

## Breathing



### Introduction

When we start to feel anxious, upset or uncomfortable, our breathing is one of the first things that changes. It usually becomes faster, shallower and less smooth. This happens in response to a release of chemicals in our bodies which are preparing us to deal with a threat. Therefore, the change in our breathing is a signal to our brains that something is wrong. By noticing the change in our breathing, recognizing that there is no present threat, and making a conscious change in our breathing rate and depth, we can signal our brains and bodies that we are safe, which allows our whole system to calm down. This is called regulation.

This type of deep, slow breathing is called diaphragmatic breathing, or belly breathing. It is called this because it uses a muscle that stretches between our lungs and our abdomen, and which helps to expand and contract our lungs and sends the message to our brain to calm our body down. Breathing in this way is a simple, but powerful exercise for our physical and mental health.

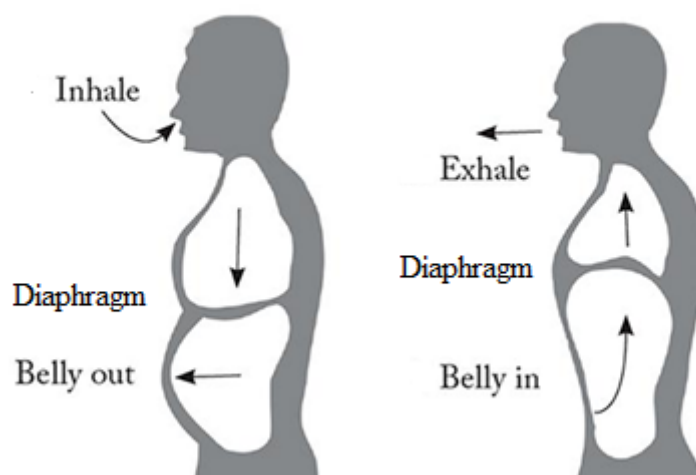
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### Steps

<p>Step 1: Find a comfortable position that allows your chest to feel open and not constricted</p>	<p>This could be standing with your feet hip-distance apart, shoulders rolled back and arms hanging comfortably at your side. It could be sitting comfortably with your feet on the ground and your back supported by the chair. It could also be lying down on your back on a flat surface and your knees bent, feet flat on the floor. Begin by becoming aware of your body, particularly any areas of tension, as well as the points of contact between your body and the floor.</p>
<p>Step 2: Place one hand gently on your stomach and one hand gently on your chest</p>	<p>Now bring your attention to your breath. Notice the speed of your breath. Is the hand on your chest moving up and down as you breathe? Is the hand on your belly moving? Most people will find at this stage that the hand on their chest is moving more than the hand on their belly, and their breath is relatively fast.</p>
<p>Step 3: Now focus on bringing more of your breath into your stomach</p>	<p>Inhale as smoothly as possible. Inhale through your nose and feel the air moving all the way down to your stomach so that your hand rises as your stomach extends. See the diagram below. You can imagine your stomach as a balloon filling with air as you inhale. When it is full, allow your stomach to recede as you breathe out as smoothly as possible,</p>

	emptying it of air. You may choose to exhale either through your nose or your mouth. Pause, then inhale again, bringing air all the way down into your stomach. You may notice that you are able to inhale for longer this time, bringing more air into your body. Although when you first try this exercise, it may feel strange and less comfortable because your muscles are moving in a new way, and we may not be used to slowing down and relaxing, but with each breath it should feel more natural and easier. You should notice that with this type of breath, the hand on your stomach moves more than the hand on your chest. You may also notice your breath slowing down as they get deeper.
Step 4: Continue breathing like this for at least five breaths	Notice how you feel after practicing diaphragmatic breathing.
Try to practice diaphragmatic breathing for at least 5 breaths, three times per day.	



### Tips

Some people find it useful to:

- ✓ **Count in their head** as they inhale and exhale. A common count is inhale for four, exhale for four, pause for two.
- ✓ **Imagine a triangle** as they breathe, where their inhale moves them up one side of the triangle, their exhale moves them down the other side, and the brief pause between breaths is the bottom of the triangle.
- ✓ Imagine as they inhale that they are breathing in **cool white light**, and as they exhale, they are breathing out hot dark heaviness.

**Breath and pain:** When we anticipate pain, we tend to hold our breath, which actually can increase the sensation of pain as we tense the muscles around that place. Focusing on our breath can help move our mind's focus away from pain and help the painful area relax, which reduces the sensation of pain. You can also imagine breathing in care and warmth to the area of your body that needs it and exhaling the pain and tension.



#### References & Further Reading

1. Baranowsky, Gentry, & Schultz: Trauma Practice: Tools for Stabilization and Recovery (2005) (p. 25). Hogrefe publishers.
2. <https://www.health.harvard.edu/lung-health-and-disease/learning-diaphragmatic-breathing>
3. [https://uhs.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/breathing\\_exercises\\_0.pdf](https://uhs.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/breathing_exercises_0.pdf)