

MMC FACT SHEET 910

RELAXATION and the importance of BREATHING

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'Life is in the breath. He who half breathes, half lives' Proverb

Stress is part of life. Too much and we cease to function effectively. Too little and we never develop and grow. Science now knows that our body reflects the distress of our highs, lows, anger, frustrations, fears and joys, even deep in the physiology of our organs.

Our chest-lung rhythmical breathing pattern is quickly changed by intense emotions. Fear and anxiety may quicken our breath, and precipitate short gasps, gulping for air and deep sighing. In very stressful situations we may breathe rapidly (hyperventilation) leading to symptoms of anxiety, panic, headache, chest pain, and fatigue. When hyperventilating you might also experience tingling of the hands, feet and face, as the excessive respiration promotes loss of carbon dioxide (acid) leaving the blood more alkaline. This can cause a relative lack of calcium and magnesium in the blood, and tissues of muscles and nerves.

Just as our breathing affects our emotional state, we can LEARN CONTROLLED BREATHING TECHNIQUES to induce relaxation for the body and mind

The ancient mystics would say to their pupils, 'always return to controlled (abdominal) breathing when under stress'

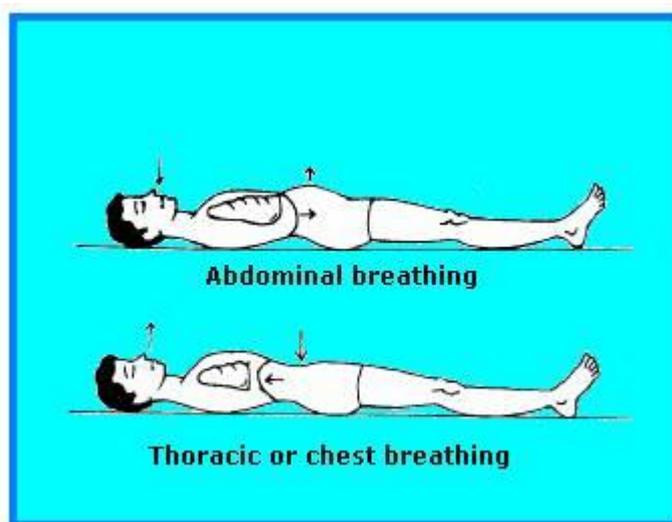
CHEST BREATHING

With this breathing the chest cavity expands and the shoulders rise as the lung fills with air. Chest breathing under stressful situations is often shallow and incomplete and may be accompanied by a constricted anxious feeling in the chest. Often the in-breath is longer followed by a quicker out-breath or sigh.

ABDOMINAL or DIAPHRAGMATIC BREATHING

With abdominal breathing the diaphragm muscle, separating the lung from the abdomen, contracts drawing air into the lower lung which pushes the belly contents outwards. This type of breathing is slower with a shorter in-breath and a longer out-breath and induces the sensation of relaxation.

In meditation often a word (eg **relax**) or short phrase (eg **I am relaxed**) is said mentally or audibly during the out-breath, which increases the relaxation response.



Try the following exercises to understand what is meant by abdominal or diaphragmatic breathing.

EXERCISE ONE.

Lie on your back, feet slightly apart with your eyes closed.

Place one hand on your abdomen just below your navel (tummy button). Now inhale (breathe in) through your nose and allow your tummy hand to rise into the air. As you breathe out (exhale) your hand will fall.

Slowly breathe in to the count of 1, 2, 3 and out to the count of 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9.

Repeat for 2-3 minutes.

In EXERCISES TWO and THREE you will combine abdominal breathing with muscle relaxation.

EXERCISE TWO.

Sit comfortably in a straight-backed chair, feet flat on the floor with hands placed lightly in your lap, or if you prefer you may lie on the floor as in Exercise 1.

Begin to inhale using abdominal breathing.

With your eyes closed breathe in slowly through your nose and out through your mouth. As you exhale (breathe out) count down - 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. Imagine the tension draining from your body.

As you repeat each out-breath, imagine more and more tension draining from your body.

After you have done this for 10-15 breaths, continue breathing slowly in a relaxed state for a few minutes.

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EXERCISE THREE

Begin as in Exercise Two in a relaxed position using abdominal breathing. In this exercise you will consciously tighten/contract each main muscle group, then relax those body areas. Moving each set of muscles before their contraction may help you focus on that part of your body.

Start with your Right Foot. Tense the muscles for a few seconds then as you breathe out, allow the foot muscles to relax. (Completely relaxed like a floppy rag doll) You may also wish to say the word RELAX as you exhale. Now concentrate on your Right Calf. Tighten the calf and then let the muscle relax. Focus your attention on feeling the relaxation for a few breaths. Continue on to your Right Thigh. Tense and relax.

Now repeat the same process with your Left Foot, Calf and Thigh muscles.

Then progressively move to the muscles of your Bottom, Stomach and Chest.

Continue with your Right Hand, Arm and Shoulder then your Left Hand, Arm and Shoulder.

Then focus on your head. Tighten your Jaw muscles then relax, screw up your Eyes then relax. Proceed to your face and forehead.

If you become distracted, stop and try again.

After you have finished the progressive relaxation, breathe quietly for a few minutes.

Breathing is the most simple and natural way to relax, control stress and reduce anxiety.

Use the following situations to practice relaxed breathing.

1. Practice abdominal breathing exercises 1-2x daily for 15-20min in a quiet place. Learning in a peaceful situation will make it easier to relax when you are stressed.
2. Consider doing relaxed breathing exercises at any time, e.g. sitting in the car, on the bus, waiting for an appointment, watching TV etc.
3. Any time you feel stressed, consciously notice your breathing. Be aware if your breathing is controlled and natural, or has become rapid and irregular. If the latter, inhale slowly and commence diaphragmatic breathing.
4. If you find your concentration wanders during breathing exercises or at any time, say to yourself **'I am relaxed'** as you breathe out. See sheet on the Relaxation Response for meditative ideas.

Remember you don't learn to sail a boat by yourself in a storm but rather in a safe quiet harbor. So we can cope with life's storms if we learn to relax and use our breathing in a quiet and peaceful place.

If you are interested in exploring stress reduction techniques, progressive relaxation, self-hypnosis and guided meditation, visit the Auckland Medical School University CALM (computer assisted learning for the mind) website <http://www.calm.auckland.ac.nz> which has useful practical teaching resources.