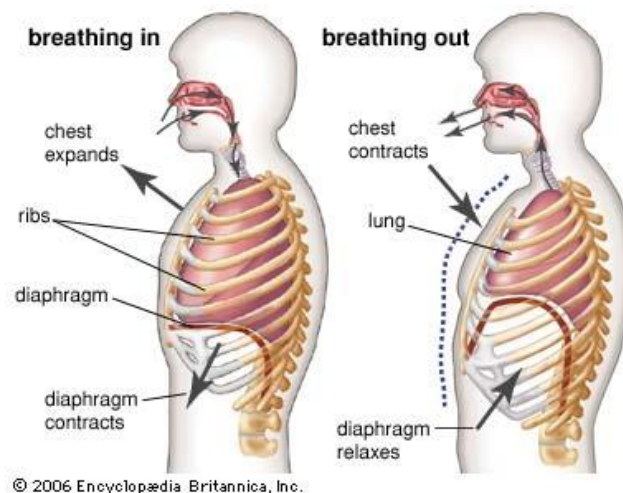


Breath Awareness – or Just Breathe!

Air is vital for human life. The first thing we do when we are born is breathe. We think of breathing as a deliberate act, however our respiratory system is under both internal body control AND conscious control. Our autonomic nervous system is the part of the body system that controls the internal organs, including the lungs, blood vessels, digestion, kidneys, etc. Our body has many functions under complete autonomic control. Breathing is a special system because we can play an active role in controlling it.

Demanding circumstances, mental tension and worry caused by life's situations and difficulties can affect our breathing negatively. Without our awareness, our breathing can become dysfunctional. The body may be physically able to breathe but still not breathing enough or too much. Being mindful of your breath is an effective way to be aware of mental or physical stress you may be experiencing.

To better understand how to be mindful of one's breath, it helps to understand how the body naturally breathes using the diaphragm muscle. When the diaphragm muscle contracts, the diaphragm tightens and pulls down, creating space for the lungs and a negative pressure. To equalize the difference in pressure, high pressure air rushes into the lungs; this is our inhalation experience, or in breath. Relaxation returns the diaphragm to its original position and decreases the available volume for the lungs. This is the exhale or outbreath.



Mindfulness Breath Exercises

Observe your breath anytime:

- Notice the sensation at your nostrils, chest expansion and stomach expansion
- Do not force your breathing, breathe naturally
- Try to maintain your focus where the breath feels most noticeable

Exercise 1

Lie on your back or sit in a comfortable position. Relax your shoulders and if you are sitting keep an erect comfortable spine. Observe the rise and fall of your belly with each breath. If you like you could intentionally increase the inhalation and exhalation for three to five breaths. Slowly inhale through the nose gently completely expanding the abdomen... then slowly exhale through the nose fully contracting the abdomen. Continue at your own pace, keeping the body relaxed. When your mind wanders simply bring your mind calmly back to focus on your breath. When you are finished with the abdominal breaths, gently return to a natural breath.



Exercise 2

Tune into your breathing at different times during the day. Be aware of the rise and fall of the belly for a few breaths. Take note of your thoughts and feeling at these times and how you are feeling mentally and physically. Observe changes in your perception over time.

Exercise 3

Count how many seconds it takes to inhale, then when you exhale, count how many seconds it takes to exhale. If they are not already, try to make the inhalations and the exhalations the same count if this is comfortable for you.

Another breath counting exercise option is extending the exhalation to up to twice as long as the inhale. For example if your inhalation count is 4, try to extend the exhalation to 6 or even 8 if it is comfortable.

- Focus on your breath is a useful soothing tool you could practice 5-15 minutes. Use mindful breath exercises as needed to calm yourself during stressful times or even to help you fall asleep.