

# Meditation Skill: Retrain Your Breathing Patterns

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## Summary

When we are stressed or anxious, the way that our body breathes changes. Over time stress breathing in the upper chest can become natural for us. Retraining diaphragmatic breathing increases health and lowers stress, anxiety and hypervigilance

If you experience stress or anxiety, retraining your breathing patterns to diaphragmatic breathing may be helpful. Retraining your breathing patterns offers three benefits:

1. It will lower your experience of anxiety.
2. It will create a basis for the MIDL Softening skill.
3. It will aid in settling your mind as a prerequisite for mindfulness of breathing.

\*\*\*If unsure, check with your doctor before doing this training\*\*\*

## How Long to Meditate

I recommend doing this meditation to retrain stress breathing patterns to lower the experience of anxiety 1 - 2 times per day over 3 - 4 weeks or until you notice that you naturally breathe in your lower belly and not in your chest.

# Detailed Instructions

## What You Are Learning this Lesson

To make diaphragmatic breathing your natural breathing.

### First stage of meditation

- Lay comfortably on the floor, eyes closed.
- Hands below your belly button, fingers pressing slightly in.
- Gently breathe in your lower belly to lift your fingers up.
- Slowly allow the breath out to lower them again 20 times.
- Be careful that the breath is in your lower belly, not chest.

#### 1. Learn to Breathe Using Your Lower Abdomen

Start by lying on the floor. Use a pillow under your head and a rolled blanket under your knees if needed. Place both your palms just below your belly button, fingers touching in the middle, pressing slightly inwards.

Now gently raise your fingers by slowly extending the lower part of your abdomen upwards. Then slowly lower it back down again, letting the breath out.

Do this a few times.

Notice that when the lower part of your abdomen rises up, air is drawn in through your nose and as your lower abdomen falls, air is expelled out again.

#### 2. Slow Down Your Breathing Rate

Once you have found the rhythm of breathing in your lower belly, you can start to slow down the in-breath and out-breath. It is the slowness of the movement that increases the range and strength of your diaphragm muscle. Slowing of the out-breath also helps to rebalance low CO<sub>2</sub> levels associated with stress-based chest hyperventilation which is responsible for anxiety symptoms.

#### Things to Watch Out For

**Effort:** Be careful of over-effort or strain. Anxiety creates the desire to try to achieve, to control things within our life, including something as basic as breathing.

If you notice any struggle or strain, then stop what you are doing for a short while and allow yourself to relax before starting again.

**Light Headedness:** Because you are not used to breathing so deeply, you may experience some light-headedness due to the increased levels of CO<sub>2</sub> being absorbed. Whenever you experience this, stop the exercise and allow yourself to stay still.

Generally, after 10 seconds this feeling settles as CO<sub>2</sub> re-balances leaving you feeling calmer & more relaxed, and you can resume your training. With regular practice this light-headed feeling gradually lessens.

*\*\*\*See your doctor if light-headedness persists\*\*\**

**Short Breaths:** If breathing in your chest is normal for you then it will be natural for your diaphragm movement on your in-breath to be short. Because of the shortness of your diaphragm movement, you may feel as if you are not getting enough air. If needed during the exercise you can take an extra breath.

Once the movement of your diaphragm slows down and lengthens, the feeling of needing more air will go away. By paying attention to the very beginning of the in-breath, starting it slowly, and paying attention to the very beginning of the out-breath, starting it slowly, your breathing will naturally deepen.

The most important part to focus on is learning to release the out-breath slowly. This is done to allow the depleted CO<sub>2</sub> levels caused by chest hyperventilation to re-balance and as a vehicle for deep mental relaxation during MIDL Softening Techniques.

**Breathing Feels Tight:** If when breathing in you feel a tightness of the breath within your lower chest, it is possible that you are breathing in from the top of your chest downwards in an attempt to push your diaphragm down into your belly.

This will not work.

The diaphragm is a dome and cannot be pushed down; it needs to be pulled.

It can be helpful to think of your diaphragm as an upside-down plunger. When you pull the handle downward the plunger will suck in air, as you push it back up it expels it.

To engage your diaphragm, think of pulling it downwards rather than pushing it. Placing your fingertips below your belly button and pressing in slightly to allow you to feel your lower abdomen move is helpful.

## Second stage of meditation

- Bring one palm to the top of your chest.
- Slowly breathe in from your belly button – ribs - chest.
- Allow your body to relax with a slow out-breath.
- Repeat 10 times with slow, gentle breaths; no strain.
- Be careful that the breath starts in your belly, not chest.

### 1. Learn to Breathe up Into Your Chest

Once you have done 20 repetitions of breathing in your belly, the next stage is to learn to breathe from your belly up into your chest.

To do this leave one palm below your belly button and place the other on the top of your chest, just below your collar bone. Start the breath in your belly so that your lower hand begins to lift. Then bring it through your lower ribs to the top of your chest. It is helpful to push your ribs outwards a little to physically help your chest lift and open.

Stress breathing lowers the flexibility of the rib cage through its lack of movement so you may need to help your chest expand in the beginning.

- In-breath: belly – ribs – top of your chest.
- Out-breath: relax your body.

Repeat 10 times with your hands on your body and another 10 times with your arms lying by your side.

- In-breath: belly – ribs – top of your chest.
- Out-breath: relax your body.

Next, stop controlling the breathing, allow it to happen naturally.

## Third stage of meditation

### 1. Allow Your Breathing to Happen Naturally

Once At the end of the out-breath, allow the breath to fully go out then relax and wait. It is helpful at this stage to distract yourself from the breathing by becoming aware of the touch of your body on the floor to avoid control.

Your brain will then fire a signal and take over the breathing for you.

Your diaphragm will re-engage, moving freely and gently within your belly. Allow the breathing to happen autonomously in your belly with bare awareness of it.

Be careful of mental control at this time, it can be helpful to bring your attention away from the breathing and into the touch of your body on the floor.

At this stage allow your breathing to happen automatically, by itself.

Notice and relax any desire to control your breathing.

It is important to allow this natural, uncontrolled breathing to occur so that your brain starts to realise that this is what breathing is supposed to be like and also so that it can regulate your oxygen / carbon dioxide levels and turn off the chest, stress hyperventilation that causes the experience of anxiety.

When you have finished the meditation make a slow transition from laying down to sitting as you may in the beginning experience light headedness due to slowing your breathing rate.

Sit still for 1 minute and observe the change within your mind, body and breathing.