

Mindfulness

Breathing

Breathing is something we all do all the time and seldom give any thought to. It is automatic and usually an unconscious act, although we can very easily change how we breathe and make it the focus of our attention. Hidden within this simple activity though, is an extremely powerful tool for helping us to relax. Our breathing and the physiology of our bodies are very closely linked and we can use our breathing as an extremely good way to take control over the physical effects of stress, arousal and anxiety, and also to calm our minds. The wonderful thing is that this is always available to us and can be used at any time, whether we are on our own, driving, in meetings or about to do something that is making us tense.

In normal breathing we actually use muscles to actively draw breath in, but not when we breathe out. It is normally only when we are breathing hard whilst exercising that we need to use muscles to breathe out. In gentle breathing when done properly, we actually breathe with the diaphragm, which is the large muscle that lies between our bellies and our chests. When this contracts it draws air into the bottom of our lungs by pulling it down there. When relaxed it is domed like a tent, and when it contracts it flattens, pulling air into the bottom of the lungs but making our bellies expand outwards. This naturally makes our bellies move out as we start drawing breath. When someone is breathing gently it is actually their belly that moves in and out, not their chest at all. It is only when we are taking deep breaths that we then begin to expand our chest as well, once we have finished breathing with our bellies.

You can practice this by placing both hands with your middle finger tips touching and all of your fingers spread apart so that your lower fingers are on your belly and your upper fingers and thumb across your chest wall. Practice breathing into the bottom of your lungs so that your belly moves out, whilst your upper fingers on your chest remain still. You will feel your hand rock as only the lower fingers are pushed out. If you keep breathing in more deeply you will then feel your chest start to move. As you take a deep breath your upper fingers will then also move out, so your hand becomes flat again across your chest and belly.

Some people have never learnt how to breathe with their diaphragms first, although it is the natural way to breathe, so for some people it takes a little practice to be able to know what diaphragmatic breathing feels like and how to do it; it is worth practising.

Next, you need to know that when we breathe out, all we need to do is to allow the muscles in our chest and belly to relax and they will naturally gently become long again - as the tension comes out of them. As the diaphragm and chest muscles that have done the work in letting you breathe in begin to relax, your chest and belly will gently collapse back to rest and you will breathe out slowly and smoothly without any effort, as this naturally squeezes the air back out of your lungs.

You can practice this too with your hands on your chest and belly as before, and you will find that your hands will stay flat as both your chest and belly collapse back at the same time as you breathe out. Feel how slow this can be as you breathe this way through your nose.

It is clear then, that you use muscular energy to breathe in but doing so is also linked to the sympathetic nervous system - which itself is linked to the things which make us aroused and alert. When you breathe out you release the tension in the same muscles and let them relax fully - and this is linked to the parasympathetic nervous system which is active in calming and relaxing our body.

Using breathing to relax is very simple and is based on focusing on breathing with the diaphragm at the start of the breath and then only using the chest to breathe in if you are taking a deeper breath. Remember the movement of your hands with the fingers over your belly moving first and then those over your chest moving out afterwards to meet them; this will help you to get it right. Relaxed breathing is also based on allowing your out breath to be simple and driven by your muscles naturally relaxing, as your chest and belly fall back to a relaxed position.

The vital thing to remember is that because we want to activate the parasympathetic nervous system to lead to a powerful relaxing reflex, our out breath should be longer than the in breath. This alters the balance between the two parts of the nervous system and emphasises the one that will help us to relax naturally. There are two ways to do this. Some people count the in breath and the out breath gently in their mind and make sure that the out breath is always longer. This is called 7-11 breathing and is done by breathing in to a count of 7 and out to account of 11. The longer out breath is powerfully relaxing and just 5 to 10 breaths will lead you to feeling much more relaxed.

The ratio of 7-11 breathing does not matter at all, however, and some people struggle to breathe slow enough to count to 7 and then to 11 – particularly when they are new to this. Anything that makes you feel out of breath or being overly controlling of your breath is not relaxing at all! You can use this technique breathing in to 3 and out to 5, or in to 7 and out to 9 just as well - however you feel works best for your normal breathing pattern and is most comfortable.

The best technique, however, does not require counting at all and if you rely on your breath naturally coming out slowly and gently through your nose only through your belly and chest relaxing naturally (rather than using any muscles) it will naturally be a longer slower movement than breathing in.

You do not need to breathe in very deeply or hard, but just enough to fill your lungs with enough air to allow a slow gentle out breath and uses your diaphragm and your chest. You want enough of an in breath to allow a good, enjoyable slow exhalation.

You can do this breathing with your eyes open or closed, so you can even use it to relax whilst driving, for example at traffic lights on the way home. You can use it at your desk and even at meetings and it is easy to learn how to do it without anyone noticing that you are.

If you feel yourself tense and anxious, breathe into your belly and then into your chest through your nose and then at the end of the in breath let go of the breath by letting your chest and belly naturally fall back – enjoying the lovely experience of the long, slow, gentle out breath. As with any muscle, breathing out allows it to relax more fully, and the muscles that you use for breathing are no different. With each breath that you take you should be able to notice that your muscles are more relaxed at the end of the out breath than on the previous breath so that you have breathed out a little bit more deeply. As your out breaths become longer, deeper and more relaxed, you will find your body and mind becoming more and more relaxed too. Just 10 breaths will be a very powerful way to calm yourself and to make sure that you feel less emotionally aroused and are able to think more clearly afterwards.

Muscle Relaxation

You might like to try a very ancient and powerful relaxation technique which, being mechanical, can work extremely well and very quickly even if you feel full of physical, nervous tension through feeling very worked up. It is an ancient technique that has long been used in yoga and in martial arts and is based on sound principles to do with muscle relaxation.

Sit comfortably with your feet supported and hold both hands out in front of your chest. Make a fist with both hands and then clench your hands tightly into very tight fists. If you have long nails you will need to make sure that these do not dig into the palms of your hands.

Look very closely at your hands as you squeeze them very hard into fists. See exactly how the skin that stretches tight over your knuckles goes white and how other parts become red. Feel the pressure of your fingers as you squeeze your fists as hard as you can and as tightly as you can. Really try to feel the strength in your fingers, hands and forearms on both sides, and look closely at the changes in your hands through the effort you are creating. Perhaps your hands will tremble slightly and you will feel quite a lot of tension, effort and burning in the muscles of your hands and forearms through the force you are putting in. Keep doing this until these feelings build up and you feel the muscles in your hands and forearms burning and really working hard.

When you feel the tension really strong in these muscles take a breath in using the technique for breathing outlined above, and then get ready to do four things at once. Close your eyes, lower your fists to rest comfortably in your lap, allow them both to relax, and breathe out using the technique you learned above. You will need to actively but slowly straighten your fingers; as if you have been doing this properly they will be curled into balls and will not easily straighten out.

As your fingers straighten and your muscles relax you will feel a powerful sensation in your hands and fingers that will quite naturally and very freely spread upwards towards your forearms. Different people feel different things so do not be surprised at what you feel personally, but it will be your particular body's sign of the muscles relaxing deeply and creating a wave of relaxation that will spread out from your hands and into your forearms. Enjoy the sensation in yourself, whatever it is. You might be curious about what it is that you feel, so pay attention to it.

Concentrate on this feeling and let it spread around your body, which it will do naturally. You can make this happen more deeply by concentrating on your out breath as you read about above, and with each out breath that you take you can feel the wave of relaxation spread further around your body. Many people will feel this spread up their arms to their shoulders, through their neck into their face, scalp and head, and downwards along the back and around the chest and belly, into the hips and down into the legs until it reaches your feet. You can focus on each part of this movement around your body using a single out breath for each area, helping each relaxing out breath to allow the wave of relaxation to deepen and spread to a different body part until you reach your feet.

When the feeling from your hands has reached throughout your body continue to breathe, focusing on the out breath, and enjoy the sensation of deepening relaxation for a few minutes before you open your eyes again.

3 Minute Mindfulness Exercise

One excellent way to break into our tendency to let our thoughts run away with this such that we become disconnected from the real world, is to use a wonderful and very short exercise, also focused on breathing, but which comes from the ancient discipline of mindfulness. You only need 3 minutes to do this and it is a lovely way to spend 3 minutes, making a complete break in what you are doing. This technique uses our ability to focus attention in narrow and wide ways, and also uses the power of breathing that we read about above.

It is often best to close your eyes to do this, but it is not necessary. Many people find it easier but depending on what suits you, you can close your eyes or leave them open.

Firstly, for 1 minute just sit quietly and open up all your senses as widely as possible and be alert to all the things that are happening around you. Whatever takes place you can acknowledge and accept, before parking this and allowing yourself to notice what else is happening as well. Nothing is good and nothing is bad, so hearing birdsong or a passing car are just as good and all we need to do is notice, accept and then widen our attention more, to capture as much as possible from every way in which our senses work. How far can you hear? How open can you make your sensory world? You might feel the sun on your face or the movement of air from an air conditioning unit, or simply feel the pressure of the chair on your bottom and back. Are you sitting straight or to one side? You might be aware of any number of physical sensations, sounds, smells or changes in light. Your body might add to the sounds, with stomach gurgles and if so that is fine; just note, accept and remain open to what else is out there. It is not wrong to have any thoughts or ideas either, but do not pursue them and fall into active thinking. If you have a feeling or thought merely accept and acknowledge it, but then do not concentrate on it and follow it through. The idea is to widen your perspective to gather the awareness of all that is happening within and outside you.

After 1 minute, change the focus of your attention onto just your breathing. Concentrate on and be aware of every aspect of your breathing whilst you use the technique you learned about above. Feel the movement of your chest and belly, and feel the movement of air in and out through your nose or mouth. Perhaps you can feel the temperature change of cool air being drawn in and warm air being blown out your nose. Be curious about what you will feel – perhaps parts of the sensation of breathing that you had not felt before. If your attention wanders away from focus on your breathing just acknowledge that, park the thoughts and gently bring your attention back to focus on the process of breathing. Do not be angry with yourself if your attention wanders but just gently bring your thoughts back to the sensations of your breathing.

After one more minute, imagine how each breath you take is nourishing your body and meeting its physical needs. Concentrate on drawing air in with each in breath and feeling it flood around your body to nourish and supply your body and your mind. Allow yourself to feel refreshed and supplied by the air you breathe in. You might like to feel this process just

generally supplying your body, or you might like to focus on breathing into separate parts of your body one by one. Sometimes, if you have a particular physical problem then breathing into that area can make it feel much more comfortable, such as if you are feeling backache, neck stiffness or perhaps a headache. With each out breath imagine that you are breathing out the things that your body needs to get rid of and they are leaving your body, leaving it clean and refreshed. Breathe for around 1 minute, breathing in and breathing out - and feeling the benefits of both parts of that process.

You can do this for longer if you wish but 3 minutes is perfectly sufficient and allows for a lovely break and a change of focus, attention and state of mind. When you have finished, open your eyes and focus on what you need to do next.

Visualisation Exercise

Often if you can think back to a time when you were relaxed and happy taking time to remind yourself of how you felt, can help you relax.

- Spend some time getting deeply relaxed using one of the techniques above, but always spending some time doing deep, slow breathing with your out breath being longer than the in breath.
- Remember a time you were very relaxed. Maybe you were on a vacation.
- Imagine being back in the experience. See what you saw, hear what you heard and feel those feelings. Where are those feelings in your body? How does it feel? Try to get in touch with that time as much as you can; imagine the colours, the smells, the feeling of air on your skin, the sounds, the feel of the ground beneath your feet and the sun on your face. Keep breathing slowly and focusing on relaxing more and more into the memory each time you breathe out.
- When you are at the peak of the feeling, squeeze your thumb and middle finger together.
- Think of a time in the future when you want to be relaxed.
- Now squeeze your thumb and middle finger together while thinking of the first thing you will see or hear and then imagine the situation with that relaxation feeling.
- What you've done is create a trigger for relaxation and replaced it with the old trigger that used to worry you, or make you tense. Use the new trigger to remind yourself of the emotions you felt in your happy memory and to get in touch with that same feeling of deep relaxation.

If you find this hard to do then it may be worth finding someone who is trained to help people form these sorts of connections. You can start by speaking to someone in the OHS.

How Well Are Your Emotional Needs Being Met?

THE EMOTIONAL NEEDS AUDIT

You might like to use this checklist when carrying out your own emotional needs audit. Rate, in your judgement, how well you feel that the following emotional needs are being met in your life now, on a scale of 1 to 7.

1 means not well met at all
7 means being very well met

Do you feel secure in major areas of your life?

Do you feel you receive enough attention?

Do you think you give other people enough attention?

Do you feel in control of your life most of the time?

Do you feel part of the wider community?

Can you obtain privacy when you need to?

Do you have at least one close friend?

Do you have an intimate relationship in your life (i.e. you are totally physically and emotionally accepted for who you are by at least one person)?

Do you feel an emotional connection to others?

**Do you have a status in life (whatever it may be) that you value and that is acknowledged?
Are you achieving things in your life that you are proud of?**

Do you feel competent in at least one major area of your life?

Are you mentally and/or physically stretched in ways which give you a sense of meaning and purpose?

If you have scored any need at 3 or less, this is likely to be a major issue for you. Even if you have scored only one need very low, it can be enough of a problem to have a serious, adverse effect on your life and could well be the cause of your anxiety or stress.