



Breathe Your Way to Calm

No matter what our personal “stress style” all human bodies respond to stress in the same way. Stress sets off an alarm in the brain, sometimes called the “**fight or flight response**” which responds by preparing the body for defensive action. The **sympathetic nervous system** is aroused and hormones like **cortisol** and **adrenaline** are released to sharpen the senses, quicken the pulse, deepen respiration, and tense the muscles. **This response happens whether the stressful situation is at work or at home, real or imagined.** Problems occur when this stress reaction happens too frequently. Periodic stress becomes **chronic stress**. When the body is constantly bombarded with stress hormones we run the risk of developing conditions like sleep disorders, depression, and chronic conditions like chronic fatigue, hyperglycemia and heart disease. **Stress can prematurely age us.** How we respond to chronic stress – going for a walk as opposed to smoking, for instance – will ultimately slow down or speed up the aging process.

The Benefits of Mindfulness Meditation and Conscious Breathing. Fortunately we have some simple and free tools at our disposal to help us counter the stress response – **breathing and mindfulness – which can be practiced anywhere.** When we access the **relaxation response** the **parasympathetic nervous system** kicks in and we experience what is sometimes known as the “**rest and digest**” response. Blood pressure decreases, your heart beats slower, and gastric juices are released so that your body can digest and absorb the maximum amount of nutrition available in food. In recent years there has been a large body of research produced on the benefits of mindfulness meditation. We know now that Mindfulness practices can reduce blood pressure, and help individuals recovering from heart disease and depression. More research is appearing every day. The latest research looks at the connection between mindfulness and a greater occurrence of positive emotion.

Mindful Breathing. Mindfulness practices help you to achieve moment to moment awareness in a non-judgmental, detached way, thereby decreasing the amount of time per day spent in “fight or flight” mode. **Attention to the breath is one of the best ways to access mindfulness.** Did you know that breathing is one of the few bodily functions that can be controlled both consciously and unconsciously? Conscious attention to breathing is common in many forms of meditation and is used by top athletes to enhance performance. Why not start treating yourself like a top athlete and try this peak performance tool?

A Simple Five-Minute Breath Exercise.

Sit in a comfortable position either on a chair or on a floor with your legs comfortably crossed. Sit tall with your spine extended so that your breath can enter your entire torso. Relax your shoulders down and move your shoulder blades towards each other. Place one hand on your abdomen and the other above your chest near your collarbone. Inhale deeply from the bottom of your abdomen. Feel the expansion pressing against your lower hand. Continue to fill your torso until you feel the hand on your upper chest expand. Hold the breath for one second, and then release the breath from the chest to the abdomen. Picture a cup of water emptying from the top to the bottom as you exhale. Note how it feels to be empty of breath just for a second before your next inhale, then repeat this long, slow even breath nine more times. Return to the breath count as your mind wanders, which it naturally will. When you have finished, remain sitting for a few natural breaths, enjoying the feeling of ease and peace.

We wish you twenty minutes of mindfulness every day!