



Breathing Techniques to Calm the Mind

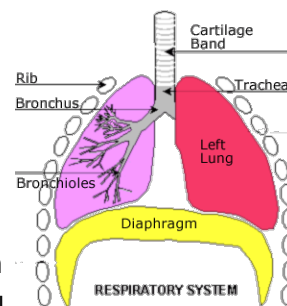
The term "fight or flight" is also known as the stress response, which is characterized by an activation of the autonomic nervous system. The perception of threat activates the sympathetic nervous system and triggers an acute stress response that prepares the body to confront or avoid danger.¹ When appropriately invoked, the stress response helps us rise to many challenges; however, trouble starts when this response is constantly provoked by less critical, day-to-day events and stressors. As a result, health problems, such as high blood pressure (a major risk factor for heart disease) can occur.² The stress response also suppresses the immune system, increasing susceptibility to colds and other illnesses.³ Furthermore, the buildup of stress can contribute to anxiety and depression.

Since we can't avoid all sources of stress in our lives, nor would we want to, we can develop healthier ways of responding (vs. reacting) to them. One way is to counterbalance the stress response by invoking the relaxation response of the nervous system, which is a state of profound rest, done by activating a part of the nervous system called the parasympathetic nervous system. This can be elicited in many ways such as through meditation, yoga, and progressive muscle relaxation.⁴ Breath focus/control is a common feature of several techniques, and the first step is learning to breathe deeply with the diaphragm. With regular practice, you will develop a new habitual breathing pattern that creates a well of calm, stability and steadiness you can dip into as the need arises.

Diaphragmatic Breathing

Diaphragmatic breathing is one of the most important foundation practices for meditation, and is the foundation training in preparation for balancing and vigorous breathing practices. The greatest challenge in learning and teaching diaphragmatic breathing is understanding the location of the diaphragm, and that it is NOT the same as the abdomen or the chest.

Many of us lead stress-filled lives that invoke the stress response and develop unhealthy breathing habits that create further tension, leaving us in a vicious cycle of mental chatter driving harmful breathing and physical tightness, in turn, causing trouble to the mind.⁵ You cannot observe the diaphragm directly; however, when you breathe diaphragmatically you may notice that the lower ribs flair out slightly on inhalation, and the abdominal area may move out a bit. On exhalation, the abdominal area moves back in toward the spinal column. It is also important to note that it is not possible to breathe diaphragmatically unless the head, neck, and trunk of the body are properly aligned.⁶





Breathing Techniques to Calm the Mind

Circular/Equal Breath (Sama vritti = even, regulated breathing)

1. Find a quiet, comfortable place to sit or lie down. Close your eyes if that feels safe, or find a stable point of focus (eg. flame of a candle).
2. First, take a regular breath. Then try a deep breath as you breathe in slowly through your nose, allowing your lower belly to rise as you fill your lungs. Let your abdomen expand fully. Now breathe out slowly through your nose (or your mouth, if your nostrils are not accessible).
3. After a few breath, now begin to establish a 1:1 breathing ratio to break possible unhealthy habitual breathing patterns, and to cultivate stability and steadiness. For example, if your capacity to inhale is to the count of 3 then exhale to 3.
4. Please do not hold the breath after inhale or exhale. Simply, transition breath so that inhalation flows into exhalation and exhalation flows into inhalation.
5. Notice where there is unevenness in the flow, hooks or glitches – these can indicate emotions imbued in the breath. Circular/equal breathing (*sama vritti*) breaks us out of these patterns and effectively releases the emotion that is stuck.
6. Through time and practice, you will eventually move into a 1:2 breathing ratio, which from the yoga tradition, is more healing.

Smile Breath

This is a simple breathing exercise that can shift your energy and lift your mood, providing a natural (and complementary) remedy for those living with depression and anxiety.

1. Keeping your eyes closed, take a deep inhale through the nose, briefly hold the breath for a heartbeat or two, and
2. then as you exhale through the nostrils, drop your chin to your chest. Hold the breath out for a heartbeat or two, as you lift the corners of your mouth.
3. Inhale and lift your head.
4. Exhale and open your eyes.
5. Observe how you feel...

¹ <https://www.psychologytools.com/resource/fight-or-flight-response/#:~:text=The%20fight%20or%20flight%20response,body%20to%20fight%20or%20flee>

² <https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/relaxation-techniques-breath-control-helps-quell-errant-stress-response>

³ <https://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/how-to-boost-your-immune-system>

⁴ <https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/six-relaxation-techniques-to-reduce-stress>

⁵ <http://www.swamij.com/diaphragmatic-breathing.htm>

⁶ Swami Rama, 1992