



# Waiting to Exhale?

We all could benefit from a nice, deep breath. But it's better if you learn how to do it right.

BY JESSICA MIGALA

**WE NEED OXYGEN** to live, but there are fringe benefits of breathing, too. By learning to control how we inhale and exhale, we can influence how we feel in the moment, says Cynthia Ackrill, MD, a fellow with the American Institute of Stress, and a stress-management and leadership coach in Asheville, North Carolina.

Breathing to change your mindset starts with rethinking how you take in air. As Ackrill explains, deep, slow breaths activate your parasympathetic nervous system, which in turn helps decrease your heart rate and blood pressure. Your calm, relaxed body then sends your brain feedback that all is well, which helps dissipate anger, irritation, and anxiety.

The challenge is that our natural inclination is to take relatively shallow sips of air, filling only the top portion of the lungs. To go deeper, Ackrill suggests a technique called diaphragmatic breathing: Close your eyes, place both hands on your abdomen, and inhale to the bottom of your lungs, allowing your diaphragm to descend and your belly to rise. Once you've mastered this basic

breath, you can change the cadence of the inhales and exhales to produce different responses. Here are three ways to use your breath to manage your mood.

## TO SIMMER DOWN

**TRY: A forced exhale**

Next time you're feeling furious, tell yourself to exhale. When we're angry, we tend to suck in oxygen and hold it, freezing up in a way that exacerbates the body's stress response, says clinical psychologist Belisa Vranich, PsyD, author of *Breathe: The Simple, Revolutionary 14-Day Program to Improve Your Mental and Physical Health*. It's impossible, however, to hold your breath while exhaling; you are literally letting off steam. Vranich says that urging yourself to "let it go" in this way can be more effective than telling yourself something vague like "calm down."

**HOW:** Make a circle with your mouth and focus on a long exhale through your lips until you feel empty. Tighten your abs to completely squeeze out all the air. When you're on edge, release one breath this way; when you need

more help transitioning from chaos to calm, try three breaths in a row.

## TO REV UP

**TRY: The breath of fire**

While slowing your breath enhances relaxation, speeding it up can be energizing. "Lengthening the inhale and shortening the exhale floods your body with oxygen, which can increase alertness," explains Ackrill. Doing the kind of pulsing exhalation called the breath of fire may make you feel physically warm. It can also help you snap out of a midafternoon slump, pep up before a meeting, or even coax yourself out of bed in the morning.

**HOW:** Breathe in and out through your nose, pulling your abdomen in during the inhale and immediately pushing it out forcefully during the exhale. Work up to two or three sets of 30 seconds each. Stop if you feel dizzy (don't try this at all if you are pregnant or have vertigo, high blood pressure, or arrhythmias).

## TO BALANCE YOUR OUTLOOK

**TRY: The coherence breath**

This type of rhythmic breathing equalizes the duration of the inhales and exhales. "It's my favorite breath because it puts you in an even state of mind," Ackrill says. Physically, the coherence breath has been shown to stabilize heart rhythm patterns—called heart rate variability (HRV)—one marker of how well your heart can bounce back from stress. A high HRV has been linked to clearer thinking and better reasoning skills. And in a study in *Frontiers in Public Health*, people who practiced coherence breathing for 15 minutes experienced lower blood pressure and a better mood compared with control groups. In other words, this breath can help you stay focused and calm, even when you're faced with uncertainty and stress.

**HOW:** Inhale through your nose for a count of 6, then exhale the same way for the same count. Aim to complete five breath cycles per minute. This will likely seem slow and sluggish at first, and you may feel like you need more air. But you'll soon learn to get comfortable with the sensation and relax into this heart-healthy breath.

## BREATHE A LITTLE EASIER

Figuring out your favorite style of taking in air may require some experimentation. Cynthia Ackrill, MD, recommends the *Breathwrk* app (free for iOS), which suggests breathing exercises for various situations; you can see which ones come most naturally to you. Android users, try the *Calm* app (\$70 per year), which offers breathing programs as well as guided meditations and bedtime stories for adults.



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