

# Belly breathing

Belly breathing can be a free and easy way to decrease your stress. Anytime you feel stressed, stop and pay attention to your breathing and work toward carving out time in your day to practice belly breathing. The following tips will help you get the most of this simple exercise.

## Getting ready

- Blow your nose if it's stuffy.
- Sit or lie down in a comfortable position.
- Close your eyes if you want to.

## Belly breathing

1. Place your hand on your belly.
2. Inhale through your nose into your belly so your belly expands like a balloon.
3. Slowly breathe out through your nose, using your stomach muscles to push your belly back in until all the air is pushed out.
4. Try to make your exhalation last at least as long as your inhalation.
5. Keep breathing in and out slowly for a few minutes.

Note: Your chest should not move much. You might try putting your other hand on your chest to be sure your breath is mostly going into your belly. Don't worry if you wind up yawning. Your body naturally breathes into the belly when you yawn. Feel the yawn and see if this is true.

## Other options

- Instead of breathing out through your nose, breathe out through your mouth, making a quiet whooshing sound.
- Imagine you are breathing in "peace" and breathing out "stress." Let your body get heavy as you let out the stress.
- Really slow down your outward breaths. Count to four as you breathe in. As you breathe out, try to slow your breath so you make it to a count of six or eight.

## Use belly breathing when you're...

- Feeling stressed, angry or worried
- In a traffic jam
- Running late for a meeting
- Waiting in line at the store
- About to have a difficult conversation with someone
- In a meeting you'd rather not attend
- Lying in bed before going to sleep
- Preparing to start your day



# Step-by-step muscle relaxation

As we go through our busy days, we often start to tense up our muscles without realizing it. Letting go of that tension can help us feel relaxed.

Sometimes we get so used to the tension that we forget what being really relaxed feels like. That's why this exercise has you tense up your muscles first, then let go to relax them.

## Getting ready

- Sit or lie down in a comfortable position.
- Close your eyes if you want to.

## Tensing and relaxing your muscles

1. Start with your head. Tighten the muscles on the top of your head. Hold the tension so you really feel it. Then let go. Relax the muscles. See how different they feel.
2. Try your face now. Scrunch up your face. Hold the tightness for a few seconds. Then let go. Enjoy the feeling of letting the tension melt away from your body.
3. Now tense up your shoulders and neck. Really tighten the muscles. Hold for a few seconds, then release. Feel free to let out a sigh.
4. Move down to your arms. Make muscles and fists, holding them tight. Feel the tension. Then relax.

5. Try your stomach. Squeeze your stomach muscles (but keep breathing). Hold the tension for several seconds. Then let go.
6. Now the muscles you sit on. Squeeze the muscles in your "behind" and let go.
7. Next, really squeeze the muscles in your legs. Hold for several seconds, then relax.
8. Finally, squeeze your feet. Curl your toes. Tighten the muscles hard. Feel the tension, then let go.
9. When you're done, notice the weight of your body, the relaxation. Take a few slow, relaxing breaths.

## Other options

- You also can simply relax your muscles without tensing them first. Moving slowly from head to toe (or toe to head), relax any muscles that are tense.
- Check out a relaxation tape or CD from the library or purchase one and let the speaker walk you through this exercise (sometimes called "progressive muscle relaxation" or "body scanning"). Having someone talk you through it can help slow you down.

Sources: The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook, Fifth Edition (2000). Martha Davis, Elizabeth Robbins Eshelman and Matthew McKay.

The Wellness Book (1992). Herbert Benson and Eileen M. Stuart.

The Complete Idiot's Guide to Managing Stress, Second Edition (1999). Jeff Davidson.

Stress Management for Dummies (1999). Allen Elkin.

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