

Relax & Start Your Meditation with this 6-Step Breathing Exercise

LAST UPDATED: DECEMBER 27, 2015 BY JULIA RYMUT <http://www.juliarymut.com/>

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You decide that meditation could help.

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focus.

So you do what everyone says to do when you need to relax- you take a deep breath.

You inhale as deeply as you can, lifting your shoulders to your ears and letting out your breath with a large huff.

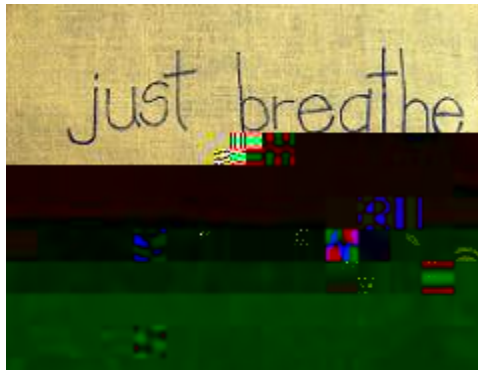
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Honestly, how many times has taking a deep breath helped you relax?

What happens when you breathe?

The idea of using the breath to relax is not crazy. There are sound, physiological ways that the breath can reset your nervous system. But unfortunately, not every breath is equal. Some ways of relaxing with the breath are more effective than others.



To understand the relationship between breathing and relaxation, you first need to understand a little anatomy.

An inhalation is created when you expand your lungs. The extra space in the lungs allows air to flow inward. If the lungs are contracted, the air is forced out, causing an exhalation.

There are two mechanisms you use to expand or contract your lungs- your diaphragm and your rib cage.

The diaphragm is a thin muscle that separates the abdominal cavity from the upper trunk. With a relaxed, natural inhalation, your diaphragm contracts and moves downward toward your abdominal organs. This creates space in your upper trunk to allow air to flow into your lungs.

You exhale in reverse. Your diaphragm stops contracting and moves upward. This forces the air out of your lungs.

And your rib cage? Your ribs expand and contract calmly in sync with your diaphragm.

This soft contraction and relaxation of the diaphragm, the gentle up and down movement, happens automatically when you are relaxed and happy.

However, when you are stressed, tense, and nervous, the process changes dramatically.

Depending on the type and degree of stress, several things can happen to the action of your diaphragm. As your diaphragm tenses, the rate and depth of your breathing can change. Sometimes your diaphragm freezes and hardly moves. And at other times, your diaphragm can actually reverse- moving upward on the inhale and downward on the exhale.

In any of these cases, the diaphragm is no longer functioning optimally to bring air into the lungs. As a result, your ribs need to compensate. Your neck and shoulders start to work double-

Your body knows how to breathe



Knowing how to use the breath to relax is a great tool to reset your nervous

system.

The first principle to remember is that *your body knows how to breathe*.

This seems obvious. Of course we know how to breathe.

But we often start to think that one type of breath is better than another. That you should always breathe with your diaphragm. Or that deep, slow breathing is always better than fast, shallow breathing.

Your body has a large repertoire of breathing strategies because you need them.

So the first principle is that the way you are breathing, *however* you are breathing, is perfectly fine.

Using the breath to relax is just a tool to interrupt the cycle of stress.

your breath, become aware of whether your exhalation is complete before the next inhalation begins. Sit with natural breathing for a few moments.

5. Rest at the end of the exhalation. Notice that moment that naturally happens when you don't need to extend it- just enjoy it as it comes.

6. Continue breathing naturally and softly.

Meditation can be done in just a few minutes. And you may be surprised by how good you feel by simply allowing a natural exhalation.

But if you have time, this routine is a great way to begin meditation. Bringing awareness to your exhalation helps quiet your mind. You become present in your body. You live in the present moment.

Taking a deep breath rarely results in relaxation. Deep inhalations contract the diaphragm and could send signals to the brain that there is something to be stressed about.

Deep inhalations can be s flashy. But exhaling completely is much more likely to reset your nervous system.

So when you want to focus and slow down, allow a soft, complete exhalation.