

Soothing Breath

Overview:

This is a simple breathing exercise that helps calm us when we are anxious, frustrated, frightened, hopeless, angry, sad, or restless. You've probably noticed that when you get upset about something, your breathing changes. For example, sometimes when we are scared, angry, or stressed out, we use shallow, rapid breathing.

Soothing Breath is the quickest neurobiological method we have for calming ourselves.

Our emotions live in our bodies, so the best way to help steady those jangled feelings is to help our bodies settle down. Fortunately, we know that our breathing is the gateway to the body. When we are able to **produce long, steady exhalations** our blood pressure lowers, our heart rate slows down, and our neurochemical reactions dissipate. When our bodies come to a steadier place, we feel better, we think more clearly, and we can act more thoughtfully. In other words, we respond better in times of challenge and stress.

So if we want to anchor ourselves through Soothing Breath, we are going to need some practice in order to strengthen our neural circuits. Here's the time to focus your mind on your breath. At first, it might be hard to feel the effects but as you practice you will experience the calm. And when you practice, **remember to go easy on yourself as you are building your soothing breath muscle – just one breath at a time.**

Directions:

Find 3 to 5 minutes and try to practice this exercise every day. (It's OK to practice more – in the car, at home, standing at the kitchen counter, at a work meeting, or in the grocery line.) The more you practice, the more the Soothing Breath will find you when you need it.

1. To begin, sit in a comfortable position on a chair with your feet on the floor and keep your spine long. (You can also sit crossed-leg on the floor or stand.)
2. Place the palms of your hands gently on your belly, around your belly button area.
3. Close your eyes OR have your gaze lightly rest on something small (e.g., a speck on the floor).
4. Breathe about three times normally and feel your belly move out and in with your breath. Be sure you use your diaphragm muscle to help your belly breathing.
5. Now, try to move everything out of your mind except your breathing. Let go of any inner stories and just shine your mind on your breathing.
6. Now, steadily breathe in to the slow count of 4. 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 to fill your lungs. Take a tiny pause.
7. Then steadily breathe out to the slow count of 8. 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 - 8. Exhale fully using the strength of your diaphragm. Push all of the air out of your lungs with your belly. Take another tiny pause.
8. Do another two rounds. Breathing in to the count of and breathing out to the count of 8.
9. Now take an easy breath in and an easy breath out, gently coming back to the world around you. Check in with your body to see how you are feeling.

** If you get light headed, decrease your count for breathing.

** If you want to make the breath a bit shorter, breathe in to the count of 3, and breathe out to the count of 6 or 7.

Four-Count Breathing

Overview:

Voluntarily changing your breath will help you calm down in stressful situations. A long, wandering nerve from our brain stem to our gut that winds through our heart and lungs is key for helping us slow down our sympathetic (fight-or-flight) system. That part that gets us revved up for action when we need it (and sometimes when we don't).

With our concentration in combination with this vagus nerve, we can use voluntary breathing with our diaphragm muscles to calm our inner state to a restful place. In other words, when you are feeling agitated, facing a situation that is building your frazzle, or sensing a charge in your inner body, you can voluntarily control your breath to quiet down your nervous system.

With regular practice of Four-Count Breathing and exercises like it, we are able to move to a more relaxed, calm state. From there, we are able to bounce back from stress more easily, think more clearly and creatively, and respond to any situation more thoughtfully and intentionally.

The exercise, Four-Count Breath, also increases your energy. Being calm and energized simultaneously is the *ideal* state for engaging with others, performing at work, and knowing a peaceful, joyful inner place even in the realm of difficult outer circumstances.

If you want to more quickly return to a restful, energized place, practice Four-Count Breathing. Use your mind to concentrate on your breath. And when you **practice, remember to go easy on yourself as you are building your breath muscle – just one breath at a time.**

Directions:

Find 3 minutes and try to practice this exercise every day. (It's OK to practice more – in the car, walking in a hallway at work, standing in front of the refrigerator.) The more you practice, the more Four-Count Breathing will be available when you need it.

1. To begin, sit in a comfortable position on a chair with your feet on the floor and keep your spine long. (You can also sit crossed-leg on the floor or stand.)
2. Place the palms of your hands gently on your belly, around your belly button area.
3. Close your eyes OR have your gaze lightly rest on something small (e.g., a speck on the floor).
4. Breathe in counting 1 – 2 – 3 – 4. (Each number gets about 1 second.)
5. Stop and hold your breathing, counting 1 – 2 – 3 – 4.
6. Exhale, counting 1 – 2 – 3 – 4.
7. Then hold your breath, counting 1 – 2 – 3 – 4.
8. Do three to four more rounds. It may help you to envision a square with each side representing a count of 4 to establish a rhythm: inhalation 4 – hold 4 – exhalation 4 – hold 4.
9. Now take an easy breath in and an easy breath out, gently coming back to the world around you. Check in with your body to see how you are feeling.

** If you want to make the breath a bit longer, use 5-Count Breathing.