Many Different Ways to Breathe

There are different types of breathing that involve movement of different areas of the trunk portion of the upper body. Many people breathe by expanding and contracting their chests (chest breathing). Sometimes they lift their shoulders as well in an attempt to more fully fill their lungs with air (shoulder breathing).

There is another type of breathing called diaphragmatic breathing that involves an in and out movement of the abdomen. Chest and shoulder breathing are relatively inefficient and can cause chest and shoulder pain due to muscle fatigue. They also can cause and/or worsen feelings of anxiety and panic. Diaphragmatic breathing, on the other hand, is calming and relaxing. It can reduce anxiety and panic. Also, it is the most efficient way to breathe, allowing for the exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide with the least amount of effort.

The Natural Way to Breathe

Infants and children naturally breathe diaphragmatically. We are born with this capability, but as we mature, we often change our breathing patterns as an adaptation to stressful events and experiences. When psychological and physiological defenses to stress are activated, the chest and/or shoulder muscles are used for breathing. Many adults have developed the habit of breathing this way, especially when nervous, tense or anxious. Also, since diaphragmatic breathing involves the slight extension of the abdomen, many adults try to avoid this because of their concern about physical attractiveness.

Practicing diaphragmatic breathing promotes a feeling of general relaxation and can be a very effective coping tool to deal with stress and anxiety. While everyone knows how to breathe this way, given that the capacity is inborn, most people have difficulty voluntarily initiating diaphragmatic breathing, especially when stressed or anxious. As a result, it is helpful to practice diaphragmatic breathing regularly so that we will be able to use it effectively to cope with stressful situations.

Are You Doing Diaphragmatic Breathing Correctly?

- When doing diaphragmatic breathing, the chest does not expand and the shoulders do not move up or down.
- Air flows easily and smoothly into and out of the lungs. It is not drawn in forcibly or blown out.
- The abdomen rises with each inhalation and lowers with each exhalation.
- The rate of breathing is slow, approximately six to ten breaths a minute.
- When you get accustomed to it, it should feel easy, natural and relaxing.
A Step-By-Step Guide

Begin by practicing **diaphragmatic breathing** a couple of times a day as part of a brief relaxation period. Any time you feel physically or emotionally tense, you should use diaphragmatic breathing. It is not necessary that you breathe this way throughout the day. Remember, however, that like other skills, relaxed breathing must be practiced often and in a variety of settings to be most effective.

Here are some specific instructions for doing diaphragmatic breathing. Read through them and put them into practice. You will find that they can be very helpful to you.

1. Initially, practice diaphragmatic breathing while lying on your back on a bed, recliner chair or on a well-padded floor. Once you can do diaphragmatic breathing easily in this position, practice while sitting and later while standing.

2. Rest one hand comfortably on your abdomen. Place the other hand on your chest. Inhale through your nose because this allows air to be filtered and warmed. Exhale through the nose or the mouth. If you have nasal stuffiness or other nasal difficulties, inhale through your mouth. Quietly concentrate on your breathing for a few minutes and become aware of which hand is rising and falling with each breath.

3. After a few moments, gently exhale most of the air from your lungs, pause briefly and then inhale slowly while counting to three (about one second per count). As you inhale, slightly extend your abdomen causing it to rise about one or two inches. You should be able to feel the movement with your hand. Remember, do not move your chest or pull your shoulders up. As you breathe in and your abdomen rises, imagine warmed and relaxing air flowing into your lungs and flowing out through your blood stream to every part of your body.

4. Pause for a second after inhaling, and then slowly exhale for approximately two times as many counts as you inhaled. For example, if you inhaled to a count of three, try slowly exhaling to a count of six. While you exhale, your abdomen will slowly recede as the diaphragm relaxes upward against your lungs. As air flows out, imagine that your mind is becoming calm and tension is flowing out of your body.

5. If it is difficult to exhale twice as long as you inhaled, shorten the count slightly and later work up to a longer exhalation. If you experience light-headedness, alter the length and depth of your breathing.

6. Repeat the slow inhaling, pausing, slow exhaling about fifteen or twenty times, or longer, if you wish. Then cease the exercise. Your ability to breathe diaphragmatically will improve with practice. Try to practice at least twice a day lying down, and then practice sitting, standing and in a variety of settings.

**The main idea is to learn to initiate diaphragmatic breathing to promote calmness and relaxation when needed.**