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Breathing Techniques to Soothe the Soul

When we are stressed, happy, or physically active, our breathing reflects these states in the body and nervous system. Conversely, we can influence our nervous system and physical state by becoming aware of and changing our breathing. This is also called breathing exercises. Breathing exercises can lead to relaxation, decreased pain, and improved mental well-being.

Abdominal breathing, also called diaphragmatic breathing, can increase oxygen levels in the body and strengthen the diaphragm. Many people feel more relaxed and focused after abdominal breathing. Some people find abdominal breathing helpful in processing negative emotions.

Breathing exercises can be practiced anytime, anywhere, and for free, making them an ideal way to manage stress and support overall well-being. Here are some general guidelines.

Get Started

- Sit or lie down comfortably, with your feet flat on the floor. Put one hand on your upper chest and the other on your abdomen, just under your ribcage. Feel yourself breathing and become aware of how deeply or shallowly you are breathing.
- Take a deep breath, feeling your abdomen rise as you breathe. Your upper hand should move very little while your abdomen lifts your other hand. Imagine a feeling of warmth as the breath moves from your mouth, down your throat, into your lungs, and your diaphragm expands.
- Hold the breath for a count of four.
- Exhale slowly through your nose for a count of four.
- Inhale slowly to a count of four, feeling the warmth of your breath and your abdomen rising. Try to keep your chest relatively still. Hold the breath for four counts, then exhale slowly, and repeat.

Reflect

Consider how your body feels different compared to before practicing conscious breathing. Are your shoulders more relaxed? Do your thoughts feel any different?

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Repeat

Five minutes of abdominal breathing daily can support relaxation, decrease stress, and improve one's sense of well-being. Learning to practice abdominal breathing while seated or lying down is preferred. However, any conscious breathing is beneficial, even one or two breaths when standing in line at the grocery store.

Over time, you may not need to involve your hands in abdominal breathing exercises. You may also want to tense your abdomen slightly at the end of each exhale to push out any remaining air. Some people use visualization or repeat words or affirmations between breaths. With practice, you will find the rhythm and routine that works best for you.

Remember: Practice whenever you can. Because of how abdominal breathing affects your mental state, it may be especially useful when you are stressed, tired, frustrated, or confused. Abdominal breathing can help you to relax, reset, and refocus.

REFERENCES

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