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**MINDFULNESS PRACTICES: Breathwork**

**Overview:**

In mindfulness meditation, the traditional idea is to be with the breath as it is, without changing it in any way. But there are physiologic benefits from something as simple as a few deep breaths, and this is the realm of breathwork. The term breathwork refers to any type of breathing exercise that usually involves changing your breathing pattern.

There are many different types of breathwork, and some require working with a trained professional. Furthermore, certain techniques are contraindicated for people with medical problems such as hypertension and heart disease. This handout will focus on some very simple, commonly used approaches, but none of this should be taken as medical advice. If you have any concerns or questions about doing any sort of breathing exercise, check with your health care provider.

When working with the breath, there are a few things to keep in mind. First, because you intentionally take slower, deeper breaths, you want to make sure you're not hyperventilating. Just let your body tell you when to breathe, and if you get dizzy or spacey, stop. Second, some people find it hard to focus on the breath, for instance if there is a history of lung disease. If these practices don’t resonate, just let them go. Do not feel like you are missing out on anything, because there are lots of ways to enhance well-being beyond breathwork. Plus, you can always come back to this if you are drawn.

The final caveat is to be aware of your expectations. Although paying attention to the breath can often calm the mind, if you do with the sole purpose of feeling better fast it may interfere with the process. Wanting something to happen tells your mind that something is wrong, and then your mind can become even more tense. Sometimes our desperate desire to feel better—as understandable as it is--keeps us from feeling better! So try these with no expectations, and recognize that any exercise like this may take time and practice sink in.

**Physiology:**

The lungs are like balloons--they want to shrink down, so our chest and belly have to expand so air is pulled into the chest. This means that inhalation occurs through expansion of the chest and also contraction of the diaphragm, a thin flat muscle at the base of the lungs that pulls the lungs down during inhalation. When we are stressed, we tend to tighten up the abdomen, which means that the diaphragm has less room to move. (Wearing tight clothes and pulling in our bellies to look thin doesn’t help!)

So we often end up breathing through the chest. But chest breathing takes more energy and is less efficient, and these breaths also tend to be a little more rapid and shallow. It is not that chest breathing is bad, it is just that if we are limiting our body’s ability to breath naturally, those shorter shallower breaths can send a signal to our brain that something is wrong, which makes us even tighter.

Relaxing the abdomen lets the diaphragm contract fully to expand the lungs, which allows for deeper and slower respirations that enhance the relaxation response. Plus, paying attention to how you are breathing can help break a cycle of thinking that perpetuates feeling stressed.

**Practices:**

The simplest “breathwork” is to pause and see how you are breathing. And it is not only about noticing the abdomen—to take a healthy, cleansing breath you need both the chest and abdomen. We’re usually hunched over our screens, so even the chest has trouble filling the lungs. So use that pause to notice both your abdomen and your posture; perhaps straightening up, rolling your shoulders gently back and opening the heart and chest. While you are at it, check into your neck and jaw and even your legs and arms. Often the whole body is tighter than it needs to be, so allowing your body to take a full, deep breath can be an opportunity to release tension everywhere—which has the added benefit of taking your mind off whatever worries were making you tight in the first place. Do not underestimate the power of pausing to notice the body and take even one slow deep conscious breath.

If you have time, you can even do several such breaths, enjoying the feeling of a healthy breath while also softening the entire body and gently allowing thoughts to recede into the background. It can help to add in a visualization, perhaps imagining inhaling calm with the inbreath and letting the natural fall of the outbreath bring a sense of softening and ease. As you do these deeper breaths, remember to go slowly and let the body tell you when to breath so you don’t hyperventilate. If you do get dizzy or lightheaded, simply stop.

There are variations on this to help you stay focused on the breath, such as 5-finger breathing, where you trace your fingers as you do each breath. [Here](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5QVqMaWrP-s) is a video on that by the psychiatrist and neuroscientist Judson Brewer. Another option is to count along with the breath, perhaps inhaling to a 4 count and exhaling to a 6 count to slow down and lengthen the exhalation.

After some intentionally deep breaths, you can then return to regular breathing and maintain a soft awareness on any tightness in the belly--letting that serve as an ‘early warning’ indicator for tension creeping in. You can even choose to spend a few minutes doing a traditional breath meditation (with no emphasis on changing the breath). [Here](https://www.uclahealth.org/marc/mindful-meditations) is a link to a 5-minute practice from the Mindful Awareness Research Center at UCLA; there are others at that site to explore further.

Dr. Andrew Weil offers an interesting type of breathwork, and you can use this if you are doing intentional deep breaths or just the regular breath (see the link below). It involves reversing the concept of the breath cycle. We usually think of the inhalation as the beginning of the cycle, but here we consider the exhalation as the beginning. This takes a surprising amount of concentration, so it is another way to breath in a natural way *and* direct your mind to something other than rumination and worry. It helps to use a label, for instance, saying in your mind, “I am beginning my breath” as you exhale, and then “I finish my breath” with the inhale. This interesting little twist can help you gather your attention around relaxed breathing instead of unhelpful thoughts.

As far as actively changing the breath, perhaps the most popular is known as the 4/7/8 breath. In this case, you inhale to a count of 4, gently hold the breath for a count of 7, and then slowly and evenly exhale to a count of 8. The long exhalation acts to stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system, which is associated with the relaxation response, and the emphasis on counting helps to attend to the breath and gives the mind less bandwidth to think unhelpful thoughts. Remember the caveats above about hyperventilating and checking with your healthcare provider if you have any concerns. [Here](https://www.drweil.com/videos-features/videos/breathing-exercises-4-7-8-breath/) is a link to a video of Dr. Weil demonstrating the technique.

A variation on this is offered in the [*Anxiety and Phobia Workbook*](https://www.amazon.com/Anxiety-Phobia-Workbook-Edmund-Bourne/dp/1684034833/ref%3Dsr_1_1?dchild=1&gclid=Cj0KCQjww4OMBhCUARIsAILndv6wke46u4_grTnJTvZ9Mv3wKx55T21h51QZLuoOpRbTqa4Wwyhc5QsaAlNKEALw_wcB&hvadid=241584492237&hvdev=c&hvlocphy=1017108&hvnetw=g&hvqmt=e&hvrand=10155502993789160690&hvtargid=kwd-2136376961&hydadcr=15527_10340956&keywords=anxiety+and+phobia+workbook&qid=1635893197&qsid=137-8585192-4731456&sr=8-1&sres=1684034833%2C1458793907%2C1572248912%2C162625334X%2C1458793915%2C1641524014%2CB00HTKAH48%2C1572240032%2C160623918X%2C1684036143%2C9090305262%2C1621063046%2C0593196643%2C1648766943%2C162625477X%2C1684034809&srpt=ABIS_BOOK)—they call it ‘calming breathing.’ In this case, you do two gentle normal breaths—making sure the abdomen is soft--and then the 4/7/8 breath. This offers the benefits of the deeper, slower intentional breath, but it is separated by two normal breaths which can minimize hyperventilation. It also tends to calm the mind because you need to pay attention to counting the normal breaths in addition to the counting for the deeper breath. [Here](https://www.newharbinger.com/9781684034833/the-anxiety-and-phobia-workbook/) is a link where you can find a guided practice for this, along with other relaxation exercises from that book.

So those are just a few ways to bring conscious breathing into your day. Remember, the idea is simple: just make a point to pause throughout the day to see if there is tightness that is constricting your access to a full breath. If so, allow that tightness to soften and give yourself the gift of some cleansing deep breaths. And while you are at it, let those breaths spread throughout your body and soften any other tension you find. By doing this consistently, you will be better able to identify stress when it is creeping in and at the same time you will get practice being less controlled by the thoughts and feelings that can perpetuate stress in the first place.

A good introduction on breathwork is the audiobook by Dr. Andrew Weil entitled [*Breathing: The Master Key to Self-Healing*](https://www.soundstrue.com/products/breathing-the-master-key-to-self-healing) (available as an audio CD or downloadable files).