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CONSCIOUS BREATHING

*Using the breath for wellbeing and to
manage stress and anxiety*

Student Life - Counselling Support

The breath as mind-body link

The breath is a remarkably powerful mind-body connection. Although we all breathe everyday it largely remains an unconscious process. This means our breathing often changes in important ways without people being aware of it. Different styles of breathing are linked with different emotional states. If we can recognise these styles of breathing we can also then consciously change them and this in turn produces change in the emotional state. For example, if someone is anxious they will almost always have shallow breathing, high in the chest, and changing to breathing slow and deep, using the diaphragm, will reduce their anxiety. If someone is panicking the breath is often high and fast, hyperventilating.

For many people when they feel very stressed and particularly if they feel threatened, they can basically close their breathing down. To look at these people there is hardly any movement of their chest or belly at all, as if they are 'freezing up'. Often when people experience powerful and unpleasant emotions, they hold the breath. It is as if they are bracing themselves. Some of the ways we breathe under stress can become habitual.

Calming breath (Diaphragmatic breathing)

When adults are asked to take a deep breath they usually breathe quite high in the chest. You might like to just take a deep breath now and notice where the breath tends to go. It is as if as adults we are aware that the lungs are in the chest, and so it seems logical to push the chest out and up in order to take a full breath.

Generally, however, it is far more calming to breathe using the diaphragm (the sheet of muscle which goes across the body under the ribs). While the effects of breathing diaphragmatically have been known for a long time, recent research has found more of the reasons why, especially that breathing diaphragmatically stimulates the vagus nerve which relaxes the body.

The diaphragm is like an umbrella or an upturned bowl that at rest curves up under the ribcage, and when active pulls down and expands out, drawing the air into the lungs. You can feel the movement of it by placing the hand on the upper belly, just under the ribcage. Breathing slowly, using the diaphragm tends to be calming.

The breath itself is very simple, although sometimes it can take a while for people to 'get it', if they have been breathing in other ways. The simplest way to learn is to think of it as belly breathing.

Breathing in the belly goes out, breathing out the belly goes in. The belly going out on the inhalation is due to the contraction of the diaphragm: breathing in, the diaphragm pulls down, flattens and thickens, breathing out it relaxes and moves upwards as it returns to its natural dome shape. You don't want to push the belly out, the belly gently moves outwards as the diaphragm pushes out and down. The exhale can be passive - the diaphragm moves upwards as it relaxes and the lungs empty - or you can extend the exhale by squeezing in the muscles of the abdomen.

As you get used to this style of breathing try to focus more on the diaphragm than the belly, so breathing in the lower ribs expand a little all around. The breath should be as slow as is comfortable for you. Breathing like this tends to have a relaxing and calming effect.

Aspects of Calming Breath

- Breathing deep as if to the belly rather than high in the chest tends to be calming.
- The slower the breath the more calming it is (as long as it stays reasonably comfortable of course, not so slow as to be forced or make you short of breath). Try to practice until eventually you are breathing at the rate of about five or six breaths per minute.
- Not holding the breath in or out, but going from the in-breath to the out-breath, and the out-breath to the in-breath with little or no gap in between. Holding the breath in or out tends to hold tension and emotion.

- Focusing on the breath in itself tends to help with calming because it helps to redirect the mind. When people are anxious they typically tend to have a lot of anxious thoughts which then feed the anxiety. Focusing on the breath tends to interrupt this. It helps you move out of the talking/thinking mode of anxious thoughts and into a gentler quieter sensing mode.
- Having the in and out breaths about the same length also helps a sense of being calm, centred and balanced. Although it is a subtle effect, having the in breath longer than the out-breath tends to raise people's energy, and having the out-breath longer than the in-breath tends to lower energy. It can be helpful to slowly count the in-breath and out-breath so they are about the same number of counts. Having a longer exhalation increases the calming effect, so there is a choice of the same length in and out, which is balanced and easy to remember, or extending the exhalation if you want to calm down in the space of a couple of slow breaths.

Energizing rebalancing breath - the full breath

The breath here is directed not just to the lower lungs, but to all the lung area. It can be helpful to consider the lungs as divided into lower, middle and upper sections. The full breath involves breathing first into the lower lungs, drawing the diaphragm out and down, then filling the middle part of the lungs by expanding the chest area, then filling the top of the lungs, slightly lifting and widening the shoulders. Breathing out then is from the upper lungs, dropping the shoulders a little, then the middle, and then the lower. The exhale can be passive just relaxing, or it can be extended a little by drawing in the belly gently at the end.

Breathing this way floods the whole lungs with oxygen and has an energising and rebalancing effect. It is an excellent breath to do for a few minutes each day as a regular practice. It is good for lifting mood and energy. It can be a helpful short break from study to do a few rounds of this breath. Breathing like this with a rate of breathing about five or six breaths per minute is a great breath for general health and wellbeing. Recent research suggest this rate of breathing is good for establishing

balance in the nervous system as measured by changes in heart rate variability, and helping 'vagal tone'.

Breathing through the nose is best, partly because the nostrils are smaller than the mouth, so it allows more even control of the airflow, and also because it filters and humidifies the air. If your nose is blocked, a good alternative is to purse the lips to make the flow of air a bit slower.

Meditation on the breath

You can use the calming breath in any situation in which you might feel stressed or anxious (such as before an exam) but if you are practicing at home, once you have finished a few rounds of controlled breathing, a nice practice is to then let the breath be passive and simply be aware of the breath, without controlling or directing it. When thoughts come up, just notice them, let them pass and draw awareness back to the breath.

This simple directing of attention is a form of meditation. It tends to have the dual benefits of being relaxing and calming, and also over time it allows the development of the capacity to be more aware of your thoughts and reactions in everyday life, so more able to choose whether to respond to them or to notice them as 'just thoughts'. This in turn can help to be more able to direct your attention in the best way in different situations.

Some further resources for meditation can found on the Wellbeing Hub website <https://www.adelaide.edu.au/student/wellbeing>.

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