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Diaphragmatic Breathing

(a.k.a. Deep/belly breathing)

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Strongest Self Individual, Relationship, & Sex Therapy

Diaphragmatic breathing is a simple yet powerful tool that improves relaxation, and enhances coping with symptoms related to anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress (PTSD). It increases core muscle stability, lung and breathing functioning, immune functioning, and resilience in the face of daily stressors. It has also been found to reduce the harmful effects of stress, lower blood pressure, heart rate, and muscle tension. Diaphragmatic breathing is the basis of mindfulness meditation and relaxation techniques. Even if you do not wish to practice mindfulness or meditation, diaphragmatic breathing can be used as a stand-alone practice with significant mental and physical health benefits. Take mind-over-matter by using diaphragmatic breathing to channel your breath, relax your mind and relieve nervous tension.

How it's done:

- Lay on your back with your knees bent or sit in a chair with your legs uncrossed.
- Take one hand and place it on your upper chest. Then take the other hand and place it on your belly below the diaphragm muscle that is positioned under your lungs.
- Next, pay attention to your breath. Notice how with your usual breathing the hand on your chest is likely moving up and down while the hand on your belly is still or moving very little. This is because our usual breaths are short, shallow, breaths that fill the chest.

- Now, instead, breathe through your nose deep down into the diaphragm muscle and the bottom of your lungs. Imagine that your belly is a balloon that you are filling with air. You will know that you are practicing this exercise correctly when we see the hand on our belly move up and down while the hand on our chest remains still. Take a few practice breaths until you get the hang of it.
- Create a slow and steady pattern with your breaths. Practice by counting, “One diaphragm, two diaphragm, three diaphragm” in and, “One diaphragm, two diaphragm, three diaphragm” out until you form a new natural rhythm.
- If you are comfortable and feel safe to do so, close your eyes and continue taking slow, deep, breaths.
- Continue diaphragmatic breaths for at least four minutes.



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Strongest Self Tools

How it works:

Our brains have much of the same automatic reactions in response to physical threats as to emotional threats. For example, imagine that you are walking on a woodland trail when suddenly a grizzly bear steps into your path. What kinds of changes do you imagine would happen in your body? When we feel afraid our body temperature rises, heart rate increases, we sweat, we breathe more rapidly, our muscles tense, our thoughts begin to race, and we prepare for fight, flight, or freeze. Now, imagine that you are about to do something that makes you particularly nervous such as giving a speech in an auditorium filled with hundreds of people, skydiving for the first time, or facing a major disagreement with someone you care about deeply. What kinds of changes do you imagine you would notice in your body? When we get nervous or upset our body and autonomic nervous system reacts the same way it would if we were facing a grizzly bear in the woods. From our brain's perspective, a threat is a threat. Our automatic response system (known as the sympathetic nervous system) does not differentiate between facing threats like a grizzly bear and public speaking, skydiving, or interpersonal conflict. The response of the sympathetic nervous system is involuntary and prepares us for fight, flight, or freeze, in part, through releasing the "stress hormone", cortisol, into the bloodstream. Cortisol then plays an important role in activating the physiological changes associated with facing threatening situations.

You may be wondering what our breathing has to do with this. When we feel nervous, upset or afraid our sympathetic nervous system is activated and we start to take short, shallow breaths. However, when we take slow, deep, diaphragmatic breaths we can actually reverse the signal and bring about a state of physical and mental relaxation! Mind over matter is a very real concept; through diaphragmatic breathing we are able to use mental intention to dampen or reverse this physiological process.

Find this hard to believe? Consider evidence from extensive research involving actual blood samples. In these studies blood samples were drawn before and after participants used diaphragmatic breathing for a minimum of four minutes and consistently found a

significant decrease in levels of cortisol! These studies revealed that we can send the message to our brains to reverse the stress response signal, reduce the release of cortisol, and, ultimately, relieve stress simply through using diaphragmatic breathing for a minimum of four minutes.

Helpful hits

- For this exercise to be effective, make sure that you are using the diaphragm muscle by taking breaths deep into the abdomen. Until you get the hang of it do not be afraid to place one hand on your chest and one hand on your abdomen to monitor your breath.
- For best results, make sure to practice diaphragmatic breathing for at least four minutes each time. Try setting a phone timer or gentle alarm or cue up four minutes (or more) of relaxing music to keep track of your practice.
- Diaphragmatic breathing works just about whenever or wherever you use it. Even if you do not feel particularly stressed or anxious deep breathing for a minimum of four minutes can still add a sense of calm, improve patience and strengthen your mental defense against whatever stressors you may face during the rest of your day.
- Add depth to your practice (when in a safe place) by closing your eyes and visualizing color in the air that you breathe in and breathe out. Try visualizing a soothing color that fills your lungs as you breathe in and the stressful or nervous color that you release back out. You may also add a one or two-word mantra that homes in on what you would like to get from your practice by mentally saying "strength," "calm," "relief," or "I'm okay."
- Just like any exercise, the more you practice diaphragmatic breathing the better it works. To maximize effectiveness try practicing deep breathing at least two to three times weekly while riding the train or bus, waiting in line, during a work break, or at home.

