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DEEP BREATHING TECHNIQUES

“Just breathe.” - Author Unknown

With deep breathing, we don't need to get to a blissed-out Zen state, but rather enough to where, "Yes, I'm still anxious, but I have the ability to engage my thinking mind and figure out what I need to do." Deep breathing helps oxygenate the frontal lobe, the center of conscious thought in the human brain, so it helps people be able to think clearer. If done properly, deep breathing is very effective. However, historically about 30% of my patients have claimed deep breathing didn’t work for them, but when I ask them to demonstrate their technique for me, they were invariably do it wrong by breathing in and out way too fast, which is hyperventilating instead of deep breathing. Hyperventilating does not help, and, only makes matters worse. Following are my recommendations for proper deep breathing techniques, based on research and personal experiences over the past fifteen years:

* GOOD POSTURE. Make sure to have good posture, sitting in a chair with a straight back or lying down can make it easier to maintain good posture.
* ABDOMINAL BREATHING. The goal of abdominal breathing is to pull air deep into the bottom of your lungs so that your stomach pushes out, and then you fill the top half of your lungs with air, which maximizes air intake. To help with this, place a palm over your belly button, and the other hand over your chest. Breathe out until you are able to feel your hand pressing inward, then breath in and extend your abdomen and watch your hand move outward. Abdominal breathing is not easy for everyone to do, but like everything else in life, you need to practice to get better/good at it. This allows you to get full lungs of air, which is the way babies breathe; we as adults usually do shallow top-half-lung breathing.
* FIND YOUR RIGHT RHYTHM. Good posture and abdominal breathing are certainly important, yet it is the proper rhythm of breathing in and out that is usually most critical. The general rule I recommend is to breathe in for a count of 3 seconds and breathe out for a count of 7 seconds, both of which can feel like a long time under the circumstances. Numerous sources recommend 6 breathes per minute, which does equal 6 reps of 3-second inhalations coupled with 7-second exhalations. For me, I need to pause two seconds between both inhalation and exhalation and exhale for 10 seconds because my heart rate is 56 beats per minute, the average is 60-100 beats per minute, otherwise, the pace is too fast. If you don't have a rhythm that suits you, none of the other aspects of deep breathing are going to be nearly as effective. Practice finding the rhythm that works best for you, but do when you are calm. I cannot stress this last aspect enough, since trying to incorporate and properly use a new coping skill as nuanced as this when your anxiety is “crushing you” won’t be as effective as it could be, or won’t be effective at all, or could actually be counter-productive as you might get frustrated and feel like a failure. So play around with different rhythms and find what works best for you; I have had a couple of patients who have said 4-8 works for them. Generally, if you are feeling dizzy at all, in all likelihood, you are breathing too fast. There are a wide variety of deep breathing styles with varying rhythms:
  + 4-4-4 is breath in 4 seconds/hold for 4 seconds/breath out for 4 seconds
  + 4-7-8 is breath in 4 seconds/hold for 7 seconds/breath out for 8 seconds
  + Other types of deep breathing include Rolling Breath and Morning Breathing (Healthwise staff), as well as Pursed-Lip Breathing, Diaphragmatic Breathing, Breath Focus Technique, Lion’s Breath, Alternate Nostril Breathing, Equal Breathing, Resonant Breathing, Sitali Breath, Humming Bee Breath (Leavitt), and Sudarshan Kriya Yoga. There are even more versions for specific health issues like Breathing Exercises with COPD (Leavitt).
  + MOUTH OR NOSE. While it is commonly promoted to breathe in exclusively through your nose and out of your mouth, I prefer patients breathe out through their nose as well, otherwise ,they have a tendency to reflexively exhale way too quickly.

Now that I have covered the breathing aspects I will now focus on additional options:

* CLOSE YOUR EYES. It is preferred, but not necessary, to close your eyes and focus on the breath going in and out of your body, as doing so cuts out visual stimuli and helps increase focus/effectiveness. I find lying on a mat in a dark room quite calming.
* MAINTAIN FOCUS. There will be external stimuli competing for your attention such as a dog barking, a car driving by, or a neighbor's TV. We don't want to fight these distractions by thinking "That blasted TV is ruining my deep breathing!" Instead, we want to gently recognize it, "There's a TV; let me refocus on the breath going in and out of my body.”
* MANTRAS CAN HELP. Thinking "Good air in, bad air out," or "Calming air in, stress out," or any other phrase along these lines that might work for you, are a way to incorporate more specific focus.
* PRACTICE ACCEPTANCE. Acceptance is crucial in order to properly deal with any situation; specific phrases can be very helpful, like “I'm anxious. I've been anxious before and I survived,” or “As long as I don’t feed into my anxiety it will pass sooner than later,” or “This state of mind is just a phase; I can't stay in the same emotional state forever.” The last phrase can be particularly useful because it is an absolute fact, nobody can stay in the same emotional state forever. Develop phrases that work best for you, practice saying them out loud and internally, write them down on a piece of paper or in your cell phone, record them in your cell phone and play them back to yourself, or find an app that works for you. If you record something yourself, make sure you are talking slow and soft enough, I also like to some timber to my recordings. Technology is an amazing tool in these ways.
* VISUALIZING. One form of visualizing is to imagine stress leaving our bodies throughout the top of our heads like white smoke gently billowing out of a chimney. Another would be to recall a very pleasant memory, although some people prefer not to use this since their minds tend to recall negative experiences from the past. Fantasizing about a dream vacation can work better than thinking of the past; for me, it's being with my family on a sailboat in New Zealand.
* MASSAGE. My favorite technique is self-massage. People hold stress in various parts of the body which can affect us in a lot of ways such as upset stomach, headache, TMJ and knotted muscles. Muscle tension can contribute to people being on edge, which can manifest in being more prone to stress, anger or anxiety. A lot of people tend to hold a majority of their stress from the shoulders up. Massaging these areas gets more blood flow to that part of the body, relieves tension, and is usually very relaxing physically and mentally. For shoulders and trapezius muscles, it’s best to massage them one at a time, otherwise, you are engaging the muscles we are trying to massage, and that won't work very well. For neck muscles, I find cupping the base of the skull with the pinky-side of your palm up and massaging the muscles all with one hand works better than using two hands at the same time because this arrangement allows the neck muscles to relax better. Jaw muscles, forehead, base of the back of our skull, and skull can take a good amount of pressure. Most of my patients, especially those who noted deep breathing didn’t work for them, are surprised how well this particular technique works.
* SINGING. Since the vagus nerve is connected to the pharynx, larynx and thorax, singing in all its variations can be very calming. While any style of singing can be helpful, I find that certain types of singing have better results: yelling with heavy metal or punk music can be a cathartic release of pent-up frustrations; pounding out a pop anthem like a declaration of independence can be reaffirming and inspirational; chants and hymns can be uplifting, with an additional unifying quality to them in groups; crooning a love song may soothe sadness; lullabies are well-known for being sleep-inducing; humming is a simple way to practice a type of deep breathing that does not require remembering words or even any specific tune or rhythm yet has the benefit of keeping intrusive thoughts from interfering with the task at hand.
* RELIEVED STANCE. A colleague recently told me that deep breathing while standing erect with your hands behind your head is supposed to trigger the vagus nerve even more. In my mind, it certainly seems to stretch the torso which would make it easier to expand the lungs. This makes sense because athletes often do this reflexively after sprinting, although this might cause problems in other situations.
* SIGHING. Sighing is a reflexive way people practice deep breathing without realizing it. Yet, some people might ask you if something is wrong because sighs are typically associated with boredom, frustration, annoyance and disappointment. However, sighing really is just an unconscious and natural response we have to these states, although it is better to keep minor annoyances to oneself, verbalize discontent appropriately, or practice deep breathing in a more mindful way; when I would drive my family on trips over an hour, I would sigh multiple times and my empathic son would think I was bored and not enjoying my family time and feel bad when the reality is that driving was/is basically intolerable for me. (Full disclosure: writing this paragraph induced several sighs.)

I love practicing these deep breathing techniques with my patients since I get to zero out my stress level and feel so relaxed. Once you have found your own sweet spot with these options, it is amazing how quickly deep breathing can be so calming. The nice thing about it, too, is it can be modified to do almost anywhere: at work, driving, or even in a restaurant. You don't have to get tranced out like a yogi to bring your stress level down a notch or two, which is usually all anyone needs to do in order to regain enough equilibrium to be on task or manage a stressful situation. Just practicing deep breathing as little as 30 seconds or 1 minute morning, noon, and night can help regulate our bodies to keep stress from building up too much over the course of a day and be a great preemptive way to minimize anxiety.

Here is a video that provides the basics: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SVBrqO77HYI

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