Take A Breath!

Find a moment of peace, and learn to embrace the wellbeing benefits of proper deep breathing

Breathing – it's obvious isn't it? It's something we all do automatically, yet it is also a deeply therapeutic action that can have far reaching effects on both mental and physical health.

We breathe on average more than 25,000 times each day and probably notice no more than a handful of them. Yet conscious breathing – being aware of your respiration – brings with it multiple wellbeing benefits.

Breath, or pranayama, is a central tenet of yoga, but breathwork also stands alone as a wellbeing technique anybody can employ to decrease stress levels and increase their sense of calm, whether they practise yoga or not.

"Through being aware of the breath, we can begin to observe it and can consciously control it," explains Jacqueline Carson, a clinical hypnotherapist, meditation and breathwork teacher based in Darlington (hypnotherapy-darlington.co.uk).

"Conscious breathing can help to reduce stress and anxiety. This is especially so if it is practised regularly as part of your daily routine."

When we're stressed or anxious it tends to show in our breath, which is shallow, coming from the chest rather than the stomach, when what we should be doing is focusing on breathing deeply and slowly, says yoga teacher Libby Stevenson (libbystevensonwellbeing.com).

"Belly breathing is a method of breathing that slows the heart rate and lowers blood pressure, creating a sense of calm.

"It's this slow, extended exhalation that switches the nervous system from 'flight, fight, freeze' (stressed or anxious state) to 'rest and digest' (calm state)."

Why does the way we breathe matter?

According to Jacqueline, immersing yourself in the breath takes your mind off your worries, helping induce a state of calm.

"Anxiety is often brought about by feelings of worry about the future," she says.

"Practising conscious breathing forces you to be in the present moment and not think about any worries. All feelings are as a result of thoughts and when we can control those thoughts, we can control our emotions."

Because we're so used to breathing incorrectly, it helps to get a feel for deep breathing.

Laura Pearce, founder of Yoga Collective London (yogacollectivelondon.com), recommends getting a sense of your tummy and your diaphragm by lying on your back and placing your hands on your tummy.

"It doesn't come intuitively to everyone," she says. "Try to breathe into your hands while keeping your shoulders super relaxed."

Inhale through your nose, rather than your mouth.

"It's quite a big movement. Your belly moves quite a lot and your ribs expand a lot when you breathe; your shoulders will move and you can really feel it. Channelling it into the belly a little deeper takes practice."

Laura first began working with her breath in response to a heart condition that meant she struggled with dyspnoea (shortness of breath). Over time, through her training, yoga and mindfulness, she has gained control over her condition to the extent that it's no longer an issue for her.

"Breathwork can be potently useful for clarity of thought, helps you concentrate, and helps you feel a little bit clearer without all the stress noise," she explains. "When we're in our rest and recover state, all the homeostatic functions just work better. It can even help with IBS, inflammation and skin issues."

If you're really stressed, a few minutes of breathwork is going to calm you down, and if you practise regularly it helps diminish the production of stress hormones adrenaline and cortisol long term.

"To slow the breath and breathe deeply into your belly, that's how you breathe when you're about to go to sleep, or when you're very relaxed," Laura continues. "You're telling your body that you're feeling calm. It's almost as if you're tricking your body into thinking it's in a very restful place. It balances you, makes you feel very level."

If you're short on time, then even a couple of minutes deep breathing can calm you down – and you can do it anywhere, even at your desk if a work colleague stresses you out.

It's personal preference whether you practice at night or in the morning – at night the ensuing feelings of relaxation could help you sleep better, while in the morning the clarity deep breathing brings could help you focus on the day ahead.

For best results, regular breathwork of five to 10 minutes each day will help you reap the most benefits. There's no need to spend ages in the lotus position, meditating, or doing anything complicated.

"People have different ways of getting in touch with that calm, still place. It might just be feeling the breath, noticing the breath, it's as simple as that, we don't have to label it," Laura says. "It's about sitting there and observing the breath, that's enough."



Find calm through deep breathing

And Breathe...



Breathwork doesn't have to be complicated and you don't need lots of training to begin breathing mindfully.

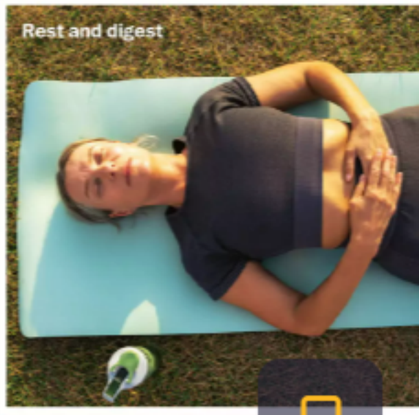
One easy breathing exercise to lower stress levels is box breathing.

Sit comfortably in a chair with your back straight and your hands resting on your knees. Breathe in through your nose for a count of four, hold your breath for a count of four, breathe out through your nose for a count of four, then hold your breath again for a count of four.

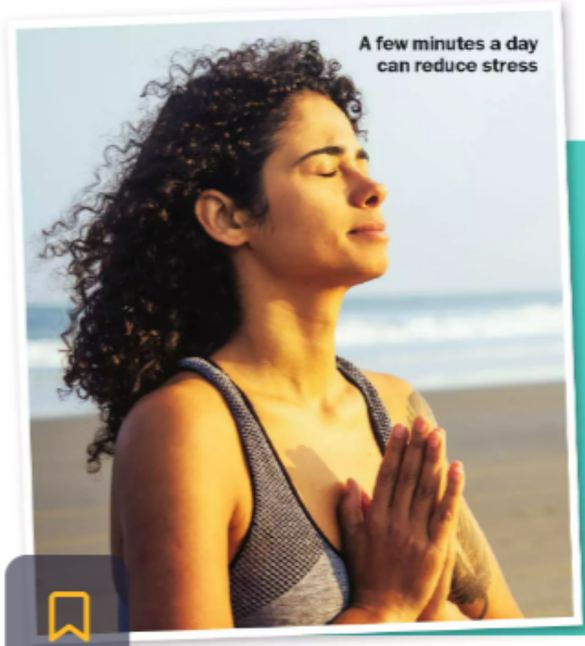
Repeat this several times until you feel your stress levels drop and calmness increase.

The name "box" breathing refers to the four stages of the exercise – think of them like the four sides of a box. It works by engaging your parasympathetic nervous system – "rest and digest" – which relaxes the body, as opposed to the "fight or flight" stress response of the sympathetic nervous system.

"Box breath is very balancing – you're evening out the inhale to the exhale," Laura Pearce says. "The more you can slow the breath – particularly the exhale – the more relaxed itbecomes. So if you're feeling hectic and stressed, the box breath is brilliant."



Rest and digest



A few minutes a day can reduce stress

How To Start

"Start by noticing exactly how the breath is in any particular moment," yoga teacher and wellbeing guide Amy Miller says (amymilleryogaandwellbeing.co.uk).

"If you are in a stressful situation, the chances are it will be shallow and up in the chest. Simply noticing that will begin to make that shift you need, then you can begin to slow down the breath."

Amy recommends counting each breath. Inhale for a count of four and exhale for a count of four. Gradually lengthen your exhale as you become more accustomed to deep breathing, exhaling for a count of six or even eight.

"If you can practice the art of slowing down the breath then you can shift yourself from the stress response into a state that is more relaxed," she explains.

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