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Breath Work for Stress Management and Relaxation

Breathing strongly influences mind, body, and moods. By simply putting your attention on your breathing, without even doing anything to change it, you move in the direction of relaxation. There are many worse places to have your attention on your thoughts, for one, since thoughts are the source of much of our anxiety, guilt, and unhappiness. Get in the habit of shifting your awareness to your breath whenever you find yourself dwelling on upsetting thoughts.

Exercise 1. Conscious Regulation of Breath (aka 4-7-8 Breathing)

Although you can do the exercise in any position, to learn it is suggested you do it seated with your back straight. Place the tip of your tongue against the ridge of tissue just behind your upper front teeth, and *keep it there through the entire exercise*. Extend each breath for a mental count as follows:

- ♦ First exhale completely through your mouth, making a **whoosh** sound.
- ♦ Next close your mouth and inhale quietly through your nose to a count of 4.
- ♦ Next hold your breath for a count of 7.
- ♦ Then exhale through your mouth, making a **whoosh** sound to a count of 8.
- ♦ This is one breath. Now inhale again and repeat the cycle three more times for a total of 4 breaths.

Always inhale quietly through your nose and exhale audibly through your mouth. The tip of your tongue stays in position the whole time. Exhalation takes twice as long as inhalation. The absolute time you spend on each phase is not important. If you have trouble holding your breath, speed the exercise up but make exhalation twice as long. With practice you can slow it all down and get used to inhaling and exhaling more and more deeply.

Exercise 2. The Alternate Nostril Breath

The importance of this particular breath cannot be over-emphasized. The body and mind are closely interrelated and one influences the other to a much greater extent that medicine admitted to for many years. As an all-around “soother”, the Alternate Nostril Breath is incomparable.

- ♦ Sit in a comfortable cross-legged position with your back straight.
- ♦ Raise your RIGHT hand and place your ring finger against your LEFT nostril, closing it off.
- ♦ Inhale deeply and slowly through the RIGHT nostril to the count of 4.
- ♦ Close off the RIGHT nostril with your thumb and hold the breath for a count of 1-4.
- ♦ Open the LEFT nostril and exhale to the count of 4-8. The longer you can make the exhalation, the better. Concentrate on completely emptying the lungs.
- ♦ Breathe in through that same LEFT nostril to the count of 4.
- ♦ Close off the nostril with the ring finger again and hold to the count of 1-4.
- ♦ Exhale through the RIGHT nostril to the count of 4-8. This makes up one round.
- ♦ Repeat these rounds of alternate nostril breathing five more times, or for up ten minutes if you are concerned about insomnia.
- ♦ Practice a ratio of 4:4:8, if at all possible. Increase this to 8:4:8 eventually, then 8:8:8, after some months.

DO practice the Alternate Nostril Breath whenever you need calming – if you are nervous, upset or irritable.

DON'T push yourself with the holding position or by increasing the ratio until you are comfortable doing so.

DON'T make the breathing rhythmic, instead it should be smooth and slow. You can work on making it inaudible eventually.

Benefits:

- ♦ Has a marvelously calming effect on the nervous system
- ♦ Helps to overcome insomnia and free the mind of anxiety and depression
- ♦ Relaxes and refreshes the body
- ♦ Purifies the bloodstream and aerates the lungs
- ♦ Soothes headaches
- ♦ Improves digestion and appetite



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Exercise 3. The Complete Breath

- ♦ Sit in a comfortable cross-legged position or in a chair.
- ♦ Straighten your back, which will straighten your thorax for easier breathing.
- ♦ Inhale slowly through the nose, breathing deeply, consciously.
- ♦ Take five seconds to fill the lower part of the lungs, by expanding the ribs and pushing the abdomen out.
- ♦ Concentrate on filling the top of the lungs for the next five seconds. This will expand the chest and tighten the abdomen slightly.
- ♦ Hold the breath for 1-5 seconds.
- ♦ Exhale slowly until you have emptied the lungs.
- ♦ Repeat 4-5 times more.

DO establish a rhythmic rise and fall of your abdomen, to promote regular breathing.

DO attempt to breathe inaudibly after you have gotten the knack of deep breathing.

DO concentrate on your breathing alone, with your eyes closed, if you wish. It serves to do the technique better but it is also a preparation for meditation.

DO push your abdomen out as you breathe in and pull the abdomen in as you breathe out.

DO give an extra snort as you exhale to rid yourself of stale waste-matter in the bottom of the lungs.

DON'T slump. For maximum efficiency the thorax must be straight.

Exercise 4. The Cleansing Breath

- ♦ Sit in a comfortable cross-legged position or a chair, back straight.
- ♦ Inhale deeply, pushing the abdomen out, and taking in as much air as possible in the space of 1 second.
- ♦ Press gently but firmly on your abdomen forcefully to expel the air through the nostrils. The sensation should be one of having been punched in the stomach.
- ♦ Inhale again by pushing the abdomen out and letting the air rush back into the vacuum created by the exhalation.
- ♦ The whole process, inhalation and exhalation should take not much more than 1-1/2 seconds. Both should be forceful and quite audible.
- ♦ Repeat ten times, follow with a complete breath and repeat ten times more.

DO push the abdomen out as far as you can as you inhale.

DON'T exhale consciously, but let the action of the abdomen do it for you.

Benefits:

- ♦ Clears lungs, sinuses and nasal passages and relieves cold symptoms
- ♦ Tones the nervous system
- ♦ Strengthens the lungs, thorax and abdomen
- ♦ Purifies the bloodstream and clears the head
- ♦ Aids digestion
- ♦ Stimulates the liver, spleen and pancreas

Exercise 5. Letting go of Tension

- ♦ Sit comfortably in a chair with your feet flat on the floor.
- ♦ Breathe in deeply into your abdomen and say to yourself, "Breathe in Relaxation." Let yourself pause before you exhale.
- ♦ Breathe out from your abdomen and say to yourself, "Breathe out Tension." Pause before you inhale.
- ♦ Use each inhalation as a moment to become aware of any tension in your body.
- ♦ Use each exhalation as an opportunity to let go of tension.
- ♦ You may find it helpful to use your imagination to picture or feel the relaxation entering and the tension leaving your body.



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Exercise 6. Abdominal Breathing and Imagination

- ♦ Lie down on a rug or blanket on the floor in the “dead body” pose (on your back, arms and legs slightly drawn away from body, palms up, limbs relaxed.)
- ♦ Relax for a moment and assess whether there is a place on your body that hurts or is holding tension.
- ♦ Place your hands gently on your solar plexus (the point where your ribs start to separate, above your abdomen.)
- ♦ Imagine that energy is rushing into your lungs with each incoming breath of air and being immediately stored in your solar plexus. Imagine that this energy is flowing through to all parts of your body with each exhalation. Form a mental picture of this energizing process.
- ♦ Repeat this exercise daily for 5 – 10 minutes each day.

Variation: Place one hand on your solar plexus and move the other hand to any point in your body that hurts/is infected. As you inhale, imagine energy coming in and being stored. As you exhale, imagine the energy flowing to the spot that hurts and stimulating it. Imagine the pain flowing away with the air as it flows out of your lungs. Keep a clear picture of this process in your mind as you alternately stimulate the spot that hurts and drive out the pain/disease/infection.