

BREATHING TECHNIQUES TO REDUCE STRESS

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One of the easiest ways to reduce stress is also the one most essential for sustaining life – breathing. When you are breathing properly, your body is able to relax because it is getting the oxygen it needs.

Fresh Air

Simply getting a few deep whiffs of fresh air works wonders. Fresh air can help you:

- * achieve measurably lower levels of stress,
- * oxygenate your tissues,
- * improve circulation,
- * increase alertness,
- * diminish muscle tension, and
- * reduce anxiety.

If you live in an area where the air quality is poor, there is no other way to say this: you are missing out. Your best strategy may be to take frequent trips out of town, away from traffic, and away from population centers. Get to the top of a small mountain where the air is clear and clean, but not necessarily thin. Or, take a walk in the woods, where trees and plants take in nitrogen and return oxygen to the atmosphere. Fresh air combined with a brisk walk is Valhalla.

Deep Breathing

Surrounded by fresh air or not, deep, diaphragmatic breathing is an important stress reducer for everyone. Much has been written about this, and it's fairly easy to over-complicate the process. The simplest metaphor that I can think of is this:

Imagine that there is a balloon in your stomach. As you inhale, you fill up the balloon. As you exhale, you deflate the balloon. Inhale, exhale. In both cases, there's no need to rush. The balloon can fill slowly, and empty slowly. Your chest and shoulders do not need to be a part of the process. Moreover, it's much better if they're not. As you achieve deep diaphragmatic breaths, your chest and whole torso will move, but they are not actively involved in the process.

On the Floor

Another way to understand diaphragmatic breathing, especially if you haven't been doing it, is to simply lie on the floor. Now, breath as you normally would, while placing one or both hands over your stomach, near your navel.

Do you feel that up and down motion? That's it, you're doing diaphragmatic breathing, through your abdomen!

So, why don't you do this all the time? Other than when you are lying down, if you are excited, tense, or in a hurry, it's easy to slip into a nonproductive routine, raising your shoulders, expanding your chest, and letting these areas be the driving forces behind your breathing.

Human anatomy has been a couple million years in the making, however, and chest breathing is simply not as efficient as diaphragmatic breathing. If you've been engaged in vigorous athletic activity, you may resort to using your chest and upper torso in combination with your abdomen to gain more oxygen into your lungs faster. This is understandable. At a more normal heart rate, however, deep diaphragmatic breathing is best for homo sapiens, including you.