

The Complete Breath

THE COMPLETE BREATH is a technique that allows you to breathe with the whole of your lungs. The lungs stretch from the diaphragm (a dome shaped muscle at the bottom of the rib cage) up to the top of the chest. This technique utilizes the lungs to their full capacity, oxygenates the body, and activates the relaxation response.

THE COMPLETE BREATH HAS 3 STAGES:

1. Breathing into the area of diaphragm. The ribs expand slightly out and to the sides. Only the top part of the abdomen rises.
2. Breathing into the area of mid-chest. The ribs expand to the sides and under the armpits.
3. Breathing into the area of upper-chest. The breast bone rises up slightly.

To breathe out - reverse the direction. This exercise requires gentle practice in order that the inhalation/exhalation will be smooth and balanced.

ABDOMINAL OR DIAPHRAGMATIC BREATHING

This is the most natural breathing. Watching a baby breathing gives you an idea what is diaphragmatic breathing. It is deep and slow, rhythmic and relaxing. Diaphragmatic breathing in combination with other relaxation techniques has been found to be effective in significantly reducing anxiety and high blood pressure. With breathing relaxation techniques, the body also removes waste products.

With diaphragmatic breathing you increase your awareness of your breathing patterns - balance your oxygen and carbon dioxide blood levels, normalize heart rate, reduce muscle tension. It is the easiest way to elicit the relaxation response.

Diaphragmatic breathing is the most powerful of all the breathing relaxation techniques. The simplest of all relaxation techniques is diaphragmatic breathing, also called deep breathing, or abdominal breathing. How is this technique practiced? Let's have a look.

You know how babies breathe, right? Their bellies are rising up and falling down gently and rhythmically. That's how we are meant to breathe. Like newborns. Taking slow and deep breaths from the belly. Stress takes a long term toll on your breathing. Your breath becomes shallow and short. Chances are that it is your chest that rises and falls with each breath, not your belly.

This chest breathing is not the most efficient way to breathe. Over time, your diaphragm gets tense and abdominal muscles constricted and you lose the ability to breathe deeply and naturally.

WHAT IS A DIAPHRAGM?

Diaphragm is a strong dome shaped muscle between abdomen and chest. When you breathe into your diaphragm, it pushes downwards - away from chest, causing your abdominal muscles to relax and rise. Lungs expand and allow air to be drawn in.

Here is where diaphragmatic breathing comes in. It stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system, which works in the opposite way to the sympathetic nervous system. Parasympathetic nervous system slows your cardiovascular system and relaxes your muscles. Diaphragmatic breathing relaxes the muscles, massages the internal organs, and allows more oxygen to flow through your body.

At first, this way of breathing may feel awkward, but once you become familiar with the technique, you will be able to reduce stress on the spot by taking a few deep breaths.

HOW IS DIAPHRAGMATIC BREATHING PRACTICED?

The procedure is very simple yet effective:

1. Find a quiet place where you know you will not be disturbed.
2. Lie down on a flat firm surface on your back and put your right hand on your diaphragm (just below the belly button).
3. Close your eyes and breathe through your nose.
4. Put your left hand on your upper chest. You should feel no movement here. The breathing should come from your diaphragm and your right hand will gently rise and fall.
5. Notice the feeling and how it differs from chest breathing.
6. Consciously breathe through your nose, keeping your mouth closed. Feel the rising and falling of your diaphragm.
7. When you become used to breathing into your diaphragm, bring your attention to the flow of your breath. Just notice the flow. Is it smooth or jerky? Smooth it out; make it flow gently and smoothly.
8. Do not rush your breath. Be gentle. Let it flow and you will discover a rhythm to the breath.

The Complete Breath Continued

Be patient - while “breathing” sounds like an easy thing to do - diaphragmatic breathing takes practice. Practice this breathing technique at least once a day for about 20 minutes. If you have trouble falling asleep, practice this relaxation technique before going to sleep - you may be surprised how easily you will fall asleep.

In working with your breath, you will discover that changing your breath sequence changes the feelings and energy throughout your body. You will also discover that emotional stress and constricted breathing are interconnected. As you gain control over your breath, you will gain control over your emotions.

The profound relaxation induced by diaphragmatic breathing re-establishes emotional equilibrium and frees energy for the tasks of your daily living and for healing.

POSTURE IMPACTS YOUR ABILITY TO BREATHE

Your physical posture plays an important role in breathing. The way you hold yourself, sitting or standing is one of the major factors restricting breath. We have been conditioned to stand as little soldiers “chest out and stomach in”. As you tighten the abdominal muscles, to tighten the stomach, you restrict free flowing breathing.

Fashion, unrealistic expectations on how we should look, sitting behind a desk, sitting in a car, all of this contributes to our unhealthy breathing patterns.

Diaphragmatic Breathing is one of many techniques to help you reduce anxiety, achieve deep relaxation, and relieve stress. Other great relaxation techniques are:

ALTERNATE NOSTRIL BREATH

Alternate nostril breath is a technique used to balance, relax, and energize the whole body system. As you consciously engage both nostrils, you assist your body to become more balanced. Yogis say that this breathing technique has the power to calm your mind and quiet down the nervous system.

1. Begin by letting go of all the air in your lungs - exhale using both nostrils.
2. Gently press your thumb against the right nostril - closing it completely, and then inhale slowly through left nostril.
3. Hold your breath for a few seconds. With your right forefinger close your left nostril as you release your thumb from the right nostril. Exhale through the right nostril, while keeping the left one closed. Hold for a few seconds.
4. Inhale through the right nostril, hold; release your forefinger as you close your right nostril with your thumb. Exhale through the left nostril, while you keep the right nostril closed. Hold for a few seconds.
5. Inhales through the left nostril... continue this for about 8 cycles.
6. Conclude and breathe through both nostrils.

Never strain yourself when practicing breathing relaxation techniques (or anything else for that matter!). Your breath is your friend. Remember to be gentle.