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DIAPHRAGMATIC BREATHING

When babies emerge into the world, their first big job is to inhale. The last act of people on their deathbeds is to exhale. Between these extremes, life is a long and continuous sequence of breaths--yet people seldom stop to consider how effectively they breathe. They don't realize that when they are racing against the clock, arguing with a spouse, or absorbing alarming stories from the evening news, they literally hold their breath and forget to let go.

Just the act of rushing from place to place makes us begin to hold our breath during the day. You don't even have to be doing something taxing. It could be that you have a lot of fun things planned for the day: the kids' piano recital, people over for dinner, a movie. Most of us try to pack a lot into one day. The physical reaction to just the sheer quantity of tasks we have to fulfill each day is to breathe with our upper chests. The diaphragm, which is a muscle responsible for pulling air deeper into the lungs, gets weak and flabby, like any other underutilized muscle. As a result, muscles throughout the body do not receive the oxygen they need in order to remain flexible and understressed. In addition, breathing is greatly inhibited by excess muscle tension. If you are experiencing other kinds of stress, including back pain, you are probably holding your breath.

Most people inhale much more fully than they exhale, which can elevate the amount of oxygen in the body. Even just a little extra oxygen can explain episodes of dizziness, blurry vision, or light-headedness. This mild state of hyperventilation is much more common than most people realize. Exhaling fully is the solution. If you do experience any of these symptoms, however, please check them out with your doctor to rule out anything more serious.

Breathing effectively is crucial to our well-being. Babies and animals engage their whole bodies in the act of breathing. Most of us, however, have lost this simple, natural gift--most people are chest breathers. This type of shallow breathing results in a lack of energy, reduced resistance to disease, higher anxiety, and the blues. It has been tied to everything from autoimmune diseases to cancer and heart disease.

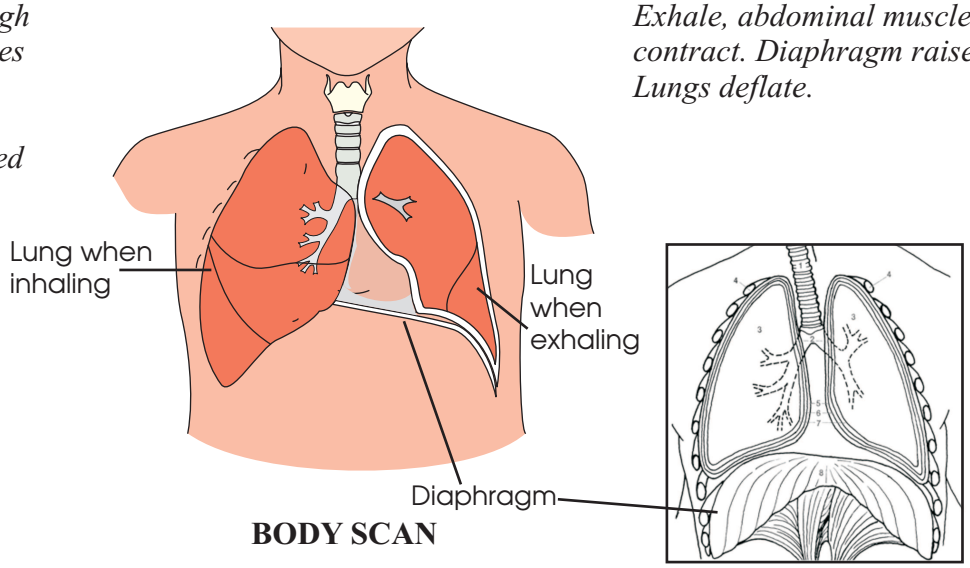
Learning to breathe more fully and deeply can help you feel and function better. Here's why: When you take a breath, air is warmed, humidified, and filtered in the nose and mouth; it travels to the larynx and then moves past the vocal cords to the trachea, or windpipe. The trachea divides into left and right main bronchi, which convey air to the two lungs. In the lungs, oxygen is absorbed into the bloodstream, and carbon dioxide is removed from the blood and then exhaled. The real gas exchange happens in the lungs. Thus, if you don't breathe deeply enough you don't get the benefit of the gas exchange.

With diaphragmatic breathing, you can increase your gas exchange. The diaphragm, a dome-shaped muscle attached to the chest wall, separates the chest cavity from the abdomen and is the main provider of respiratory muscle force. Breathing with the diaphragm is performed by slowly taking a deep breath and letting the belly be pushed out by the movement of the

diaphragm, thus allowing the lower lobes of the lungs to inflate fully. If you place your hands on your upper abdomen, you can easily sense the breathing motion. With the upper chest relaxed, inhale deeply and slowly. The abdominal wall is pushed up and out. Exhale slowly feeling the abdominal wall descend toward the spine. Diaphragmatic breathing stretches the lower lobes of the lungs, allowing for more fresh air to enter.

Inhale, breathing through nose. Abdominal muscles extended. Diaphragm lowered. Chest cavity expanded. Lungs inflated fully.

Exhale, abdominal muscles contract. Diaphragm raised. Lungs deflate.



BODY SCAN

1. Breathe deeply and slowly. As you do so, scan your body with your mind: being particularly aware of each muscle group starting with your neck and moving down your body to your shoulders, back, arms, forearms, hands, chest, lower back, abdominals, hips, thighs, calves and feet. Allowing each muscle group to become relaxed and more comfortable.
2. Momentarily, set yourself free from whatever you are thinking and feeling and smile inside.
3. Create an image or say a phrase or word that you have come to associate with being calm and comfortable (see "cueing" below).
4. Breathe deeply and slowly a few more times.

This process should take from 10 seconds to 90 seconds and need not interfere with any ongoing activity. To maintain body awareness, it is important for body scans to become a relatively automatic part of living. Ideally, to achieve this enhanced body awareness, you will be doing body scans throughout your day as often as two to four times an hour.

CUEING

During relaxation, practice “cueing.” Cueing is accomplished by bringing to mind a key image or phrase or word. When you are feeling very serene and calm, repeat this relaxing image or phrase or word to yourself. For example, you can create the image of being at the seashore, smelling the salt air, feeling the warmth of the sun on your skin, hearing the seagulls and watching the waves as they roll in and roll out. Another example would be saying the phrase: “I am calm,” “I can handle it,” or by repeating the word “calm,” “relax.”. *Any* image or phrase or word will do, as long as it is *meaningful to you*. (Ask yourself “what might that cue be for me?”)

After *many* times of pairing this “key” image or phrase or word while in a deeply relaxed state, you can automatically guide yourself into relaxing just by repeating this image or phrase or word. For example, when facing a stressful situation where you need to calm down quickly, the image or phrase or word triggers the relaxation response.

This procedure isn't anything magical; it is simply a very powerful reminder or *suggestion* that you can give to yourself in times of need. It is powerful because you have used it many times in a deeply relaxed state. It is also powerful because it is meaningful to you. A choice image or phrase or word instantly reminds you of all the relaxed, serene experiences you have had and how you achieved them. It suggests to you that you *can* indeed effectively handle a stressful situation, as you have done before during your relaxation times.

Learning to breathe in a healthy manner is difficult for some people. Here are some additional tips and techniques to help you from Elaine Petrone, author of the *Miracle Ball Method*. You can do these exercises anywhere. If the exercises seem too strange or too time-consuming, try them for just five minutes. Then try it again for five minutes the next day. You may be surprised to find how much more energy you have and how much it reduces your anxiety. As you become more comfortable with the exercises, gradually increase the time you spend practicing them. Fifteen to twenty minutes a day is ideal, but don't feel you have to focus along with the breathing.

Exercise One: **Relieves anxiety, tense muscles, and fatigue**

1. Make an "S" sound as you exhale. This sound is one of the ways to strengthen your diaphragm by making you more aware of your exhalation. Make the sound of an "S" during the entire exhalation. SSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS Try to make that "S" sound as loud and long as you can.
2. After you run out of air, stop making the sound and notice the difference in your breathing. You should be starting to breathe more deeply and to feel the breath being pulled lower into your lungs. You might feel reactions to the breathing in places that are your tightest areas. Some people begin yawning; others' eyes tear, others feel nothing. It doesn't matter if you feel nothing; the exercise is still helping you breathe properly, and eventually you will notice improvement. Return to the way you normally breathe. Does it feel any different? Looser? Deeper, maybe? Take note of the changes, then make the "S" sound again.
3. Think "let it happen" while you breathe, not "force it deeper." Repeat the "S" sound as you breathe for 5 to 7 minutes a day if you're a beginner. When you feel able to, there is nothing wrong with making the "S" sound for 10, 15 or 20 minutes at a time. But be aware that 5 minutes of observing your reactions following the exercise and allowing your breathing to change will do more for you than 20 minutes of mindless, distracted "S" sounds. Make the "S" sound as loudly and for as long as you can. Right before the end of the exhalation, stop and notice how you feel.

Be more of an observer than a director. Your goal is to respond to your body's changes, not to tell it what to do.

Yawning is a common reaction to making the "S" sound. Do not resist yawning. It is an excellent physical reaction. When you yawn, your lungs fill with air and your abdominal muscles flex, causing the diaphragm to spasm and pull more air into your lungs. It's a corrective measure that your body is doing in order to bring in the oxygen it needs. It probably means that you do hold your breath often, and your body is doing a wonderful thing by taking care of you.

Exercise Two: **Relieves tight facial muscles and neck and shoulder tension**

1. Hold your hand a few inches in front of your mouth. Open your mouth and exhale for as long as you can, making a hushed "haaa" sound as if you were trying to fog up a cold window. Feel the weight of your jaw as you exhale. Just like any other area of your body, your jaw has weight. Try to become aware of that weight when you open your mouth, but don't force it.

2. At the end of the exhalation, slowly bring your lips together (don't clench your teeth) and notice if there is any change in your breathing. You may have the same reactions as you did during the “S” exercise.
3. Repeat this breath work for 5 to 7 minutes. Do you feel your breath filling the back and sides of the rib cage, abdominal area, chest, or shoulders? You may notice some discomfort in your back muscles or feel the need to move your body. This is because the oxygen is beginning to move muscles that have been clenched; until it gets into those areas fully, you may feel a need to relieve that discomfort by stretchinglike you do when you wake up in the morning.

Exercise Three: **Relieves dizziness, light-headedness**

Some common reactions to making the “S” sound and doing open-mouth breathing, as mentioned, are eye-tearing, feeling the need to stretch, runny nose, yawning, etc. One less common reaction is light-headedness. Although the feeling is uncomfortable, it is a positive sign. As a result of your expelling more breath, you are now taking in more oxygen probably much more than you are used to. Your muscles need to absorb that oxygen. This exercise helps redirect the oxygen to your muscles, thus alleviating your light-headedness.

1. While sitting cross-legged on the floor, make fists with both hands and bring them into your chest.
2. Straighten your arms, keeping your fists closed.
3. Repeat the movement several times.

Exercise Four: **Relieves neck and shoulder tension**

1. Cup your hand and tap your upper rib cage, near your collarbone. Instead of focusing on pushing down, focus on pulling away from the skin. Tap in a circular motion and with the same frequency as you use to applaud. Do this for 15 seconds.
2. Lower your hand and notice any changes. Your upper chest may feel warmer or muscle tension might be lessened. Bring your attention to the feeling in this area. Increased breath leads to awareness of feeling, which leads to more freedom of movement.
3. Repeat the exercise for 5 to 7 minutes, tapping for 15 seconds and then resting for 15 seconds.

In addition to the upper chest above the breast, you can tap on your shoulder above the clavicle (collarbone) and on the side of my rib cage. All three locations are ideal because tapping there helps loosen the muscles that may be preventing your lungs from fully expanding as you breathe.

At first, many people have a hard time believing that tapping works to relieve muscle tension, but the proof is in the tapping. Try tapping just one side of your body--your left shoulder, for instance. After five minutes of tapping, move your left arm as though you are brushing your hair. Then repeat the motion using your right arm. Most people notice that their left shoulder is much more flexible that the right shoulder.