



Breathing Away Stress

One of the most powerful ways to reduce the stress response is to control the breath. Working with the breath can also be the key to unlocking tension once it has settled into the body.

It is natural to hold one's breath in a stressful situation; unfortunately, this locks tension into the body and often limits our options in the situation.

When we immobilize the breathing muscle (the diaphragm) with tension, we take in air by raising the ribcage with our chest and neck muscles. This locks tension into our bodies and makes the neck tight and uncomfortable. It is also a very inefficient way to breathe and leads to fatigue.

The answer to this state of affairs is to relearn diaphragmatic breathing. By consciously choosing to breathe with the diaphragm, we unlock the cycle of tension and tell the body that it can relax. This slows the racing engine of the nervous system down to a more gentle idle. It often helps people sleep better and can even improve digestion.

To determine your breathing style, place one hand on your chest and your other hand on your belly. Take a deep breath. Ideally, both hands should move equally outwards with the in breath (inhalation) and equally inwards with the out breath (exhalation).

If only the hand on your chest moves, then you tend to breath with your chest and neck.

You may also notice the neck muscles tighten with a deep breath. If you notice the belly hand actually moving in towards your body as you inhale, your breathing pattern is very tense and you have a lot to gain from learning to breathe with your diaphragm.

Learning to breathe diaphragmatically is very simple, but can be very difficult to accomplish, so take your time with the exercise.

To learn diaphragmatic breathing, place one hand on your chest and one hand on your belly. Initially, it may be done sitting comfortably in a chair or lying down. The goal is to develop

diaphragmatic breathing into your regular breathing patterns. Now exhale fully from the mouth, squeezing all the air out of your chest and belly. As you begin to inhale through the nose, let the breath push the hand on your belly away from your body. Since we are trying to activate the diaphragm, end your inhalation as soon as you feel the chest hand begin to rise.

Now, exhale fully from the mouth and repeat, trying to activate the diaphragm. This can be a little tricky, so stick with it. In time you will be able to feel the diaphragm without placing your hands on your chest and belly.

When learning diaphragmatic breathing, do this exercise for at least 5 minutes/twice a day. The best times are when awakening in the morning and when going to bed.

This is a very useful exercise for anyone with stress-related problems, headaches, neck pain or respiratory problems. If you have problems with anxiety, actively controlling your breath can be of much help. You may also combine visualizations with this exercise.

The more you practice, the easier it will be to respond to a stressful situation in a relaxed fashion.

