BREATHING EXERCISES

Proper breathing can transform an individual’s physical, emotional, mental and spiritual health and is one of our health’s most potent tonics. The lungs are one of the 3 primary organs of detoxification. Properly done, breathing re-establishes psychological, neurological, immunological and endocrinological equilibrium and invigorates the entire being. The blood becomes saturated with oxygen, delivering it to each body cell, while carbon dioxide and other toxins are eliminated. Mental and physical relaxation is induced via activation of the parasympathetic system. Heart rate and blood pressure decrease. With each breath, the movement of the diaphragm also gently massages the abdominal viscera and significantly increases lymphatic drainage.

GENERAL BREATHING TIPS

1. Always inhale and exhale through your nose. If you have allergies or sinus problems, you may try, as an alternative, inhaling through the nose and exhaling through the mouth until the sinuses clear.
2. Feel, listen and visualize the breath moving in your body.
3. Long, slow breathing is optimal.
4. In the beginning, the exhalation usually feels easier and longer than the inhalation and should be emphasized.
5. Focus on the releasing quality of exhale (releasing stress, carbon dioxide/toxins, etc.)
6. Focus on the energizing quality of inhale (increasing energy, vitality, etc.)
7. Do not practice retention of your breath if you have high blood pressure or are in the last trimester of pregnancy.
8. Do not take in too much air at the beginning of your inhalation. Let the breath enter and exit the body evenly.
9. Breathing exercises should never cause distress; they should be relaxing and/or energizing. If you feel any adverse effects. Stop and call the prescribing doctor.

Breathing rate and depth greatly influences the mind and the emotions, and vice versa. “Agitated” breath (shallow, rapid) can create an agitated mind, whereas a calm and focused breath can help us feel relaxed and at peace. Breathing techniques are used to increase energy flow and reduce obstructions in both the body and the mind.

Abdominal Breathing
Abdominal breathing occurs when the abdominal muscles are relaxed and strongly involves the movement of the abdomen. There is very little to no involvement of the ribcage. The diaphragm is the main driving action. This is a relaxing breath and directly influences the visceral organs as the diaphragm compresses them upon inspiration and releases it upon expiration. This action promotes blood flow and acts to “massage” the organs, and will stimulate digestion. If abdominal breathing is practiced regularly it can again become second nature and is a good habit for promoting wellness as it is a natural way to reduce stress and improve circulation.

Thoracic Breathing is when the upper ribs and chest expand minimally on inhalation with minimal diaphragmatic involvement and a tight abdominal wall. This is common when people are acutely or chronically stressed or tense. This stimulates the sympathetic nervous system and general arousal of the body. The mental state is often anxious which is appropriate for emergency situations. This will reduce oxygenation of the tissues and can lead to hyperventilation. In general it is not considered good practice to breath thoracically.

SPECIFIC BREATHING EXERCISES

Caution: If your breath feels strained, slow down or take a break. Breathing should never feel rushed or be painful. If you have allergies or asthma you may need to modify the breath and/or consult your physician. Do not hold your breath if you have high blood pressure or are in the last trimester of pregnancy. Lastly, it is
always a good idea to be under the instruction of a knowledgeable teacher to help you with your breathing practice.

**Deep Abdominal Breathing**

Deep breathing is used in general for relaxation, to improve energy and promote detoxification. It should be done nightly for 6 weeks.

- Pick a comfortable position either sitting, standing or lying on your back.
- Make sure that your feet are flat on the floor and your back is straight.
- Always start with exhaling fully. Once you think you have fully exhaled consciously relax your diaphragm muscle fully and exhale the residual breath contained in the bottom of the lungs. Feel your abdomen flatten as you do this.
- Inhalation should then be a reflex response as your diaphragm contracts. This should require no effort other than to modulate the rate of the in breath. Inhalation should be slow, smooth and consistent.
- As you inhale, let the breath completely fill your lungs and push your belly out. (As your diaphragm contracts it pushes down on the organs of your abdomen and thus pushes your belly out.), then allow your ribs to expand outward from the sides of the chest. Finally, lift the collar bones to allow the upper lungs to fill. Even though this is explained separately it should be one continuous motion.
- Exhale completely, feeling your belly move back in as your breath leaves.
- Do a series of 7 breaths. Rest for 2 minutes and then repeat 2 more times.

**Diaphragmatic Breathing**

Diaphragmatic breathing relies largely on the contraction and relaxation of the diaphragm. However, this breathing pattern involves the muscles of the abdomen, which causes the lower ribs to expand on inhalation. Physiologically, the **nervous system is calmed** while the **mental clarity and attentiveness are enhanced**. This breath is helpful at the beginning of an asthma attack.

- Start by exhaling fully. Once you think that you have exhaled fully bring your attention to your abdominal muscles and fully contract them exhaling any residual breath in the lower lungs.
- Then while maintaining the contraction of the abdominal muscles begin to contract your diaphragm. Contraction of the diaphragm will be a reflex reaction to proper exhalation. Inhalation should be slow smooth and consistent.
- As you inhale, let the breath completely fill your lungs and push your belly out. (As your diaphragm contracts it pushes down on the organs of your abdomen and thus pushes your belly out.), then allow your lower ribs to expand outward from the sides of the chest. Finally, lift the collar bones to allow the upper lungs to fill. Even though this is explained separately it should be one continuous motion.
- Do a series of 7 breaths. Rest for 2 minutes and repeat 2 more times.

**Breathing Exercise for Good Posture**

This is an excellent exercise for the waistline or a weak back, but even more so for stooped shoulders. It is a great exercise for beginners along with alternate nostril breathing described below.

- Stand straight with feet together. Put your hands behind your back and interlock the fingers, palms upward. Now turn the palms down. This will automatically give a twisting movement to your elbows. *If this puts a strain on your elbows, then do not interlock your finger and modify the exercise by extending and straightening your arms behind you.*
- Inhale deeply; bend forward while exhaling, at the same time raising the arms behind you until they are stretched out. Do not bend the elbows—they should remain straight throughout. Keep your head down, trying all the while to swing your arms a bit higher and higher.
- Remain a moment in this position, holding your breath (not if you are hypertensive); then slowly return to the standing position without unlocking your fingers (unless you are modifying the exercise). Repeat the whole exercise two or three times.
• Another version is done in a kneeling position. The procedure is the same, except that here you bend over until your forehead touches the floor.

**Breath of Fire – a stimulating breathing exercise**

This is a stimulating, heat-producing breath. The exhalation is forceful and active, while the inhalation is passive. The emphasis is on the exhalation and the strong abdominal contractions of the lower belly. This exercise works the respiratory system, massaging the abdominal organs and strengthening the abdominal wall.

• Kneel on floor on your knees or sit in a chair. Place your hands palms down on your thighs. Your back should be straight and you abdominal area unrestricted.
• Take a deep breath in.
• Round your lips and begin to blow the breath out through your mouth by strongly contracting your abdominal musculature.
• As you release your abdomen the breath will be drawn in again.
• Each exhalation should be directed and powerful and the inhalations will take care of themselves. Imagine that you are blowing out candles on a birthday cake placed several feet in front of you.
• Repeat 20 to 40 times, eventually working up to 60 breaths and practicing for 2 sets.

**Breath with sound**

This is a fundamental yoga breathing method that creates a “Darth Vader” sound by narrowing the throat as you breathe. It can be practiced on its own or incorporated into yoga poses. This breathing exercise draws more oxygen into the lungs and increases endurance. It **reduces phlegm and strengthens the immune system.** It is very empowering, enhancing the respiratory system and soothing the nervous system. The emphasis should be on physical balance and mental equanimity.

• Sit in a chair or on the floor. Allow your breathing to come into its own comfortable rhythm, breathing in and out through the nose. Imagine the back of the throat as a straw. Sip the breath into this straw as though you were drinking the air with your throat. You should feel the incoming air on the soft palate at the back of the throat and hear it as it makes a sibilant (sa) sound.
• On exhalation, you’ll feel the breath on the back of the throat and make an aspirate sound (ha).
• Each breath should be 3 to 5 counts in, 3 to 5 counts out.

**Alternating Nostril Breathing**

This technique is especially good for those who suffer from chronic sinusitis, allergies and lung infections.

• Sit in a comfortable position in a chair or on the floor. Press the thumb of your left hand against the left side of your nose blocking the air passage. Keep the other fingers of your hand straight, but not touching your face.
• Breathe in through your right nostril for a count of ten.
• Move your hand so that the side of your index finger closes the air passage on the right side of your nose.
• Breathe out of the left nostril for a count of ten.
• Repeat this five times.
• Switch hands. Breathe in through the left nostril and out through the right nostril for a count of ten.
• Repeat 5 times.

**Breathing Colors**

This exercise is a combination of meditation and breathing. It is especially helpful for relaxation, stress reduction, high blood pressure, generalized immune stimulation and insomnia.

• With your feet parallel, shoulder width apart, slowly bend and unbend your knees.
• Each time you bend your knees to go down, breathe out.
• Each time you straighten your legs to come up, breathe in.
• Allow yourself to bend your knees as far as you can without letting your heels come off of the ground. Keep your back straight and do not bend forward at the hips.

Now, it’s time to add the colors through visualization:
• As you breathe in, you will breathe in colors from the earth and the air through your feet and hands. Breathe in each color several times, beginning with red. Then repeat the same thing with each of the rest of the colors of the rainbow: orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet and white.
• As you breathe out, let the colors go back into your environment.

Resources