

Deep Breathing Can Improve Your Wellbeing

A deliberate focus on breathing can be an effective tool for healing and wellbeing. When we feel stress, our heart rate may increase, our breathing may get shallow, and/or our blood pressure may rise. We can shift that response by using slow deep breaths and activating the parasympathetic nervous system. This can slow the heart rate and bring equilibrium to the body. In other words, you calm down.

You may choose to incorporate “Coherent Breathing” into daily life. This technique can create a relaxed yet alert state by focusing on the in-and out-breaths. Begin by sitting comfortably upright, supporting your back if preferred. Take a few deep breaths, allowing the belly button to balloon outwards. Relax the mind as much as possible. Once you feel calmer, begin the practice as follows:

1. Exhale to a count of six.
2. Allow several breath cycles to complete, and then again focus on exhaling to a count of six.
3. Let the breaths be smooth, and feel the body relaxing.
4. Switch your focus by inhaling to a count of six.
5. Again, allow your body to breathe in and out naturally several times, Focus on the the six-count inhalation every few breaths.
6. Combine these by inhaling for six and exhaling for six. There’s no need for every breath in and out to be a six-count. The idea is to eventually piece together this rhythm without force. Allow your body to ease into it.

Another technique you may use is the “STOP” practice. This may be used in the middle of the day after a stressful phone call. The technique takes about one minute, and the acronym guides the practice:

S Stop or slow what you are doing.

T Take a few, deep slow breaths.

O Observe how you are feeling in your body as you are taking slower breaths. Notice the thoughts and emotions. Invite calm.

P Proceed with what you were doing.

Visualizing the breath as nourishing can help create a more peaceful physical and mental state. As you inhale imagine something positive. As you exhale think of letting go of negative things.

These techniques are meant to be gentle and unforced. Through time, this kind of attention can help decrease blood pressure as well as reduce other ill effects of stress, including headaches, digestive issues and depression.

Reference: UCLA Health Healthy Years Volume HY19A ; Natalie Bell, Certified Meditation Teacher with the UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center.