



Breathing for Wellbeing and Calm

Overview: The health of body, mind and heart is continuously affected by trauma, violence, stress, fear, diet, environment, daily news, and the challenges of life. The following simple exercises are offered for use at times when we feel stressed, distressed, overwhelmed or scattered. These tools are for all of us, whether we are survivors of trauma, activists confronting injustice and oppression, caregivers working with others or persons overwhelmed and stressed by daily life.

Purpose: Breath is the source of life, bringing fresh energy into the tissues and cells to nourish body, mind and the whole person. When we breathe out, accumulated stress and toxins are released. Breathing through a stressful time is an effective way to let go of the tension that accumulates in the body. A few long deep breaths at a difficult moment can completely change the way we handle a situation. Breath-work combined with images of light or nature can promote feelings of peace, calm and focus.

Simple breathing exercises are calming for both the nervous system and the overworked mind. Your exhale needs to be longer than your inhale, the vagus nerve (running from the neck down through the diaphragm) sends a signal to your brain to turn up your parasympathetic nervous system and turn down your sympathetic nervous system. The sympathetics command your fight or flight response, and when they fire, your heart rate and your breathing speed up, and stress hormones like cortisol start pumping through your bloodstream, preparing your body to face a threat. If the threat is, "A lion is chasing me and I need to run away," this is helpful. If the threat is, "I am late for work" or, "I'm so upset with my colleague" this is not particularly helpful, and in fact it can be damaging – when cortisol is elevated for too long or too frequently it disturbs all the hormonal systems of the body. The parasympathetics, on the other hand, control your rest, relax, and digest response. When the parasympathetic system is dominant, your breathing slows, your heart rate drops, your blood pressure lowers as the blood vessels relax, and your body is put into a state of calm and healing.

Time: 5 minutes - 1 hour



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Materials: Quiet space, chair or if you prefer you can sit on the floor in which case you may require a cushion for comfort.

Credit: Adapted from the *Capacitar Emergency Response Tool Kit* www.capacitar.org

Exercises

Purpose: The following simple exercises are offered to be used at times when we feel drained or scattered. These tools are for all of us, whether we are survivors of trauma, caregivers working with others or persons overwhelmed and stressed by daily life.

Methodology:

Breathing 1 - Abdominal Breathing

Process: Breathe deeply and centre yourself, letting go of all worries and thoughts. Abdominal breathing can be practiced lying down on your back, sitting down or while standing.

Lie down. Separate your legs slightly and let the feet fall to the sides. Interlock the fingers and place the hands on your abdomen, palms facing downwards. Make a conscious effort to inhale deeply, so that your abdomen starts to expand your fingers separate. Allow your abdomen to expand as much as possible. As you begin to exhale, apply gentle pressure on your abdomen with your hands, pushing it downwards. Exhale fully. The secret to good breathing is in proper exhalation. With better exhalation, your inhalation will also get better.

Repeat this process several times. When you feel comfortable, take full abdominal breaths without using your hands. And make your breath long and smooth, for both inhalation and exhalation.

Breathing 2 - Breathing in Calm

Process: To begin, sit still and tall somewhere comfortable. Close your eyes and begin breathing through your nose.

Then, inhale for a count of two... hold the breath in for a count of one... exhale gently, counting out for four... and finish by holding the breath out for a count of one. Keep your breathing even and smooth.



If the 2 - 4 count feels too short try increasing the breath lengths to 4 in and 6 out, or 6 in and 8 out, and so on. But if longer breaths create any anxiety there is no need to push yourself. The most important thing is that the exhale is longer than the inhale, not the absolute length of the breath. Set a timer and breathe this way for at least five minutes. You will see a difference in your mood.

Breathing 3 - Breathing in Nature

Process: Nature is a great resource for healing and grounding. With feet on the ground, breathe in deeply imagining that your feet are long roots running into the earth. Breathe in earth energy; breathe out stress, tension and pain. Slowly focus on tensing and relaxing each muscle group for two to three seconds each. Start with the feet and toes, then move up to the knees, thighs, rear, chest, arms, hands, neck, jaw and eyes – all while maintaining deep, slow breaths. Take a moment to listen to the sounds of nature while slowly bringing participants back into the present, asking them to slowly and gently open their eyes when they are ready.

Breathing 4 - Oxygenating your body

Process: Stand with your feet firmly on the ground. Raise your arms in the air. Take a deep breath in. As you lower your arms breathe out in a vigorous manner, your elbows coming in close to the side of your body. Repeat in cycles of 8. This exercise causes a rapid intake of oxygen and could result in mild dizziness as a result.