

BREATHING AWAY STRESS

One of the most powerful ways to reduce the stress response is to control the breathing process.

It is natural to hold one's breath during a stressful situation. Unfortunately, this locks tension in the body and often limits our options in the situation. The answer to this state is to relearn **diaphragmatic breathing**. By consciously choosing to breathe with the diaphragm we unlock the cycle of tension and tell the body to relax.

To determine your normal breathing style, place one hand on your chest and your other on your belly. Take a deep breath. Ideally, both hands should move equally outward with the in breath (inhalation), and equally inwards with the out breath.

If only the hand on your chest moves appreciably then you tend to breathe with your chest and neck. You may also notice the neck muscles tighten with a deep breath. If you notice the belly hand actually moving towards your body as you inhale, your breathing pattern is very tense, and you have a lot to gain from learning to breathe with your diaphragm. Learning to breathe diaphragmatically is very simple, but it can also be very difficult to accomplish, so take your time with the exercise.

LEARNING ABDOMINAL BREATHING

To learn diaphragmatic breathing, place one hand on your chest and one hand on your belly as mentioned above. Initially, this can be done sitting comfortably in a chair, or lying down. The goal is to be able to activate diaphragmatic breathing in any situation you find yourself in.

Exhale fully, squeezing all the air out of your chest and belly. As you begin to inhale, let the breath push the hand on your belly away from your body. Since we are trying to activate the diaphragm, end your inhalation as soon as you feel the chest hand begin to rise. Now, exhale fully and repeat, trying to activate the diaphragm. This can be a little tricky, so stick with it. In time you will be able to feel the diaphragm without placing your hands on your chest and belly.

When learning diaphragmatic breathing, the exercise should last for at least five minutes, twice a day. The best times to do the exercise are when you awaken in the morning and before going to bed at night. This is very useful for anyone with stress related problems; especially headaches and neck pain.

If you have problems with anxiety, then actively controlling your breathing can be of much help. Place both hands on your belly and imagine it is a balloon that slowly inflated with your breath. Visualize your breathing through your nose and filling your lungs. Gently hold your breath and slowly exhale. Practice this breathing exercise inhaling in three to five seconds and taking as long as you can comfortably manage to exhale slowly. The more often you practice this technique the easier it will be to respond to stress situations in this manner.