

BREATHING

INTRODUCTION

Breathing keeps us alive, but many individuals are unaware that they are engaging in a type of breathing that is not optimal for health. When our thoughts and lives are stressed or rushed in this hectic world, our bodies often respond with shallow, fast, or choppy breathing. This can be reflective of sympathetic nervous system dominance (also known as the “fight or flight” response). We may begin to overuse the “accessory” muscles of breathing creating tightness in our shoulders, chest and/or neck. This type of breathing does not well utilize the main muscle of breathing—the diaphragm.

In most of life’s situations, breathing with the diaphragm is the most natural and efficient way to breathe. However, if we are in a habit of breathing shallow, fast or in our chest, it might feel awkward at first to use the diaphragm or to slow our breathing down. Patience and practice may certainly be needed.

The acronym DASS can help us to remember what relaxed breathing is—**Deep Abdominal Slow Smooth**.

HOW TO PRACTICE

Initially, it is much easier to develop relaxed breathing under relatively ideal conditions, such as in a quiet setting with few distractions, having 5-10 minutes set aside, etc. With practice, it could be used at nearly any time and in any place, as it is extremely portable. Practicing with a relaxed attitude and avoiding “trying too hard” is important. When we effort too much, we can actually create stress and physical tension in our bodies, which makes it more difficult to engage in relaxed breathing.

WHO CAN BENEFIT

Nearly all of us can benefit from using relaxed breathing in our lives, even if only in stressful and demanding situation. If focusing on breathing creates distress, other relaxation techniques may be more appropriate, at least initially. For more information, refer to the [“Power of the Mind”](#) overview.

BRIEF VERSIONS

An excellent goal for most of us is the integration of more relaxed breathing into our lives on a moment-to-moment basis. Many of the techniques and practices described below can be integrated into our day or utilized in a daily practice, even briefly.

THE DISTRACTIBLE MIND

It is helpful to know that we have not failed in using relaxed breathing if our mind becomes distracted. This is part of the human condition. When this happens, notice any judgments that might arise in your mind and then gently let them go, refocusing back on the breath.

GETTING STARTED

Set aside 5-10 minutes to focus on this activity. Attempt to have as few distractions as possible during this time. Practice several times a day when possible.

1. Start with lying on your back. Initially, many individuals will find it easier to do DASS breathing lying down rather than seated.
2. In the prone position, place one hand on your abdomen and the other on your chest. Do not try to change your breathing, just observe your breathing. Note whether your abdomen is rising and falling with your breath; this is a sign that you are utilizing the diaphragm. You might imagine inflating the balloon with each inhalation and deflating it with each exhale.
3. If you have little movement under the hand that is on your abdomen and primarily feel the movement in your chest, see if you can gently encourage a little movement in your abdomen by breathing under that hand. If the belly does rise and fall with your breath, just enjoy observing this. A good goal is to be able to do DASS breathing at any point during the day, even while seated, standing or walking, as well as in a stressful situation.

BREATHING TECHNIQUES

You are encouraged to experiment with the practices and techniques found below to find what works best for you. With practice, these skills can help to manage stress/distress, quiet or cope with physical discomfort, prepare for sleep, manage a difficult medical procedure, etc. They can also be used as part of a daily relaxation practice or for mini practices during your day. Again, as a reminder, it is best to minimize overexertion or “trying too hard,” as that can create physical discomfort, tension, breathlessness or anxiety. Work within your own comfort zone.

USING NUMBER COUNTING

INHALE TO 2, OUT TO 3

Breathe in for a count of “2” (with each counted number taking a second) and out for the count of “3.” If this is not comfortable, you can adjust the numbers so that it is comfortable and not stressful. For example, if this pace feels too slow, try in to “1” and out to “2;” if it is too fast, try breathing in to “3” and out to “4.” Counting can help us slow our breathing down, which can result in deeper breaths and better use of our diaphragm. The elongation of the outbreath can often create an opportunity for a deeper next breath.

Option: Hold the breath for several counts in between the inhalation and exhalation such as in 2 (inhale) – 2 (hold) – 3 (exhale).

COUNT 10 TO 1 WITH OUTBREATH FOR EACH NUMBER

Count very slowly from “10” down to “1”, one number on each outbreath. Thus, breathe in and on the first outbreath say “10” and with the next outbreath, say “9”, working your way down to “1” and when at “1” notice how you feel. Counting the numbers can be either in your own mind or out loud as desired.

1,2,3,4 IN; 4,3,2,1 OUT

As you breathe in, count slowly up from “1” to “4” and as you breathe out, count slowly back to “1” from “4.” As you breathe in, say quietly in your mind “1..2..3..4,” and as you breathe out, say “4..3..2..1.” Do this several times.

COUNTING THE SPACE BETWEEN THE INHALATION AND EXHALATION

After each inhalation, pause and count, “1..2..3;” and after each exhalation, pause again and count “1..2..3” completing several rounds.

USING GUIDED IMAGERY

BREATHING HOLES

Imagine that you have breathing holes in the bottom of each foot. Then, breathe in through the bottoms of the feet, with the breath coming to the middle of your body. Next, breathe out through the bottoms of your feet. Enjoy the imagery and notice that breathing might naturally slow and deepen over several minutes.

WAVES

Imagine your breathing as gentle waves of an ocean or lake. With each inhalation, a gentle wave flows in. With each exhalation, a gentle wave flows out.

SQUARE BREATHING

Visualize a square. During the inhale, visualize a vertical line (breathing in) and then a horizontal line (hold). On the exhale, visualize another vertical and horizontal line until you complete the square. Complete several rounds.

FULL COMMITMENT TO THE EXHALATION

Breathe with your normal breath in. On the exhalation, focus on letting all of the air completely out of your lungs. Make a full commitment to your exhale. Then instead of just breathing in right away, wait until the body wants to breathe again. Continue, but let any sense of effort drop away as you practice this technique.

PURSED LIPS

Enjoy taking an easy breath in. On the exhale, breathe out slowly through pursed lips. As you practice this, you might imagine that you are blowing out a candle or inflating a balloon.

BREATHING IN (I AM) AND BREATHING OUT (AT PEACE)

Breathing in, think or say internally, “I am.” Breathing out, think or say internally, “at peace.” You can adjust this to use other words that work better for you. For example, breathing in to the words “I am” and breathing out to the word “calm.”

FIND WHAT WORKS FOR YOU

You can take an element of one and combine it with another in a way that tailors them to your needs. An online source to learn more about breathing techniques is [Dr. Andrew Weil's website](#). He illustrates several techniques including bellows breath, relaxing breath, and counting breath.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To find out more information about the clinical research on breathing practice, its usefulness and physiological effects, please see *The Power of Breath: Diaphragmatic Breathing*.

RESOURCE LINKS

- [Dr. Andrew Weil](http://www.drweil.com/): <http://www.drweil.com/>
- “[Power of the Mind](https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTHLIBRARY/self-care/power-of-the-mind.asp)”: <https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTHLIBRARY/self-care/power-of-the-mind.asp>
- “[The Power of Breath: Diaphragmatic Breathing](https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTHLIBRARY/tools/diaphragmatic-breathing.asp)”: <https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTHLIBRARY/tools/diaphragmatic-breathing.asp>
- [Healthline](https://www.healthline.com): Techniques for Stress Relief and more. <https://www.healthline.com>

AUTHOR(S)

“Breathing” was written by [Janice Singles](#), PsyD, and [Shilagh Mirgain](#), PhD (2016, updated 2023).

This Whole Health tool was made possible through a collaborative effort between the University of Wisconsin Integrative Health Program, VA Office of Patient Centered Care and Cultural Transformation, and Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation.