

Refresh, Relax, and Renew Yourself Through Conscious Breathing

«I need a vacation!» is a common statement from stressed-out friends and co-workers, but we can't just take off every time life stresses us out. So how does one escape without actually skipping town? Through conscious breathing.

That may sound like a simplistic statement because breathing is underrated. It basically happens unconsciously so we take it for granted, but when we bring awareness to it, breathing transforms from solely keeping us alive to creating a desired effect in body, mind, and spirit. According to Kendra Fried, a board-certified holistic health and nutrition counselor, hypnotherapist, Reiki Master Teacher, massage therapist, and yoga instructor (whew!), thoughtful breathing can make a big influence on your state of mind and well-being. You can, essentially, learn how to relax your body and refresh your entire soul with just a little effort.



Fried explains that when we're stressed out our breathing becomes very shallow. «When the nervous system goes into 'fight or flight,' basic functions like digestion and deep breathing shut down so that you can use all your energy to survive,» she says.

«Back in the days of saber-toothed tigers this was necessary. But [nowadays] there is rarely a need to be in this survival mode.» So while your blood may boil when you run into an awful ex-boyfriend, have a conflict with a co-worker, or you accidentally break your cell phone, these occurrences don't warrant the reaction your body may be having. The way to combat those emotional reactions is through shallow breathing, because it can fan the flames of your inner drama.

How does it work?

Body & Mind Follow the Breath.

«The most efficient and enjoyable way to gain control over your reaction to stress is to start breathing consciously,» Fried says. «Peaceful, centered breath creates the same environment in body and mind. It is *that* simple. It can take as little as one minute to experience the magic of these results! Having said this, I encourage you to practice as long and often as possible. You will notice the cumulative benefits of relaxation touching every area of your life.»

Fried suggests a technique called 3-part breathing (Dirgha), which can be done while driving, when you have insomnia, or any time you find yourself needing to relax.

1. Close your eyes. Settle into your body. Let your body relax into whatever you're on—the bed, chair, floor, etc. «Bring awareness to your breathing just as it is, without changing anything at first,» she says. «Where does the breath seem to stop? At the top of the lungs, at the bottom? Where do you feel tension? How deep or shallow is your breath in this moment?»

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2. Once you recognize how you're breathing, focus on bringing your inhale into the lower pelvis and belly. Let the whole area fill and expand, then exhale all of the air. After doing this several times, do the same with your ribcage, filling it entirely and then exhaling everything. After a few rounds of this breathing, focus on those big tension areas: the upper back, chest, armpits, and lower neck area. «Imagine that the upper lungs are a hot air balloon beginning to fill and rise up into space,» Fried suggests.



3. Now it's time to connect all three parts with long inhales and exhales. Lower belly, middle ribcage, upper ribcage fills with gentle breath and then releases. In no time you'll see the tension drain away and your body fill with a wonderful sense of peace.

As a caution, Fried explains that this exercise should have us releasing stress and pressure. «So if you begin to feel physical or mental tension while doing this exercise, back off a little. Let go of needing to be perfect at it. Also, if you are getting dizzy, slow down, and notice if your inhale is longer than your exhale. Keep them equal if possible. We don't want paper bags to be a part of this technique. You're breathing, not wheezing!»

Regular, conscious breathing allows one to experience what Fried calls "a peaceful center." That's a valuable reference point, because once you un-

derstand what it's like to consciously feel peaceful, then you know where to direct your mind when encountering stressful events. With continued practice, those situations won't inflame you the way they once did, letting you take a stress-vacation in your office, at home—anywhere and any time tensions hit.