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Mindful Breathing

Mindful breathing is a simple tool that can easily be used anywhere to support your health and well-being.[1,2] While it may take some practice, anyone can begin by slowing down their breath and focusing on each inhale and exhale. With regular practice, intentional and mindful breathing can help strengthen the mind-body connection which has physical, mental, and emotional benefits. With time, it may result in benefits such as supporting heart health,[3] better sleep,[4] stress,[3] and improved mental health.[5,6]

What is Mindful Breathing?

Breathing is an activity most people do without even thinking about it. Since it is done automatically, most people aren't paying attention to whether their breathing is shallow or deep. Shallow breathing comes from the chest, bringing only small amounts of air into the lungs. Deep breathing pulls more air into the lungs, which requires the use of a muscle called the diaphragm. When inhaling the diaphragm muscle contracts and when exhaling, the diaphragm muscle relaxes. Deep, diaphragmatic, also known as abdominal breathing encourages deep, slow breaths that activate the relaxation centers in the brain.[7–9]

Mindful breathing exercises utilize deep, diaphragmatic breathing. They are designed to help you focus on inhaling and exhaling in a deep, controlled manner. When you incorporate mindful abdominal breathing exercises into your daily routine, it allows you to shift your attention away from your current situation and instead focus on your breathing. This can be particularly helpful during stressful or uncomfortable moments. Mindful, deep breathing is an important skill that can help you deal with stress[3,10,11] and anxiety[12–14]

How Mindful Breathing Supports Your Health

Intentionally and mindfully slowing down your breath has a direct influence on your autonomic nervous system (ANS) which controls the automatic functions of your body, like heart rate, digestion, and blood pressure.[15] The ANS has two parts:

- The parasympathetic nervous system, also known as the "rest and digest" response
- The sympathetic nervous system, also known as the "fight or flight" response

The goal is to activate the parasympathetic (PS) nervous system which promotes the relaxation response.[16] Mindful breathing helps shift your body out of "fight or flight" and into "rest and digest" by turning on the PS nervous system and turning off the sympathetic nervous system. Once you feel comfortable with your ability to breathe into the abdomen, it is not necessary to use your hands on your abdomen and chest.Major organs such as the heart, lungs, brain, stomach, and blood vessels

are all connected to the ANS. This means that over time, practicing mindful breathing may help with symptoms connected to those organs. Deep breathing exercises can be a tool to activate the PS nervous system which can in turn help manage oxidative stress, pain perception, and blood pressure.[17–20] They can also support energy, digestion, and relaxation, and reduce stress and anxiety.[9,21,22]

Types of Breathing Exercises:

The following breathing exercises use specific rhythms or counts to guide your inhale and exhale. Each exercise can be repeated for multiple rounds. Aim for 1 minute of practice initially then after 3 days work your way up to 5 minutes.

Box Breathing[11]

This form of breathing exercise incorporates 4 seconds of inhaling, pausing for 4 seconds, exhaling for 4 seconds, and pausing again for 4 seconds before repeating the process. While implementing this practice you can envision drawing a square (or box) and taking 4 seconds to create each line. Repeat.

Alternate Nostril Breathing[23] (Anulom-vilom)

This technique is derived from yogic practices and usually involves using your thumb and middle finger (however you can use any finger placement that feels most comfortable) to close your nostrils, one at a time. One nostril will remain closed, while the other is open, then switch. For example, your middle finger will gently press against the right nostril, closing it, while air is inhaled through the left nostril. After your inhale, pause and hold your breath. Then close your left nostril with your thumb, while you open and exhale through the right nostril. Then repeat. You can also switch which nostril was used for inhaling or exhaling.

4-7-8 Breathing[24,25]

This breathing technique is named after the numbers related to performing the exercise. Four, seven, eight breathing involves inhaling for 4 seconds, pausing and holding the breath between 4 and 7 seconds, then lengthening the exhale for 8 seconds. Repeat.

Resonant/Resonance (Coherent) Breathing[26]

Resonance breathing, also referred to as coherent and resonant breathing, is another breathing technique that involves breathing at a slow and consistent rate. The proper rate for this method is achieved by inhaling for 5 seconds and exhaling for 5 seconds, repeating for a minute.

Get Started:

Here is a detailed step-by-step example of how you can try any of the exercises above. This example is for **4-7-8 Breathing**:

- Find a comfortable place to sit or lie down, with your feet slightly apart. Place one hand on your abdomen near the navel, and the other hand on your chest.
- Gently exhale the air in your lungs through your mouth, then inhale slowly through your nose to the count of four, pushing out your abdomen slightly and

concentrating on your breath. As you breathe in, imagine warm air flowing all over your body. Hold the breath for a count of at least four but not more than seven.

- Slowly exhale through your mouth while counting to eight. Gently contract your abdominal muscles to completely release the remaining air in the lungs.
- Repeat for a total of five cycles or until you feel deeply relaxed. You may be able to do only one or two cycles initially.

Once you feel comfortable with your ability to breathe into the abdomen, you can try increasing the duration of your practice.

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