



## Breathing Exercises

The Breathing Exercises allow you to release and gain control of the muscles involved in breathing. The exercises are practiced lying on the back with the knees bent, inhaling and expanding the belly, chest, and right and left sides of the chest and belly individually. These exercises improve breathing, reduce blood pressure, and reduce stress.

### EXERCISE DESCRIPTION

**Starting Position:** Lie down on your back on your carpet or exercise mat. Come into your neutral starting position, with your knees bent and feet on the floor, a comfortable hip width distance apart. Get comfortable here, so that you feel like you're using little to no effort to stay in this position. Take a few moments to notice how you're breathing right now. Don't change anything – try to just notice how you naturally breathe when you're not thinking about it.

**Movement:** Start taking slow, deep breaths. Completely relax your abdominal muscles and let your lower belly expand forward as you inhale. If you want to you can rest your palms on your lower belly. See how fully you can inhale, and then how slowly you can exhale.

Now, inhale up into your chest, letting your lungs expand, and not letting your belly stick out. It will feel like you're gasping for air. Then relax, and let the air out. Try this one or two more times, then relax and breathe normally.

Now, bring your hands up to rest on the sides of your rib cage, your right hand resting on the right side of your ribs, and your left hand resting on the left side of your ribs. Stay relaxed, and as you inhale through your nose, visualize the air going just into the right side of your lungs, expanding the right side of your ribs out to the right side. Then slowly exhale. Try this two more times. Then try this on the left side, visualizing the air going just into the left side of your lungs, expanding the left side of your ribs out to the left side. Then slowly exhale. Try this two more times. When you're done, just relax and breathe normally.

Now bring your hands down to rest on your lower belly, with your right hand on the right side of your belly and your left hand on the left side of your belly. Stay relaxed, and as you inhale through your nose, visualize the air going down into the right side

of your lower belly, letting the right side of your belly expand out into your right hand. Then slowly exhale. Try this two more times. Then try that on the left side, visualizing the air going down into the left side of your lower belly, letting the left side of your belly expand out into your left hand. Then slowly exhale. Try this two more times.

When you're done, just relax and breathe normally. Notice if your natural, relaxed breathing has changed at all since the beginning of the exercise.

## ANATOMY OF THE BREATHING EXERCISES

The Breathing Exercises allow you to release and gain voluntary control of the muscles involved in breathing. The diaphragm is the muscle we consciously focus on when breathing down into the lower belly, and the intercostals are the muscles we focus on when breathing up into the chest. You can see *Trail Guide to the Body* (in Synergists - Muscles Working Together) for a complete list of the muscles involved in inhalation and exhalation.

## CONDITIONS HELPED BY THE BREATHING EXERCISES

The Breathing Exercises help to alleviate the following conditions:

- Shallow breathing
- High blood pressure
- Stress
- Hiccups

## HOW TO TEACH THE BREATHING EXERCISES

**Get the student in their starting position.** Instruct your student to lie down on their back in their neutral starting position, with their knees bent and feet on the floor, a comfortable hip width distance apart. They can rest their arms on the floor by their sides, or rest their palms on their lower belly.

**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.

**Teach the exercise.** Ask your student to notice how they are breathing right now; not to change anything, but just to notice.

Then, instruct your student to start taking slow, deep breaths. Tell them to completely

relax their abdominal muscles, and let their lower belly expand forward as they inhale. Ask your student to inhale slowly and as fully as they can, and then to exhale as slowly as they can. If your student is not familiar with the diaphragm, describe its location and how it contracts downward during inhalation, and relaxes upward during exhalation. Encourage your student to visualize their diaphragm contracting downward as they inhale, and relaxing upward as they exhale.

Then, instruct your student to inhale up into their chest, letting their lungs expand, and not letting their belly expand. Ask them to take several breaths like this, and ask them how they feel. Do they feel like their gasping for air? Do they feel lightheaded? Is this a relaxing way to breathe? Could they fall asleep breathing like this?

Then ask your student to rest their right hand on the right side of their rib cage, and their left hand on the left side of their rib cage. Instruct your student to inhale through their nose and visualize the air going just into the right side of their lungs, expanding the right side of their ribs out to the right side. Then they can slowly exhale. Ask them to do this two more times. Then, talk them through inhaling just into the left side of their lungs, expanding the left side of their ribs out to the left side, a total of three times.

Finally, ask your student to rest their right hand on the right side of their lower belly, and their left hand on the left side of their lower belly. Instruct your student to inhale through their nose and imagine the air going down into the right side of their belly, expanding the right side of their belly out into their right hand. Then they can slowly exhale. Ask them to do this two more times. Then, talk them through inhaling and imagining the air going down into the left side of their belly, expanding the left side of their belly out into their left hand, a total of three times.

At the end of these exercises, ask your student to relax and breathe normally, and ask them to notice if their breathing has changed since the beginning of the exercise.

### **Common mistakes:**

Students may do unnecessary movements, like bending and shifting their torso, in order to try to breathe into one side at a time. These unnecessary shifts do not accomplish anything, so encourage your student to relax and be still, and just visualize the air going into each side of their chest and each side of their belly as they inhale. It might feel impossible at first, but it quickly becomes easier with practice.

## **The following is an example of how I teach the Breathing Exercises:**

Gently come down to the floor, and lie down on your back on your carpet or exercise mat. Come into your neutral starting position, with your knees bent and feet on the floor, a comfortable hip width distance apart. Get comfortable here, so that you feel like you're using little to no effort to stay in this position.

Take a few moments to notice how you're breathing right now. Don't change anything - try to just notice how you naturally breathe when you're not thinking about it.

Most of the time we take fairly shallow breaths up into our chest, but right now I'd like you to start taking slow, deep breaths, and imagine the air going down into your lower belly. If you want to you can rest your palms on your lower belly. Just bringing that sensation of touch to an area can help to increase awareness. 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 relax and let go of your abdominal muscles. We're 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 brain. 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, or 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 your diaphragm and other 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 pressing your diaphragm downward, and then exhaling and releasing as slowly as you can.

Now let's try something different. Instead of letting your lower belly expand, I want you to inhale up into your chest, letting your lungs expand, and not letting your belly stick out. It will feel like you're gasping for air. Then relax, and let the air out. Try this a few more times, and ask yourself - is this a relaxing way to breathe? Could you fall asleep breathing like this?

When you've taken a few breaths like this, up into your chest, just relax and breathe normally. Many people go through their daily lives breathing up into their chest, and they

don't realize how it contributes to their stress level. Periodically throughout your day, take a few moments to remind yourself to breathe down into your lower belly, and notice how it immediately relaxes you. If you can train yourself to breathe down into your belly most of the time, you'll find that your overall stress level is reduced.

Now, let's try to gain even more control over the muscles involved in breathing. Bring your hands up to rest on the sides of your rib cage, your right hand resting on the right side of your ribs, and your left hand resting on the left side of your ribs. Stay relaxed, and as you inhale through your nose, visualize the air going just into the right side of your lungs, expanding the right side of your ribs out to the right side. Then slowly exhale. Try this two more times, inhaling and visualizing the air going just into the right side of your lungs, expanding the right side of your ribs out to the right side, and then slowly exhaling.

Try that on the left side now. Stay relaxed, and as you inhale through your nose, visualize the air going just into the left side of your lungs, expanding the left side of your ribs out to the left side. Then slowly exhale. Try this two more times, inhaling and visualizing the air going just into the left side of your lungs, expanding the left side of your ribs out to the left side, and then slowly exhaling. When you're done, just relax and breathe normally.

Now bring your hands down to rest on your lower belly, your right hand on the right side of your belly and your left hand on the left side of your belly. Stay relaxed, and as you inhale through your nose, imagine that the air is going into the right side of your lower belly, expanding the right side of your belly out into your right hand. Then slowly exhale. Try this two more times, imagining the air going in through your nostrils and down to the right side of your lower belly, inflating the right side of your belly.

Try that on the left side now. Stay relaxed, and as you inhale through your nose, imagine that the air is going into the left side of your lower belly, expanding the left side of your belly out into your left hand. Then slowly exhale. Try this two more times, imagining the air going in through your nostrils and down to the left side of your lower belly, inflating the left side of your belly.

Trying to have this much control over the muscles involved in breathing may feel impossible right now, but with practice it becomes much easier. So, I'm going to talk you through this whole sequence again. As you do this, make sure you're not forcing anything. Don't move your back or do any sort of bending or shifting around while you're doing these exercises – you won't gain anything by trying to force the articulation of these muscles that are involved in breathing. Just relax, and visualize the air going into each side of your lungs and each side of your belly, and gradually you'll gain control of the muscles that are involved.

(Talk the student through the sequence again if you wish. When you're done, ask your student to notice if their natural, relaxed breathing has changed.)