

Lower Belly Breathing

It is important to teach each student the concept of lower belly breathing before teaching any of the movement exercises. Many people tend to breathe up into their chest, which perpetuates stress, tension, and shallow breathing. By relaxing the abdominal muscles and allowing the lower belly to expand while inhaling, the student will get a more full breath and will engage the parasympathetic nervous system, cuing the systems of the body to relax. Students are encouraged to breathe into the lower belly while doing Clinical Somatics exercises.

EXERCISE DESCRIPTION

Starting Position: Lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet on the floor, a comfortable hip width distance apart, so that you are using little to no effort to be in this position. Rest your palms on your lower belly to bring your awareness to your breath.

Breathing: Completely relax your abdominal muscles and take a slow, deep inhale, imagining the air going down into your belly. Let your lower belly inflate like a balloon as you inhale. When you're ready, exhale as slowly as you can. You may find that you are able to exhale more slowly each time, as your control of your breath improves. Repeat as many times as you wish.

ANATOMY OF LOWER BELLY BREATHING

The *diaphragm* is the primary muscle responsible for breathing. The diaphragm separates the thoracic cavity from the abdominal cavity, and is shaped like a dome or umbrella. When the diaphragm contracts, its center moves downward as if the umbrella is flipping up. This movement expands the thoracic cavity, drawing air into the lungs, and at the same time compresses the contents of the abdominal cavity, pushing the lower belly outward.

When the diaphragm relaxes, its center moves upward to the muscle's released position, forcing air out of the lungs.



The intercostal muscles, located between the ribs, help to control the expansion and contraction of the rib cage and play a secondary role in inhalation and exhalation.

Chronic muscular contraction in any of the muscles of the chest and abdomen will limit the ability to take a full breath.

CONDITIONS HELPED BY LOWER BELLY BREATHING

Lower belly breathing helps to improve the following conditions:

- Shallow breathing
- Stress
- High blood pressure
- Muscle tension

HOW TO TEACH LOWER BELLY BREATHING

Get the student in their starting position. Describe to the student how to get into their neutral starting position, lying on their back with their knees bent and feet on the floor. Their knees and feet should be a comfortable hip width distance apart (not too close and not too wide!) so that they are using little to no effort to stay in this position.

Invite the student to close their eyes. Closing their eyes removes all the visual information that their brain would otherwise have to process. Keeping the eyes closed allows the student to focus completely on their internal sensations.

Ask the student to notice how they normally breathe. It is helpful to bring the student's awareness to how they are breathing before doing the lower belly breathing so that they may notice a difference afterward.

Instruct the student to rest their palms on their lower belly. Bringing the sensation of touch to an area greatly increases internal awareness of the area. Resting the palms on the lower belly will help the student tune in to how their belly moves as they breathe.

Instruct the student to completely release their abdominal muscles as they breathe. If the student is holding any tension in their abdominal muscles, they will not be able to fully inhale. They must completely release their abdominal muscles and allow their lower belly to fully expand as they inhale. This may be difficult for some students at first, but with practice (and doing other Somatics exercises to release the abdominals) it will become easier.

Describe the diaphragm; where it is located, what it looks like, and what it does.

It is helpful for students to understand what is happening in their body when they inhale and exhale. Their diaphragm contracts, drawing air into their lungs and forcing the contents of their abdomen forward. Then their diaphragm releases, forcing air out of their lungs.

Talk about automatic vs conscious control of breathing. Breathing is controlled automatically by our nervous system; there's no real need for us to get involved at the conscious level. But if we habitually take shallow breaths up into our chest, due to stress or muscular tension, it can negatively impact our health. With regular practice of lower belly breathing, we can learn to automatically breathe in a more full and relaxed way, which will reduce stress, lower blood pressure, and reduce overall muscle tension.

Tell your student that you'll be cuing them to inhale and exhale at certain times as you teach them the exercises. Incorporating lower belly breathing into the exercises teaches the nervous system how to breathe deeply, fully and naturally while moving. Also, arching the lower back is a natural extension of the movement of inhaling, and flattening the lower back and hollowing out the belly is a natural extension of exhaling. Trying to do the opposite (inhaling while flattening, or exhaling while arching) will restrict the movements. However, you don't want your student to ever hold their breath in an effort to breathe as you have instructed. Let them know that they should breathe as needed and not hold their breath.

The following is an example of how I teach Lower Belly Breathing:

Lie down on your back, on your carpet or exercise mat. Bend your knees and slide your feet up, leaving your feet on the floor. Let your knees and feet be a comfortable hip width distance apart, so that you feel like you are using little to no effort to be in this position. Close your eyes so that you can focus completely on your internal sensations. Notice how you're breathing right now. Are you breathing up into your chest, down into your belly, or some of both?

Bring your palms to rest on your lower belly. This will help you become more aware of how your belly moves as you breathe. Now, start taking slow, deep breaths down into your belly. Imagine that your belly is a big balloon, and you want to inhale and fill up that balloon as much as possible. Then just let the air slowly leak out as you exhale. In order to take a really full inhale and let your belly expand, you'll have to completely relax your abdominal muscles. We are always taught to hold our belly muscles tight so that we can stand up straight and not have our stomachs stick out. So, letting go of these muscles to take a really full breath can be difficult.

We usually don't think about the muscles involved in breathing, because they are controlled automatically by our nervous system. But the muscles involved in breathing can be controlled by our conscious mind as well – that's what you're doing right now. The biggest muscle involved in breathing is the diaphragm. The diaphragm is a large sheet of muscle that separates your thoracic cavity (the upper half of your trunk which contains your heart, lungs and ribs) from your abdominal cavity (the lower half of your trunk which contains your organs and intestines).

As you inhale, your diaphragm contracts and presses down toward your belly, drawing air into your lungs and forcing your belly to expand out to the front. As you exhale, your diaphragm releases, pressing back up and forcing the air out of your lungs. We don't usually think of breathing as being a movement, but it is – it's a contraction and then release of muscles. So, as you inhale, imagine your diaphragm slowly contracting and pressing down toward your belly. Then see how slowly you can release your diaphragm, as you slowly exhale. Take a few more breaths like this, inhaling fully and then exhaling and releasing as slowly as you can. With practice, this relaxed way of breathing will become more automatic.