Breathing

Simple breathing practices reduce stress and anxiety; promote restful sleep; ease pain; increase attention and focus; and, on a more subtle level, help people connect to a calm, quiet place within so that they may experience greater clarity and well-being on every level.

Most people's unconscious breathing patterns are anything but easeful and smooth; they tend to be tense, shallow, and erratic. When we are afraid or hear bad news, we often gasp—inhaling and then holding the breath. These breathing patterns can activate the sympathetic nervous system (often referred to as the "fight or flight response").

A long, smooth exhale (like the ones presented here) can be so beneficial because, when practiced correctly, they can support the parasympathetic nervous system and activate what is commonly known as the "relaxation response," reducing stress and its effects on your body and mind. As a result, your resilience in the face of challenge or adversity increases, and your mind becomes more focused and still.

Breathing techniques are particularly vital because they deepen the breath and stretch the group of muscles responsible for widening and narrowing the chest. Deep breathing can stimulate circulation or digestion and increase the oxygen level in the blood. The circulation of oxygen-rich blood increases your muscle power as well as your mental power. Breathing techniques play a key role in helping you get focused, concentrate, and meditate.

Contraindications Don’t underestimate the effects of yoga breathing techniques. Though there are only a few contraindications, you should immediately stop a yoga breathing exercise if it doesn’t feel right and return to your normal inhalation and exhalation.

The regular breath in yoga is a nostril breath, but in rare cases other methods, such as exhaling through the mouth, will be indicated. The breath initiates and leads the movement, so if you feel short of breath, slow down the pace of the movement.
Three Breathing Exercises

1. Basic Breath Awareness

This gentle introduction to diaphragmatic breathing teaches you how to breathe more fully and consciously.

*Benefits: Quiets and calms the entire nervous system, reducing stress and anxiety and improving self-awareness.*

Try it: At least once a day, at any time.

How to: Lie comfortably on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the floor about hip-distance apart. Place a palm on your abdomen and breathe comfortably for a few moments, noticing the quality of your breath. Does the breath feel tense? strained? uneven? shallow? Simply observe the breath without any judgment. Then gradually begin to make your breathing as relaxed and smooth as possible, introducing a slight pause after each in-breath and out-breath.

Once the breath feels relaxed and comfortable, notice the movement of the body. As you inhale, the abdomen naturally expands; as you exhale, feel the slight contraction of the abdomen. In a gentle way, try to actively expand the abdomen on the inhale and contract the abdomen on the exhale to support the natural movement of the diaphragm and experience the pleasure of giving yourself a full, relaxed breath. Continue the practice for 6 to 12 breaths.

2. The Long Exhale

This 1:2 breathing practice, which involves gradually increasing your exhalation until it is twice the length of your inhalation, relaxes the nervous system.

*Benefits: Can reduce insomnia, sleep disturbances, and anxiety.*

Try it: Before bedtime to help support sleep, in the middle of the night when you're struggling with insomnia, or at any time of the day to calm stress or anxiety. (In general, it's best to avoid practicing 1:2 breathing first thing in the morning unless you're experiencing anxiety. The relaxing effects of the practice tend to make it more difficult to get up and go on with your day.)

How to: Begin by lying on your back with your knees bent and feet flat on the floor, hip-width apart. Place a palm on the abdomen and take a few relaxed breaths, feeling the abdomen expand on the inhalation and gently contract on the exhalation. With your palm on your abdomen, mentally count the length of each inhalation and exhalation for several more breaths. If the inhalation is longer than the exhalation, you can begin to make them the same length over the next few breaths.
Once your inhalation and exhalation are equal, gradually increase the length of your exhalation by 1 to 2 seconds by gently contracting the abdomen. As long as the breath feels smooth and relaxed, continue to gradually increase the exhalation by 1 to 2 seconds once every few breaths. Make sure you experience no strain as the exhalation increases and keep going until your exhalation is up to twice the length of the inhalation, but not beyond. For example, if your inhalation is comfortably 4 seconds, do not increase the length of your exhalation to more than 8 seconds.

Keep in mind that even an exhalation that is only slightly longer than the inhalation can induce a calming effect, so take care that you don't push yourself beyond your capacity. (If you do, you'll likely activate the sympathetic nervous system, or stress response, and feel agitated rather than calm.)

If your breath feels uncomfortable or short, or if you're gasping on the next inhalation, back off to a ratio that is more comfortable for 8 to 12 breaths. Then finish your practice with 6 to 8 natural, relaxed breaths.

Kate Holcombe is the founder and president of the nonprofit Healing Yoga Foundation in San Francisco. Adapted by Mark A. Dannenfelser, LPC

3. Alternate Nostril Breathing

Simply by practicing a few rounds of alternate nostril breathing for a few minutes each day, you can help restore imbalances in your brain – improve sleep – calm your emotional state – boost your thinking – calm your nervous system.

**Benefits:** Can cool a busy mind and calm an overstimulated nervous system; revitalizes; improves brain function; balances the mind (left “thinking” brain and right “feeling brain”).

**Caution:** Do not hold your breath if you have high blood pressure. More advanced methods of alternate nostril breathing need to be practiced with an experienced practitioner. Practicing on an empty stomach is preferred.

Step one: Use right thumb to close off right nostril.
Step two: Inhale slowly through left nostril
Step three: Pause for a second
Step four: Now close left nostril with ring finger and release thumb off right nostril
Step five: Exhale through your right nostril
Step six: Now, inhale through right nostril
Step seven: Pause
Step eight: Use thumb to close of right nostril
Step nine: Breathe out through left nostril
Step ten: This is one round. Start slowly with 1 or 2 rounds and gradually increase. Never force.

Sit quietly for a few moments after you have finished.

“12 Great Reasons To Start Alternate Nostril Breathing” by CAROLE FOGARTY. Adapted by Mark A. Dannenfelser, LPC