

# Anxiety-Reduction Exercises

## The science behind deep breathing

Deep breathing has can be an important recovery method from depression and anxiety as shallow breathing can contribute to panic. The practice of deep breathing stimulates our parasympathetic nervous system (PNS), which is responsible for activities that occur when our body is at rest. It functions in an opposite manner to the sympathetic nervous system, which stimulates activities associated with the fight-or-flight response.

Of all the automatic functions of the body, including cardiovascular, digestive, hormonal, glandular, immune, only the breath can be easily controlled voluntarily, explain Richard P. Brown, M.D. and Patricia L. Gerbarg, M.D. in their book, "The Healing Power of the Breath."

Brown and Gerbarg explain the impact of deep breathing:

*By voluntarily changing the rate, depth, and pattern of breathing, we can change the messages being sent from the body's respiratory system to the brain. In this way, breathing techniques provide a portal to the autonomic communication network through which we can, by changing our breathing patterns, send specific messages to the brain using the language of the body, a language the brain understands and to which it responds. Messages from the respiratory system have rapid, powerful effects on major brain centers involved in thought, emotion, and behavior.*

Following are some anxiety-reduction exercises that one of our psychologists, Carrie Landin, refers to her patients regularly. We have five psychologists that practice mindfulness and deep breathing exercises. If you are interested in learning more, call The Center for Integrative Medicine at 720-848-1090.

Inhale clarity

Exhale out stress

Inhale strength

Exhale fear

Inhale peacefulness

Exhale tension

Inhale a positive outlook

Exhale the bad stuff

Inhale a fresh start

Exhale the past

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It turns out that breathing is one area in which babies may be smarter than you. Babies use a deeper type of respiration called *abdominal breathing*, which strengthens and makes full use of their diaphragms. It's only as we grow older that we revert to the more inefficient style. However, you can train your body to go back to breathing properly.

To practice it, try to "inflate" your stomach as you breathe in, while keeping your chest relatively still. Then contract your abdominal muscles on the exhale. Not only will this give you more oxygen per breath, it will eventually strengthen the diaphragm. A stronger diaphragm means you get more oxygen with each breath, so your brain won't need to divert any away from your muscles so you won't get tired as easily.



### **Three-part breath**

Exhale all of the breath. Place one hand lightly over the abdomen, and the other hand lightly over the chest. Imagine your abdomen like a balloon as the air enters your body, first slowly filling up the belly, then filling up the mid-chest, and finally filling up the upper chest, up to the collar bone. Then slowly exhale, reversing the process—feel the deflation of the upper chest...then the mid-chest...then the abdomen. Relax for a moment in the gap between breaths, then repeat the three-part breath for several minutes. When you are comfortable with this breath, you can lower your hands.



### **4-7-8 relaxing breath**

In this exercise, it is important to control the ratio of the breath: inhaling/holding/exhaling. The speed of the breath is not important. However, you should be sure not to inhale too slowly, or else you will run out of breath. Experiment with different rates of inhalation to find a comfortable rhythm.

Inhale to the count of 4; hold to the count of 7; exhale to the count of 8. Repeat for at least 5 minute, or for as long as you like.



### **5-4-3-2-1 relaxation technique**

This exercise is helpful for severe anxiety or panic symptoms, as it fully engages the body and mind in the present moment. You can either do this out-loud or silently if you are around other people.

Take a moment to pay attention to your present surroundings. Now name 5 things that you see. Name 5 things that you hear. Name 5 things that you physically feel. Now name 4 things you see. Name 4 things you hear. Name 4 things you physically feel. Now name 3 things you see, 3 things you hear, and 3 things you feel. Continue in this manner until you have said 1 thing you see/hear/feel. You may repeat the entire exercise to relax even further.

It is okay to repeat the same items (e.g., if all you hear is the sound of an air conditioner, you can say this each time). If you lose your place, just start again at any point.