

Deep Breathing

(Adapted from The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook, 2005. E. Bourne)

When we are tense we breathe shallowly and rapidly. When relaxed we breathe more fully and more deeply, from the abdomen. By using deep abdominal breathing we stimulate the relaxation response of our bodies, promoting calmness.

Additionally, attending to our breath helps us connect our minds to our bodies.

The following exercises can help you change your breathing pattern, especially if practiced regularly. Just 3 minutes of deep breathing practice will usually induce a state of relaxation.

Practice for 3-5 minutes every day for at least two weeks. If possible, find a regular time each day to do this so that your breathing exercise becomes a habit. With practice you can learn in a short period of time to “damp down” the physiological reactions underlying anxiety and panic.

Once you feel you’ve gained some mastery apply it when you feel stressed, anxious, or when you experience the onset of panic symptoms. By extending your practice of either breathing exercise to a month or longer; you will begin to retrain yourself to breathe from your abdomen. The more you can shift the center of your breathing from your chest to your abdomen, the more consistently you will feel relaxed on an ongoing basis.

Abdominal Breathing Exercise

1. Note the level of tension you’re feeling. Place one hand on your abdomen right beneath your rib cage.
2. Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose into the “bottom” of your lungs – in other words, send the air as low down as you can. If you’re breathing from your abdomen, your hand should actually rise. Your chest should move only slightly while your abdomen expands. (In abdominal breathing, the diaphragm – the muscle that separates the lung cavity from the abdominal cavity – moves downward. In so doing it causes the muscles surrounding the abdominal cavity to push outward.)
3. When you’ve taken in a full breath, pause for a moment, then exhale slowly through your nose or mouth depending on your preference. Be sure to exhale fully. As you exhale, allow your whole body to just let go. (You might visualize your arms and legs going loose and limp like a rag doll.)
4. Do ten slow, full, abdominal breaths. Try to keep your breathing smooth and regular, without gulping in a big breath or letting your breath out all at once. It will help to slow down your breathing if you slowly count to four on the inhale (1-2-3-4) and then slowly count to four on the exhale. Remember to pause briefly at the end of each inhalation. Count from ten down to one, counting backwards one number with each exhalation.