

BREATHING: THE PROTECTOR OF LIFE ENERGY

Proper breathing supplies more oxygen to the blood and to the brain. Deep, slow, relaxed breathing practiced on a regular basis has been shown to reduce stress and help reduce blood pressure and blood sugar, symptoms of depression, anxiety, sleeplessness and indigestion. It can increase our ability to cope with life's many stresses, big and small. If practiced regularly, deep breathing can become something we do naturally whenever we feel stress. Consistency is the key; practice daily. Here are three techniques that address relaxation, muscle strengthening and mind focus.



Balloon Belly Breathing

This technique is helpful to relax and reduce stress. Either lying or sitting comfortably, imagine a small balloon in your belly. Inhale through your nose, pause, exhale through your mouth. When you inhale, the balloon inflates and your belly should rise. When you exhale, the balloon deflates and your belly should fall. You can place your hands on your belly to feel the movement.

On the first breath, take in as much air as you can and then try to completely force out all the air from way down inside. Try to make your belly button touch your spine. Then, inhales should be slow and relaxing and last about 4 counts (1001, 1002, 1003, 1004). Inhale through your nose as much air as you can and slowly, very slowly exhale air out through your mouth. Exhales should be slower and last about 6-8 counts. As you exhale, imagine all the stress leaving your body.

Everyday, make it a habit to practice balloon belly breathing such as in the shower, at a red light, and at time of sleep. Be consistent. Try to have 4-5 breaths, at least 2-3 times every day. Then in times of stress, you will automatically call on this tool.



Spoon Belly Breathing

This technique is used to strengthen the core muscles of the body. The core consists of the muscles of the abdomen (front and side), the low back (lumbar) and the gluteal area (butt and thigh). They are the muscles that surround the center core of the body.

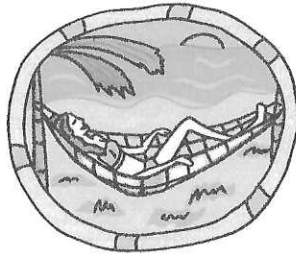
Imagine your belly button is pressing back to your spine in the shape of a spoon or a scoop. Inhale through your nose slowly and deeply and let your chest and diaphragm fill. Pause, then exhale deeply and slowly through your mouth and let your chest and diaphragm empty. Throughout the entire deep breathing session, try to keep your belly button pulled in all the way to the spine or in the shape of a spoon or a scoop. Some call this "holding in your stomach".



Yoga Belly Breathing

This technique is helpful when we need to focus our mind. Use it during progressive relaxation, meditation or cool-down. Start with four or five deep breaths before starting yoga breathing. Strive for slow, rhythmic breathing through the nose and felt at the back of the throat.

Breathe in slowly and fully. Try to feel the breath against the back of the throat with a slight whistling or raspy sound. Pause, exhale slowly and fully with the same raspy sound. Inhalations should be about the same in length as exhalations with a pause in between, comfortable and slow. All breathing is through the nose. The breaths fill and empty the whole belly and chest areas. When your mind wanders, focus on the sound of your breathing.



PROGRESSIVE RELAXATION

- Play a tape of relaxing music or nature sounds to set the mood. You might even dim the lights or light candles.
- Get into a comfortable position (uncross your arms and legs), close your eyes, and take four deep, relaxing breaths. Picture yourself where you would most like to be right now, where you can be relaxed, content, and without worries and stresses.
- Maybe your special place is a beautiful white beach with the soft, blue waves gently meeting the sand, or a stunning green meadow full of brightly colored flowers and butterflies, or maybe it is sitting next to a quiet, cool stream in the forest. It can be a place you have been before or a place that you imagine.
- Once you see your special place, begin to relax your head ... forehead ... eyes ... mouth ... neck ... and shoulders. Let the tension leave you as you continue to breathe deep, relaxing breaths.
- Relax the muscles in your back ... arms ... chest ... abdomen ... buttocks ... thighs ... legs ... and feet. Gently wiggle your fingers and toes, now let them relax.
- If you still feel tension in any part of your body, breathe in deeply and slowly and as you breathe out, imagine the stress and tension leaving that part of your body with your breath.
- Keep the picture of your special place in your mind and continue to breathe in slow, relaxed breaths for a few minutes.
- When you are ready, come back slowly and open your eyes.