

Take a deep breath... and relax

Introduction

Breathing. It is something you have been doing since you were born and usually without a second thought. The interesting thing about breathing is that it is something that is partially automatic and at the same time, partially within our control. In this article, I explore aspects of proper breathing and how and why it benefits our physical and psychological well being.

Become Aware of Your Breathing

Pause for a moment and reflect on your breathing. Do you generally take slow deep breaths? Or do you tend to breathe in a more shallow way? What parts of your body are you using as you breathe? How does your breathing change in response to various situations around you? How is your breathing connected to your thoughts?

Note the answers to these questions as you continue to read this article, and see what might be applicable to your situation.

What Goes on When You Breathe?

Breath and the act of breathing are, in essence, the basis of life. That is how we get the oxygen we need for our body to survive, and that is also how we eliminate carbon dioxide - a waste product of our body's metabolism.

When a person breathes, "new" air enters the lungs, and "old" air leaves. Within the lungs, an exchange takes place, whereby blood cells get oxygen from the new air, and release carbon dioxide- which then leaves with the old air. You can think of the blood cells as little couriers who help to transport oxygen and carbon dioxide back and forth from the lungs to various parts of the body. When you breathe fully and deeply, you are helping the couriers do their job better.

What is Proper Breathing?

You are breathing at your best when the exchange of gasses is occurring to the fullest extent possible. Proper breathing is also characterized by slow, steady and deep breaths. It is the kind of breathing you do when you are asleep, and involves the diaphragm, a major muscle that sits below the lungs and above the abdomen.

You can tell if you are using your diaphragm fully by looking at what happens as you breathe. Is your belly gently moving in and out as you inhale and exhale? If so, it is likely that you are breathing properly.

What is Improper Breathing?

Improper or inefficient breathing is generally characterized by a shallow pattern of breathing that involves the upper part of the chest and shoulders instead of the abdomen and diaphragm. So instead of the abdomen moving, the shoulder and upper chest are more active. In addition, this kind of breathing tends to be irregular and fast.

Take a look at how you breathe. If you find that you are using your shoulders more than your abdomen, it is likely that you are not breathing as fully as you can.

Why is Proper Breathing Essential to Wellbeing?

When a person does not breathe properly, they are not exchanging oxygen and carbon dioxide efficiently. And that means that their body is not getting what it needs to function well, nor is it fully eliminating waste. As a result, people with poor breathing are inclined to feel fatigued.

Additionally, poor breathing patterns are associated with anxiety, panic and worries. While poor breathing is not a cause of anxiety, the two are intimately connected with one another. When a person feels anxious, without realizing it, he or she begins to breathe faster than usual. This fast breathing then serves as a "signal" to the person that things are not going well. As a result of "reading" this signal, the person gets even more worried or scared, and so breathes even faster (and less fully).

Consequently, even less oxygen gets into the body, and the person is inclined to feel worse, which in turn serves to "verify" that something is indeed wrong. But if the person had slowed down his or her breathing at the first sign of anxiety, they would have been able to get enough oxygen, and thereby would have felt better.

When Can Deep Breathing Help You Cope Better?

Deep breathing is a "tool" that you always have on hand, and can help you be at your best, no matter what the situation. The following examples show a variety of situations where deep breathing can be useful:

- whenever you find yourself feeling anxious or worried - even when you cannot clearly identify the cause of your worry;
- when dealing with cravings - such as for a particular food or for a cigarette;
- when discussing important matters with a family member, with whom you have a history of conflict;
- when you are being assertive and standing up for what you want-be it in a restaurant, shop or even when at the doctor's;
- when dealing with invasive medical procedures such as having blood drawn, or having a colonoscopy or eye exam;
- when awaiting news such as the results of a lab test

Barriers to Proper Breathing

Some people may have a medical problem that prevents them from expanding their abdomen and diaphragm fully. If you find you have such difficulties, speak with your health care provider about this, and see what they can advise you. Even if you cannot fully use your diaphragm, chances are there is still room to improve upon what you are doing. For instance, you can become aware of the connection between your breathing patterns and your emotions, and learn to slow down your breathing when you find yourself feeling tense.

If you do not have a medical problem, but nevertheless find yourself experiencing difficulty breathing to your fullest capacity, try the following: empty your lungs as much as you can, and then take deep breaths. As you breathe out, exhale as fully as possible, and actually picture yourself emptying your lungs. Then, focus on your abdomen and push it out, expanding it slowly as you breathe in.

Some people may be reluctant to breathe fully with their abdomen, not because of medical reasons, but because they think it makes them look "fat". They think that a relaxed abdomen is unattractive, and are used to holding in their abdominal muscles tightly. Similarly, tight clothing, including "control top" hose or undergarments may block your ability to breathe fully.

Remember that fashion does not always dictate what is best for our health. Recognize this, and even if you choose not to give up tight garments, give yourself periods of time during the day when you can enjoy deep and full breathing, without feeling restricted by your clothes.

Practice Makes Perfect

Your ability to breathe deeply and regularly can be enhanced through regular practice. Set aside a few minutes a day and practice. Some people find it better to practice in the morning, before starting their day, while others find it useful to practice as a way of relaxing and unwinding after a long day.

Try sitting in a comfortable chair as you practice. Alternatively, you can also try to lie on your back - on the bed or floor- with your arms and legs comfortably extended. If you fall asleep while practicing, it is likely that you are tired and need the sleep! Remember, practicing your breathing gives you the greatest benefit when you are awake. So make sure you get enough rest and separate sleep from breathing practice.

In order to practice on a regular basis, try to schedule a time for practice and keep to your "deep breathing appointment". This way, you are more likely to successfully practice. Remember, the more you practice, the better you will be at it. And the better you are at it, the more effective you will be at responding to difficult situations.

Variations on Practice

You can count your breath in cycles of 5 if you like. Doing so helps some people keep a steady rhythm. Upon inhalation, with each breath, they say to themselves in their mind : "one" and "two" and so on until they reach five. Then, they return to one and start all over again.

Others find it useful to rest the palm of their hand on their abdomen as they are practicing breathing. This serves as a way to focus on the breathing during practice and not let your mind wander. Watching your hand rise and fall also gives you an indication of how much you are moving your abdominal muscles.

Breathe Deeply and Feel the Benefits

With regular practice, two things will happen:

First, your overall level of reactivity to difficult and worrisome situations will be reduced. Fewer things will bother you, so you will have less reason to feel tense or anxious.

Second, with practice, you will learn to train yourself to become relaxed almost immediately. Just say to yourself "Breathe", and you will be able to quickly reduce the amount of tension you are feeling. That way, no matter what situation you are facing, you are always at your best to respond to whatever comes your way.

Source and Courtesy: <http://www.healthandage.com/public/health-center/40/article/1175/Take-a-deep-breath-and-relax.html>