



## Breathing Exercises

Our diaphragm is the ceiling to our cylindrical core. Our pelvic muscles make up the floor. To train core properly all core elements must be addressed. Breath work is an important part of all core programs. There is an important coordination that occurs between the diaphragm and the pelvic floor. A dysfunction in one leads to a dysfunction in the other. The most common dysfunction I see in my practice is a fast, shallow breath that is accompanied with a tense, rigid and even painful pelvic floor.

We take on average 20,000 breaths per day. Breathing properly can have huge health benefits while breathing improperly can lead to the vast majority of illnesses.

### Why is breathing properly important?

Breathing properly means that our bodies are being supplied with the right amount of oxygen which replenishes our brain and other vital organs with essential nutrients.

If you are not breathing correctly, your body is robbed of oxygen, leading to a host of conditions. For example, your skin can suffer as it is not receiving enough fresh oxygenated blood, your muscles can tire easily during a workout as they are not getting the right amount of oxygen and you can feel constantly tired and lethargic because there are not enough vital nutrients being carried in the blood.

Stress shallows our breathing. Prolonged periods of stress mean we constantly shallow breathe, only ever using the top third of our lungs. This causes us to breathe as if we were permanently hyperventilating. This leads to a poor exchange of oxygen and CO<sub>2</sub> in the bloodstream, depriving our bodies of both vital gases. The physiological effect of a lack of CO<sub>2</sub> can make you feel 'spaced out' and can lead to panic attacks, insomnia, dizziness and extreme fatigue, while lack of oxygen can rob your organs and muscles of a proper blood flow.

Proper breathing can facilitate healing from a startling number of serious conditions, including chronic pain, atrial fibrillation, asthma, digestive issues, depression and a wide range of stress-related illnesses. Newborns come into the world breathing deeply. By adulthood, on average, we're taking 15 to 20 breaths per minute—three to four times faster than is optimal.

Fortunately, there are simple methods to reverse our faulty inhale-exhale habits. To get started, try these six exercises: **Follow your Breath, Begin with Exhalation, Diaphragmatic Breathing, The 4-7-8 Breathing Exercise** (also called the Relaxing Breath), **Breath Counting** and **The "S" sound**

### **Exercise 1: Follow your Breath (1-5 minutes daily)**

Pay attention to your breath. Make no attempt to influence it. Simply follow it. Notice how it flows, how it feels. Describe all the aspects of breath, notice that there is no beginning, no end. This is the most subtle but most powerful form of breath work. Terribly simple because what could be more simple than following your breath, terribly difficult because as you attempt to do this for a sustained period of time you will notice your habits of allowing your attention to run to thoughts, images, and other sensations. When your attention wanders, gently bring it back to your breath.

Breath work is the essence of meditation; learning to focus your attention.

### **Exercise 2: Begin with Exhalation (1-5 minutes daily)**

This exercise changes the way you think of breath and gives you more control over the breathing process. Begin by observing your breath. Make no attempts to influence it, just follow your breath. Now reverse your conception of the breath cycle. Begin each breath with exhalation (out-in-out-in) and learn how to take greater control of the breath process.

### **Exercise 3: Diaphragmatic Breathing (1-5 minutes daily)**

Breathing that involves expanding the belly, which gives the lungs room to take in more oxygen. It improves circulation, eases stress-related and anxiety disorders and speeds recovery.

Lie on your back with your knees bent. Place one hand just below your rib cage and the other on your upper chest. Breathe in slowly through your nose so that your stomach pushes against your lower hand. As you exhale through your mouth, tighten your abs and let them fall inward. Throughout inhalation and exhalation, the hand on your chest should remain as still as possible. Do this exercise three times a day for five to ten minutes, then gradually increase the amount. With enough practice, you should begin to breathe this way automatically.

### **Exercise 4: The 4-7-8 (or Relaxing Breath) Exercise (5 minutes daily)**

This exercise is simple, takes almost no time, requires no equipment and can be done anywhere. 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.

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 tranquilizer for the nervous system. Unlike tranquilizing 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 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.

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. Use it whenever you are aware of internal tension. Use it to help you fall asleep. This exercise cannot be recommended too highly. Everyone can benefit from it.

### **Exercise 5: Breath Counting (1-5 minutes daily)**

A deceptively simple technique used in Zen practice.

Sit in a comfortable position with the spine straight. Gently close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. Then let the breath come naturally without trying to influence it. Ideally it will be quiet and slow, but depth and rhythm may vary.

- To begin the exercise, count "one" to yourself as you exhale.
- The next time you exhale, count "two," and so on up to "five."
- Then begin a new cycle, counting "one" on the next exhalation.

Never count higher than "five," and count only when you exhale. You will know your attention has wandered when you find yourself up to "eight," "12," even "19."

Try to do 10 minutes of this form of meditation

### **Exercise 6: The "S" sound**

This exercise relieves anxiety, tense muscles and fatigue.

Lie on your back with your arms gently straightened out by your side. Lying down is most relaxing but you can also take a mini-breathing break throughout your day in any position that you find yourself in.

Take a deep breath in through your nose. Breathe out through your mouth, making an "S" sound as you exhale. This sound strengthens your diaphragm by making you more aware of your exhalation. Repeat for 5-10 minutes several times per day.

Make the sound of an "S" during the entire exhalation. Try to make that "S" sound as loud and as long as you can. Allow yourself to exhale normally as you make the "S" sound like a balloon expelling air when the top is open; don't try and force the breath out.

After 5 or 10 minutes, stop and observe how you feel. Does your breathing feel any different? Looser? Deeper?

*\*\* Regularity is the key to mastering breath work. Turning your attention to breath must become a daily routine. Attempting to change the rhythms of your nervous system requires the consistency of the new input and it is this regularity of the input that will produce the changes over time. What appears to be a gentle force produces large results.*

Everyone can benefit from breathwork! It is simple, free, easy and requires no equipment- really we have no excuses not to use it to support our health and well-being.