

Diaphragmatic Breathing for Reducing Anxiety, Worry, Stress & Panic

This technique can be done anywhere, any time. Whether you are tense at work or home, whether in public or private, you can breathe without being obvious.

For seven days, practice this breathing for 1-2 minutes at a time, up to 10 times a day.

The moments throughout the day when you need to wait for something are ideal opportunities to practice. While you wait for water to boil, the light to change, the computer to load a file, the elevator to arrive, etc., take that moment to practice diaphragmatic breathing. You can also post notes, set an audible reminder on your phone, change the desktop on your computer and wallpaper on your phone. Make it a habit! And should you forget - just begin again (and again).

How & when to practice breathing

Most breathing and relaxation books suggest 10 minutes of breathing per day, but this can seem to be too much to do. It is better to start with a manageable task and, later, build up to the longer period of breathing, which will set the stage for deep relaxation. Here's how to practice:

1. Lie down flat on your back, sit up straight, or stand in a relaxed manner, feet slightly apart, knees loose. You must have a straight passage for air to flow. If you are seated, make sure you are sitting up very straight and that your head is upright, not hanging forward or tilted way back.
2. Rest your hand on your abdomen. This will help you to notice if you are breathing low with your diaphragm or high into your chest. One way to imagine this is to think about how a balloon fills with water when you attach it to a faucet. The bottom fills and widens first and then the water expands the upper portion. This image of heaviness as you fill suggests how to imagine your breath. Form an image of your breath filling your abdomen, feeling heavy and warm. This will help your body to relax and fill your lungs completely.
3. Next, blow out all the air in your lungs until you feel empty. If possible, breathe in and out just through the nose.
4. Then begin to breathe in. Inhaling must be done evenly, as if you can fill your lungs from bottom to top in equal, even amounts. It will help you to breathe evenly if you find a pace that works to measure your breathing in and out. Count your breathing until you feel exactly full, (e.g., a slow 1,2,3,4) to help you get a measured, even breath. Chances are you will take between 3-6 counts to fill your lungs with smoothly. If you don't like counting, breathe while thinking a sentence with an even rhythm such as, "I notice I am breathing in. I notice I am breathing out."
5. Fill up evenly, no gulps or gasps, so the top is reached physically (in your image of the balloon) just in time to release the breath at the same even, measured pace.
6. Exhale evenly. Count the breath out of your body, without any sudden release, never taking less time to exhale than you took to inhale. A smooth extended exhale is the best 'volume control' we have to turn down the anxiety process in the brain. Concentrate on the exhale, rather than the inhale, letting the inhale happen with very little effort, beyond keeping it smooth and even. Your body needs time to exchange the oxygen and carbon dioxide, and too much effort inhaling can make you dizzy. If this happens, just ease up for a few breaths then resume.
7. Practice! This breathing is for you to use to calm down and get grounded when you're caught up in worry or are having a panic attack. Most people who panic complete forget their panic control measures unless they have trained via repeated practice. It is essential to use diaphragmatic breathing the moment you sense a panic attack beginning, so you must practice frequently, whether or not you feel anxiety, worry, tension or panic at the moment. Don't tell yourself, "I'm not that stressed today, so I don't need to practice." That's the perfect time, as your body and brain will learn quickly, and you can even reset your baseline level of tension to a lower level.

Gratefully adapted from Dr. M. Wehrenberg's [The 10 Best-Ever Anxiety Management Techniques: How Your Brain Makes You Anxious & What You Can Do About It & The 10 Best-Ever Anxiety Management Techniques Workbook](#), which includes a CD with an audio version of this practice and nine others .