

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Stress Relief and Breathing Strategies

The body's primary natural method of stress response reduction is to engage the parasympathetic nervous system to counteract the tension producing action of the sympathetic nervous system. There is perhaps no more direct route to parasympathetic nervous system activation than through the breath. Conscious deep rhythmic breathing has a calming effect on the body, and tends to help the heart rate to slow down, the mind to quiet and attention to turn inward towards the sensation of inhalation and exhalation.

Benson's Relaxation Response

In his landmark study of the arousal and calming mechanisms of the body, Harvard cardiologist Dr. Herbert Benson discovered that the automatically triggered parasympathetic nervous system response (which he referred to as the "relaxation response") that normally ends a stress episode can be triggered in a conscious and intentional fashion through the use of a variety of stress reduction techniques. Among the various techniques Benson recommended to engage the relaxation response is this simple breath-oriented technique, which can be practiced most anywhere:

- Pick a focus word or phrase. (Benson suggests the words "one" or "calm", but any word you find restful will work well.)
- Sit quietly in a comfortable position.
- Close your eyes.
- Relax your muscles.
- Breathe slowly and naturally, repeating your focus word or phrase as you exhale.

Continue this simple practice for ten to twenty minutes. Do not worry about how well you are doing. Try to concentrate on your breathing and your focus word. If other thoughts come to mind, gently direct your mind back towards your breathing.

Diaphragmatic Breathing

Another related simple and effective method for releasing body tension is diaphragmatic breathing, which involves breathing deeply from your diaphragm (a muscle located at the base of your abdomen). Adults tend to breathe in a very shallow way, using only the upper part of the chest. This tendency is exacerbated during times of stress, as breathing becomes even more shallow and rapid. Deep, slow diaphragmatic breathing releases tension from the muscles by improving the flow of oxygenated blood throughout our bodies.

You can experience the difference between shallow breathing and deep breathing by trying this exercise:

- Lie down on a bed or on the floor. Bend your knees and relax your toes. Keep your spine straight. If necessary, put a small pillow under your lower back for support.
- Place one hand on your abdomen and one on your chest (or use magazines or light books in place of your hands).
- Inhale slowly and deeply. Pay attention to which hand (or book or magazine) moves the most. Shallow breathing causes the hand on the chest to move the most. Deep, diaphragmatic breathing causes the hand on your abdomen to move the most.

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- Continue breathing deeply for 5 or 10 minutes. Concentrate on moving the hand on your abdomen more than the hand on your chest.

Once you have mastered the diaphragmatic breathing technique, you can use it any time (and any place) you feel the need to release stress.

Meditation

Properly considered, meditation is a form of attention and awareness training that involves far more than a simple emphasis on breathing. Literally any activity that improves concentration and awareness can be used as a focus of meditation. As such, meditation could be easily classified as a psychological, kinetic, or haptic intervention just as easily as a breath-related intervention.

Although meditation has been used for centuries in Asia, contemporary scientific research on the effectiveness of this technique has lead to more widespread acceptance by Western individuals. People from all walks of life who are concerned about stress and good health now make meditation an important part of their lives.

American culture reinforces staying busy. Many of us feel guilty if we are not working, being productive, or running from one event to another. Meditation requires pausing for (at least) a brief time each day. When meditating, you focus your attention solely on what happens when you are sitting still. For a little while each day, you live in the present rather than the past or the future.

You can practice a simple form of meditation by following these breath-related steps:

- Wear comfortable loose-fitting clothing and sit in a chair on the floor in a comfortable position. Cross your legs in a comfortable way.
- Mentally scan your body for tension. If you notice any tension, imagine it draining away and being replaced by relaxation.
- Begin to breathe slowly through your nostrils, from your abdomen. You may want to imagine a balloon inflating and deflating just beneath your belly button as you breathe. Count silently each time you inhale. On the first inhale, count one; and then exhale slowly. Then on the next inhale, count two and so on until you have reached ten. If you become distracted, simply return to counting. After you have finished counting to ten, add a word like one or calm or amen as you exhale.
- Keep the focus on your breathing, attending to each in-breath and each out-breath for their full duration, as if you were riding the waves of your own breathing. Whenever you become aware that your mind has wandered away from your breathing, notice what it was that took you away and then gently bring your attention back to your belly and the feeling of the breath coming in and out.
- Become aware of your thoughts and feelings at these moments, but observe them without judging them or yourself. At the same time be aware of any changes in the way you are seeing things and feeling about yourself.
- Continue the exercise for about 15 minutes. Sit or lie quietly for a few minutes before you return to other activities.