

Five Breathing Exercises

that actually help you feel calmer



* Box Breathing

- 1** Inhale for four counts
- 2** Hold your breath for four counts
- 3** Exhale for four counts
- 4** Hold for four counts
- ▶** Repeat – As each step progresses, picture one side of a square box

Focusing on counting and breathing can be a healthy distraction from thoughts that may be feeding into increased anxiety. Research suggests it can have a calming effect. In one randomized controlled trial, people who practiced box breathing before a stress-inducing task had a lower heart rate and less self-reported anxiety afterward compared with people who breathed normally,

* 4-7-8 Breathing

- 1** Inhale through your nose for four counts
- 2** Hold your breath for seven counts
- 3** Slowly exhale through your mouth for eight counts
- ▶** Repeat – As each step progresses, picture one side of a square box

Slowing down the exhale specifically can really help kick the parasympathetic nervous system into gear and relax the body. Some research has found that 4-7-8 breathing is effective at reducing heart rate and blood pressure, while studies on yogic breathing (which uses a similar pattern) suggest similar benefits. Another small study found that 4-7-8 breathing was helpful in reducing reported levels of anxiety and improving quality of life in patients who recently had bariatric surgery.

* Physiological Sign

- 1** Inhale deeply through your nose, filling your lungs with air and allowing your diaphragm to expand
- 2** Take a second, shorter inhalation through your nose
- 3** Exhale slowly and fully through your mouth
- ▶** Repeat

In a randomized controlled trial out of Stanford, researchers compared the effectiveness of the physiological sigh – also known as the cycle sigh – to two others breathing techniques and a control group that did mindfulness meditation. While all four groups experienced a drop in anxiety and better mood, the physiological sigh experienced the largest improvement in mood. The more days in a row that the participants practiced the technique, the greater improvement in mood they experienced.

* **Alternate-Nostril Breathing**

- 1** Gently close your right nostril with the thumb of your right hand and inhale through your left nostril for a count of four
 - 2** Gently close your left nostril with your ring finger, release your thumb, and exhale through your right nostril for a count of four
 - 3** Inhale through your right nostril for a count of four
 - 4** Close your right nostril again and exhale through your left nostril for a count of four
- ▶ Repeat**

Known in Sanskrit as nadi shodhana, alternate-nostril breathing is a traditional yogic breath work practice. One study found that using a modified form of this breathing method for 30 minutes a day, five times per week for 12 weeks reduced participants' perceived stress levels. They also saw a reduction in heart rate and blood pressure, indicating a shift toward a calmer state and away from a stress response.

* **Diaphragmatic Breathing**

- 1** While sitting comfortably or lying down on your back, place one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach, just below your rib cage.
 - 2** Inhale slowly through your nose. Your stomach should expand outward into your hand while your chest remains still.
 - 3** Exhale through pursed lips as your stomach moves back into its original position
- ▶ Repeat**

Also known as belly breathing or abdominal breathing, diaphragmatic breathing engages the diaphragm, which is a large muscle at the base of your lungs. Diaphragmatic breathing allows the most efficient intake of oxygen, which helps decrease heart rate and, as a result, also decreases anxiety effectively. This can be especially helpful if you've fallen into a shallow or rapid breathing pattern due to stress.

Research suggests that diaphragmatic breathing may also decrease cortisol levels. In one study, participants who practiced diaphragmatic breathing 20 times over a period of eight weeks had significantly lower cortisol levels than people in a control group who didn't use the breathing technique.

Breath work takes practice – and may not work for everyone.

All of these breathing exercises are most effective if you practice them regularly, especially in times of lower stress. That doesn't mean you need to dedicate a ton of time to intentional breathing. There is some research indicating that benefits can be seen in as little as five minutes a day.

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