

BREATHING

Breath is the essence of life. The first thing you do when you are born, and the last thing you do when you die. Everyone knows that breathing is the most fundamental requirement of the human body and that without it we cannot survive for more than a few minutes, yet most of us give it very little attention. In fact not only do we breathe to survive, but also our health and general well being depend on the way we breathe. Paying attention to the breath is a vehicle for releasing stress and allowing the body to find its own natural balance. The body's use of oxygen is the central determinant of the rate at which we age.

If you observe a baby or young child breathe you will see that the abdomen moves in and out rhythmically with each breath, while the upper chest and shoulders remain in a state of relaxation and relatively still. Yet in many adults the opposite happens.

Most of us, particularly if we have sedentary jobs, breathe high – quickly and shallowly concentrating on the upper chest area which is the part of the lungs that hold the smallest quantity of air. *'Not only does this kind of breathing inhibit oxygen intake, it can also encourage the lungs to atrophy and to lose much of their natural elasticity – something which is a common occurrence as people get older.'* (1) Most of us use only half our breathing potential and we expel only half the wastes. This means less oxygen gets to our cells and more carbon dioxide wastes are retained in them, all of which inhibits our ability to experience a high level of energy and maintain balance- as the amount of oxygen available to the blood, brain, and nerves as well as the skin and the rest of the body is reduced.

The stress that many people are under causes excessive muscular tension and restricted breathing and results in breathing habits such as shallow breathing, fast breathing and little movement of the diaphragm and ribs. Erratic, fast, shallow breathing is a direct reflection of modern life – life at a fast pace with never enough time to get everything done. Anxiety, depression, a sense of meaninglessness, addictions, muscle tension, headaches, fatigue and irrational fears are all tell tale signs of a low breathing capacity.

By increasing your awareness of your own breathing patterns and shifting to more abdominal breathing, you can reduce tension and anxiety. Diaphragmatic breathing is the easiest way of eliciting the relaxation response. Many forms of meditation focus on breathing. Breath is the energy, the 'chi', and the 'prana' of life. *'Breath is the bridge, which connects life to consciousness, which unites your body to your thoughts. Whenever your mind becomes scattered (ie fearful or anxious or over active), use your breath as a means to take hold of your mind again. (ie feel peace/calm)'* (7)

Here are some simple ways to enhance your breathing. They may take a bit of practice but it is well worth it.

1. Become aware of your breath without trying to change it. Just by doing this will bring about an improvement by encouraging you to take longer and deeper breaths, which is a simple breathing practice that you can use to help you relax. In this approach, you simply emphasise and lengthen your exhalation. The long exhalation helps turn on your parasympathetic nervous system, your "relaxation response." Using this technique, there's nothing to do except to make sure that your exhalation is longer than your inhalation. You don't have to count to do this. Just put your attention on your breathing as you exhale. Sense the air from your lungs going out slowly and gently through your nose. When you're finished exhaling, don't put your attention on the inhalation. In fact, don't make any kind of effort to inhale at all. Just let your inhalation arise by itself. Take at least four

complete breaths in this way. If, after several breaths, your exhalation still isn't longer than your inhalation, simply imagine that you are gently blowing out a single candle as you exhale slowly and effortlessly through pursed lips. Take several more breaths in this way, and you will soon find yourself beginning to relax. This is an extremely safe exercise, so you can practice it as often as you like. The key is to breathe gently and effortlessly. (3)

2. To check for abdominal breathing, lay down and put your hands on your stomach. Does it well swell when your breathe in and sink when your breathe out? If not practice pushing your tummy out while breathing in, in the lying down position until you get the feel of it. Make sure that with each out breathe you let out all the air you take in. Progress to this type of breathing while sitting, then standing and then walking. Then it can be used in any potentially stressful situation.
3. Take up some form of aerobic exercise (running, dancing, cycling) that demands full use of your lungs every day.
4. It is actually possible to breathe in energy. Before you get up in the morning (and as your settle down to sleep at night) take 30 breaths through your nose during which you are consciously aware of the air entering and leaving your body. You don't have to do anything or change the rhythm of your breathing in any way. Just be aware of what is going on in your body. As you breathe in imagine you are breathing in a feeling of calm and well being, and breathing out a feeling of calm and well being. Feel that your whole body is becoming more and more relaxed. As your practise this technique day by day, over a period of several weeks you will find both that your energy levels increase and that you experience a sense of balance in yourself.

Benefits of conscious diaphragm breathing and full exhalation

Promotes a feeling of calm and well being	Puts you in control
Improves your mood	Increases energy
Enable one to think more clearly, improves concentration	Sparks metabolism
Calms nerves. Abdominal breathing triggers the relaxation response	Skin will glow with health and eyes will shine
Ageing will be slowed down	Wards of degenerative diseases
Increases resistance to colds and illness	Improves sleep
Promotes efficient excretion of bodily toxins	Enable you to consider your connectedness to all things – the balance and flow of universal energy.

Sources

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| 2. Leslie Kenton | 10 Steps to Energy |
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| 8. Deepak Chopra | Ageless Body, Timeless Mind |