

Breathing

*So you know you cannot stay alive without breathing,
but did you realize most people do not really know how to breathe?
You may be amazed to learn that incorporating some simple breathing tools in your life
can dramatically improve your self-awareness and state of mind,
reducing anxiety, deepening relaxation, and improving your overall mood.
From there, breathing can help in countless areas, from personal satisfaction,
to work efficacy, to relationship building, and even to physical health.*

- Start by noticing how you breathe. Do you take short, shallow, rapid breaths? Where do you bring your breath—do you expand it into your chest? If you take a deep breath do you open your mouth?
- Often constricted breathing has to do with muscle tension or habitual stress: do you carry tightness in your neck, shoulders, chest or belly? This kind of tension can become habitual over time.
- Restricted breathing can contribute to poor coping, anxiety, depression, irritability, headaches, fatigue, and impaired concentration. Insufficient air intake means not enough oxygen in your blood, and a corresponding increase in heart rate, muscle tension, and arousal or stress reaction.
- Deep (diaphragmatic) breathing is the easiest way to trigger a relaxation response. Can you do this? Put one hand on your chest, and one hand on your belly: as you breathe, notice if the hand on your belly moves out, being pushed by your intake of breath. If your hand on your belly does not move, or moves less than the one on your chest, you breathe from your chest not your belly!
- Re-learn to breathe! A simple exercise:
 - Feet on the floor, sitting up straight, simply start to notice your breathing, one hand on your belly and one on your chest. Take a few breaths normally. (For some people this is easier lying down at first.)
 - Then start to focus on the breath, breathing gently in through your nose, out through your nose.
 - After a few breaths, focus on the exhale, and count slowly to four.
 - On the inhale, through your nose, count slowly to four, and breathe in deeply, pushing out the hand on your belly, letting your chest and shoulders move not at all or only a little.
 - Then exhale even more slowly through your nose, counting to four, and consciously loosening your muscle tension, where ever you feel it. Quietly and calmly, think “*relax*.”
 - Continue to breathe slowly & deeply, counting each breath for a few minutes, slowly increasing your count in, to six or eight, and out, to six or eight, being sure to loosen the muscles in your torso, shoulders, neck, belly with each breath.
 - Over time, focus on the exhale being longer than the inhale.
- Slow, deep breaths can provide deep relaxation, calming anxiety, muscle tension, clearing thoughts, and lifting mood.
- Re-learning to breathe is simple to explain but takes time to really change. You must consciously practice breathing each day. Use it as a centering or mediation practice in the morning, use it as part of a stretching and movement break at work each hour, use it to prepare for potentially stressful encounters, use it to calm when anxiety is triggered, or use it to help you fall into a deep sleep at night. Consider taking classes like yoga or pilates, that have a focus on deep breathing—it helps!