

Lesson 1

Breathe Deep and Find Your Zen

Introduction

There's little in life more fundamental than the ability to breathe and it happens without us even thinking about it. It forms a basis for almost all forms of meditation and relaxation, and using the breath as a strategy to calm down is easy once practised, available to you at all times and free!

Diaphragmatic breathing - or abdominal or belly breathing - is a form of breathing exercise you can learn to help control your anxiety. It is a way of strengthening your diaphragm, a vital muscle you need in order to breathe. The more you practise, the more habitual the exercise becomes, and the easier it is to recall and practise it when you need it most.

To begin your journey towards effectively controlling your anxiety, it's important to start with a strong foundation... and that begins by learning to breathe deeply, so you can find your zen...

The science

There are multiple benefits to learning diaphragmatic breathing. Amongst others, studies show that it reduces stress and lowers your blood pressure.

Breathing deeply is proven to help you relax and reduce the harmful effects that cortisol - the stress hormone - has on your body. As it lowers your heart rate, you expend less energy and use the air you breathe more efficiently.

All of this reduces the physical stress placed on your body, while lowering your emotional stress.

All by learning how to breathe a little more deeply.

Why this helps

Diaphragmatic breathing is available to you at all times, it doesn't cost anything, and the gains it can bring to your physical health and mental wellbeing are immense.

Creating a habit of deep breathing by building it into your daily routine will help anchor it's benefits for years to come.

Exercise (Video)

It's important to ensure that your breathing exercise becomes a habit, so rather than aiming to do this once, or occasionally when you feel like you need it, aim to create a routine from the start.

Step 1: Sit Or Lie In A Comfortable Position...

Create your comfortable space, ensure it's quiet, and either sit or lie down. Lying on your back, seating yourself cross-legged, or in a chair, are usually good choices.

If you sit in a chair, keep your knees bent and relax your head, neck, and shoulders. Try not to slouch, but don't worry about sitting perfectly straight.

If you lie down, place your head on a pillow, and a second pillow under your knees to ensure you're comfortable. Alternatively, you can simply bend your knees.

Step 2: Place One Hand On Your Upper Chest...

This will help you ensure you're breathing with your diaphragm and not your chest. It should remain relatively still throughout the exercise.

Step 3: Place Your Other Hand Below Your Ribcage...

Place your other hand beneath your ribcage on the epigastric area, just to the right and above your navel. This hand should move a lot throughout the exercise and will help you monitor whether you're effectively engaging your diaphragm.

Step 4: Breathe In Through Your Nose...

Take a slow breath in through your nose. Without forcing or pushing your abdomen muscles outward, use the hand you have resting above your navel to check that your stomach rises as you breathe in.

The airflow should create a smooth movement, which should mainly engage the point your hand is sitting on, rather than your chest. You shouldn't have the sensation that you're clenching your muscles or forcing your stomach out.

Meanwhile, the other hand resting on your chest shouldn't move much at all.

Step 5: Breathe Out Through Your Mouth...

Now, relax your belly. The hand resting on it should fall naturally inward (back toward your spine). Don't push your stomach back by clenching or squeezing your muscles, simply relax - it will happen all on its own.

Purse your lips slightly and exhale slowly through your mouth. Again, the hand on your chest shouldn't move much at all.

Bonus Tip

To build diaphragmatic breathing into your everyday life:

- Find a place that's quiet and peaceful, where you can practise your breathing exercises daily.
- Don't focus on how long you're spending on the exercise, or whether you're doing it right. This will cause more stress, not less!
- Clear your mind and set aside thoughts of anything that's bothering or stressing you. To do this, focus on the rhythm and sound of your breath, or choose a single point in your surroundings like a lit candle, or the sound of a meditation bowl.
- Do your breathing exercise once or twice a day, every day, at the same time when you're well rested, and feeling relaxed and positive.
- Aim to spend 10-20 minutes at a time on your breathing. You might want to start with five minutes three times a day.

What have you learnt?

Belly breathing is most effective when you're well-rested.

Regular practice brings the most gains. The more you practice when you're in a good place physically and mentally, the easier it will be to slip into the exercise when you're struggling with anxiety.

What next?

While learning to control your breathing is a vital step in managing your anxiety, it's only the beginning.

In our next lesson, we'll be introducing you to the stress response with top tips on what to do when you feel the need to 'fight or flight.'