleep. In theory, it's easy. You exhale through your mouth and then close it and inhale through your nose for 4 counts. You hold the breath in for 7 counts, then release it in 8 counts, and repeat at least three times. Because you have 8 counts to get the breath out in, you're forced to slow down your breathing which, in turn, slows down the heart rate and helps you relax.

**5. Breath counting:** This is another relaxation technique that will keep your mind from wandering too far. Sitting comfortably with your eyes closed, take a few deep breaths, then settle into a pattern of "normal" breathing. When you exhale, count "one." The next time, count "two." Do this until you have exhaled (and counted to) five, then start the pattern over. Don't count past five, and if you find you've lost count, start again at one. You'll be surprised at how much concentration it will take to keep yourself on count.

