

3 Breathing Exercises

for Dealing with Stress

THESE TECHNIQUES ARE YOUR TICKET TO CALMING DOWN, WAKING UP AND GENERALLY FEELING BETTER.



You don't think twice about it but, just like most things taken for granted, breathing has a profound impact on mood, mind and body.

But why, exactly, does breath have such a strong impact on the body? "The input from the respiratory system sends the most important messages the brain receives," says Patricia Gerbarg, M.D., co-author of *The Healing Power of the Breath* and founder of Breath-Body-Mind.com. "If something is wrong with your breathing and you don't fix it within a couple of minutes, you're dead. So anything that's changing in the respiratory system has to have top priority."

Changing the rate and pattern of breathing also affects the way the autonomic nervous system (ANS) functions, explains Gerbarg. When the sympathetic nervous system—the part of the ANS we associate

with fight-or-flight mode—is activated, your body is constantly on alert and ready for a threat. Certain types of rapid breathing can help activate this system, while other slow breathing exercises can help bring this excitement back down, she explains. Simultaneously, slow breath techniques activate the counter-balancing parasympathetic nervous system, which acts to slow the heart rate, restore energy reserves, and send messages to the brain that it can now relax.

So, what kind of techniques are we talking about? Experts break down three of the most beneficial breathing exercises to lower stress, boost energy during the day and help you sleep better at night.

1

RELAXATION BREATH

Also called diaphragmatic breathing, belly breathing and abdominal breathing, this breathing exercise for stress reduces your blood pressure, heart rate and production of stress hormones, explains Kathleen Hall, an Atlanta-based stress expert and founder of the The Mindful Living Network.

Try it: Put one hand on your chest and the other on your abdomen. Take a deep breath through your nose, feeling your belly expand as your lungs fill with oxygen. Inhale slowly for four counts, then slowly exhale through your mouth for four counts. Do six to eight slow, deep breaths per minute for five minutes at a time.

2

COHERENT BREATH

This technique is the basic calming breath, and it creates an ideal daytime state of calmness with alertness. In order for it to be sedating, like when you want to fall asleep, you increase the length of the exhale, says Gerbarg.

Try it: Sit or lie down. Close your eyes and, breathing at about five breaths per minute through your nose, very gently inhale for four counts and exhale for four counts. Increase the exhale to six counts for sedation.

3

ENERGIZING BREATH

Skip the caffeine—this breathing exercise stimulates oxygen flow, which wakes up your mind and your body, says Hall.

Try it: Put one hand on your chest and the other on your abdomen. Take in short, staccato breaths through your nose, filling your abdomen. Inhale quickly and hold deeply for four counts, then quickly exhale through your mouth. Perform eight to ten quick, deep breaths per minute for three minutes at a time. Stop if you get light-headed.