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BREATHING TECHNIQUES

Diaphragmatic Breathing

The diaphragm, a dome-shaped muscle at the base of the lungs, plays an important role in breathing — though you may not be aware of it. When you inhale, your diaphragm contracts (tightens) and moves downward. This creates more space in your chest cavity, allowing the lungs to expand. When you exhale, the opposite happens — your diaphragm relaxes and moves upward in the chest cavity.

All of us are born with the knowledge of how to fully engage the diaphragm to take deep, refreshing breaths. As we get older, however, we get out of the habit. Everything from the stresses of everyday life to the practice of "sucking in" the stomach for a trimmer waistline encourages us to gradually shift to shallower, less satisfying "chest breathing."

Relearning how to breathe from the diaphragm is beneficial for everyone. Diaphragmatic breathing (also called "abdominal breathing" or "belly breathing") encourages full oxygen exchange — that is, the beneficial trade of incoming oxygen for outgoing carbon dioxide. Not surprisingly, this type of breathing slows the heartbeat and can lower or stabilize blood pressure.

But it's especially important for people with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). In COPD, air can become trapped in the lungs, which keeps the diaphragm pressed down. This causes it to weaken and work less efficiently. Diaphragmatic breathing can help people with COPD strengthen the diaphragm, which in turn helps them use less effort and energy to breathe

Heres How To Do It

- Lie on your back on a flat surface (or in bed) with your knees bent. You can use a pillow under your head and your knees for support, if that's more comfortable.
- Place one hand on your upper chest and the other on your belly, just below your rib cage.
- Breathe in slowly through your nose, letting the air in deeply, towards your lower belly. The hand on your chest should remain still, while the one on your belly should rise.
- Tighten your abdominal muscles and let them fall inward as you exhale through pursed lips. The hand on your belly should move down to its original position.

You can also practice this sitting in a chair, with your knees bent and your shoulders, head, and neck relaxed. Practice for five to 10 minutes, several times a day if possible.

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Pranayama Breathing

Breathing is something we do on a daily basis. The body, in a living state, breathes involuntarily whether we are awake, sleeping, or actively exercising. Breathing is living. It is a vital function of life. In yoga, we refer to this as pranayama. Prana is a Sanskrit word that means life force and ayama means extending or stretching. Thus, the word "pranayama" translates to the control of life force. It is also known as the extension of breath. Every cell in our bodies needs oxygen to function properly. So it's no surprise that research shows that a regular practice of controlled breathing can decrease the effects of stress on the body and increase overall physical and mental health.

Ever notice how soothing a simple sigh can be at the end of a long day? There are a variety of breathing techniques that are known to reduce stress, aid in digestion, improve sleep, and cool you down. Here are instructions on four pranayama exercises worth practicing and the most beneficial times to do them.

Nadhi sodhana, also known as alternative nostril breathing, is a very relaxed, balancing breath that is used to help calm the nervous system and aid in a restful night's sleep. By increasing the amount of oxygen taken into the body, it's believed that this breath can also purify the blood, calm the mind, reduce stress, and promote concentration.

How To Do It:

Nadhi sodhana can be done seated or lying down. To start, empty all the air from your lungs. Using the thumb of your dominant hand, block your right nostril and inhale through your left nostril only. Be sure to inhale into your belly, not your chest. Once you are full of breath, seal your left nostril with the ring finger of the same hand, keeping your right nostril closed, and hold the breath for a moment. Then release your thumb and exhale through your right nostril only. Be sure to exhale all the breath out of the right side and pause before inhaling again through the same side. Seal both nostrils once you've inhaled on the right side and exhaled through the left side. A complete cycle of breath includes an inhalation and exhalation through both nostrils. If you're just starting out, you can do a four-count inhale, holding your breath for four to eight counts, then exhale for four counts. Perform up to ten cycles and notice how your body responds. You may feel more relaxed and calm in both your mind and body.

When To Do It:

Nadhi sodhana is a calm, soothing breath that can be done any time of day. Try practicing this technique when you are anxious, nervous, or having trouble falling asleep.

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