

STRESS & BREATHING

Breathing has well-documented and extremely powerful effects on bodily function. Learning to be aware of breathing is the first step toward controlling the physical and mental effects of stress. There are two basic types of breathing:

Diaphragmatic or belly breathing

The diaphragm is a large sheet of muscle, like a piece of rubber balloon stretched over the bottom of the lungs. When breathing is natural and relaxed, on the inhale the diaphragm moves down. The contents of the abdomen naturally move forward so that the belly expands. If you place your hand on your belly, you will feel it bulge out on the inhale and flatten back on the exhale if you are breathing diaphragmatically. During stress there is a tendency to hold the breath, to breath irregularly, and to exhale incompletely. When the exhalation is incomplete, not enough fresh air can enter the lungs on the inhalation. This leads to a pattern of chest breathing where the diaphragm is not being used.

Chest or stress breathing

This type of breathing is rapid and shallow. The chest expands and the shoulders rise with each breath, since the lungs are being expanded by the small muscles between the ribs, rather than by the diaphragm. This type of breathing results in poor exchange of stale air with fresh air and blood chemistry changes that result in anxiety and fatigue. It also stimulates the sympathetic nervous system producing a widespread stress response. A vicious cycle ensues where stress leads to chest breathing and the physiological consequences of this shallow breathing magnify the stress response.

Shortcutting stress breathing

Learning to breath diaphragmatically automatically shifts physiology out of the stress mode into the relaxation mode. Begin by relaxing back against a chair so that you are reclining slightly. It's helpful to close your eyes. Take a deep breath and then exhale slowly and completely. Place a hand on your belly and notice whether you can feel your belly expand with your in-breath, and flatten back with your out-breath. Some people find it helpful to sense or imagine the diaphragm bulging downward on the in-breath, and returning to its original position on the outbreath.

By simply paying attention to your belly, you will soon learn to shift automatically into diaphragmatic breathing. Heart rate will slow, blood pressure will decrease, and sympathetic nervous system arousal as a whole will decline, leading to a subjective sense of relaxation and a decrease in anxiety and restlessness.

