

Learn to Breathe

A Simple Technique to Manage Stress

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Mindfulness

Paying attention to our breathing is a popular and effective mindfulness skill. According to Jon Kabat-Zin, Mindfulness means paying attention to something, in a particular way, on purpose, non-judgementally. One of the easiest and most effective things to pay attention to is our breath. We breathe automatically whether we are aware of it or not. If we choose to we can change our breathing; make it slower, faster, hold it for a few seconds, or we can pay attention to it without changing it. It is always present, always with us. We can pay attention to our breath no matter where we are. And if we forget to pay attention to our breath, that's ok, we keep right on breathing.

By changing our breathing pattern we indirectly change our physiology. When we breathe in, inhale, we activate our sympathetic nervous system which activates our physiology as well as our stress response. This is often called the fight or flight response. When we activate our sympathetic nervous system our heart rate increases, pupils dilate, blood vessels constrict, sweat increases, the bronchioles dilate in the lungs, kidneys secrete renin, and the digestive system slows down. We get more alert and overall tension increases.

When we breathe out, or exhale we activate our parasympathetic nervous system. The parasympathetic nervous system is responsible for the 'rest and digest' activities that occur when the body is at rest. Therefore, when we exhale our heart rate slows down, intestinal and glandular activity increases and we generally feel more relaxed.

Therefore, in order to de-activate the stress response we need to activate the parasympathetic nervous system more than the sympathetic nervous system. This can be accomplished by briefly changing our breathing pattern.

Mindfulness of Breath

A breathing technique that I find very helpful in de-activating the stress response consists of breathing in through the nose to the count of four and breathing out through the mouth to the count of eight. Thus we activate the parasympathetic nervous system twice as long as the sympathetic nervous system with a net result of calming our physiology and stress response.

Try this simple technique as often as you think of it. Breathe in through your nose to the count of four and out through your mouth to the count of eight. When you exhale, purse your lips and blow gently like you are blowing out a candle. This will help you slow down the exhale. Don't worry if your nose is stuffy, just breathe in and out through your mouth if you must.

When doing this breathing exercise it is helpful to take a deep belly breath instead of a shallow chest breath. Most of us tend to breathe shallow chest breaths most of the time, unless we have increased our awareness of our breathing and have learned to belly breathe. A belly breath is deeper, allowing the diaphragm to relax and the lungs to expand downward. This results in more oxygen being provided to the body with each breath. Singers learn this in order to better support their breath while singing.

There are two easy ways to tell if you are belly breathing or chest breathing. First, place one hand on your abdomen over your belly button and one hand on your upper chest. Just breathe as you usually breathe. Notice when you breathe normally which hand moves more. If the bottom hand moves more, great, that's a belly breath. If the top hand moves more, that's a chest breath which is the same as anxious breathing. Deliberately move your stomach in and out just below your rib cage and above your belly button to get the feel of a belly breathe.

Another way to tell if you are getting a belly breath is to intentionally take a chest breath and blow on your hand. Notice the temperature of the air as it flows across your fingers. Now, intentionally take a belly breath and blow on your hand. Again, notice the temperature of the air as it flows across your fingers. You will notice that the air feels warmer when it comes from a belly breath.

An easy way to get more in touch with whether or not you are belly breathing is to lie down on your back. Place an object on your belly. For children, you might use a small stuffed animal. Now make the object go up and down as you breathe.

Practice this breathing technique often throughout the day. You might choose to take a nice belly breath as described above every time you answer the phone, when you get into the car, when you visit the bathroom, before you eat. Pick a few times that work best for you to help you get in the habit of doing one to three deep belly breaths in through your nose to the count of four and out through your mouth to the count of eight.

By practicing this breathing technique, you will effectively lower your stress response and improve your physical, emotional, and cognitive health.