



Breathing techniques to aid relaxation.

Deep breathing is one of the best ways to lower your stress levels. This is because when you breathe deeply, it sends a message to your brain to calm down and relax. This factsheet explores how you can develop a calming breathing technique.



The stress response

We are all being asked to do more, with less and faster! Our days can often feel as if we're jumping from one sudden high-pressure situation to another. The net result being we are spending longer and longer in our 'stretch and strain zones' with little time to relax and recharge our batteries which can only take its toll on wellbeing in the long run.

The stress response, or 'fight or flight' response, is what the body does as it prepares to confront or avoid a perceived danger. When appropriately called upon, the stress response helps us rise to many challenges. But trouble starts when this response is constantly provoked by less momentous, day-to-day events, such as money issues, traffic jams, job worries, or relationship problems.

Resilience is not just your ability to bounce back from big, unusual or tough events, but also your capacity to adapt in the face of challenging circumstances, whilst maintaining a stable mental wellbeing. This isn't a personality trait – it's something that we can all take steps to achieve.

Becoming aware of our breathing

A simple way we can help to control our stress response is through being aware of and controlling our breathing.

Our breathing patterns vary depending on our emotional state.

- When relaxed we breathe deeply, quietly and evenly.
- When under pressure we breathe in a shallow and fast manner. When this happens, we only use the top of our lungs and it is known as hyperventilation or over breathing.

Proper breathing physically helps us to relax and calm down and prevents anxiety-associated hyperventilation. It enables us to feel more in control of the situation.

Calming breathing

Calming breathing can be used anywhere and at any time to help calm you down and relax; you can use it to react to situations or better still as a preventative measure if you see stressful situations are about to develop.

- Position yourself in a quiet environment, at home or at work
- Make sure the air temperature is comfortable
- Sit comfortably in a chair or in a relaxed position
- Drop your shoulders naturally, so that your lungs can fully expand
- Gently lift your head and fix your eyes straight ahead of you; don't strain
- Take 5 slow steady breaths
- Try breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth
- Begin 'Calming Breathing' by breathing in easily and gently to the count of three, breathing out to the same count
- This breathing should not be noticeable to others, only your calmness should be visible

Try to recognise the signs of oncoming anxiety or stress; or identify situations that are likely to be stressful. The earlier that you use calming breathing the more effective it will be.

Diaphragmatic breathing

- Lie on the floor placing a small pillow under your head and another under your knees (this is optional)
- Place your hands flat across your stomach, with just the tips of your fingers touching
- 'Bell' out your stomach as you breathe in, filling the lower lobes of your lungs with air (your fingers should move apart) and count to three.
- As you breathe out to the count of three, flatten your stomach muscles (your fingers will be drawn together again)

Give yourself a couple of minutes alone each day to practice diaphragmatic breathing; you will find it becomes a little oasis of tranquillity and calm in your day.

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By simply observing our breathing we can become more in control of our stress and become more resilient.