

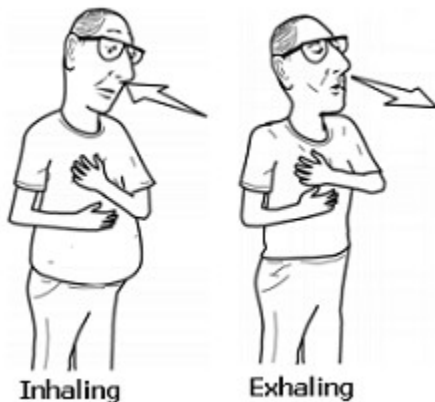
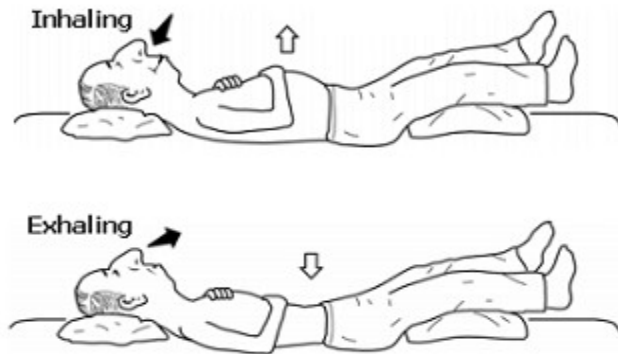
Diaphragmatic/Abdominal Breathing

When we are feeling anxious, one of the most effective ways to calm ourselves is by using “diaphragmatic breathing.” Diaphragmatic breathing is the natural way to breathe. We were born breathing diaphragmatically.

When we are stressed, tense, or anxious our breathing often becomes more rapid and shallow. Our abdominal muscles may also get tense, interfering with the normal contraction of the diaphragm. Breathing shallow and rapidly causes anxiety. This pattern of anxiety and shallow “chest breathing” can become a self-perpetuating cycle that in turn creates more anxiety.

Especially in western countries, we are taught that it’s good posture and that we look better when our stomach is flat. So we “suck in” our stomach. A flattened stomach is impossible to maintain if you breathe with your diaphragm. We become “chest breathers,” missing out on the fullness of breath that diaphragmatic breathing brings.

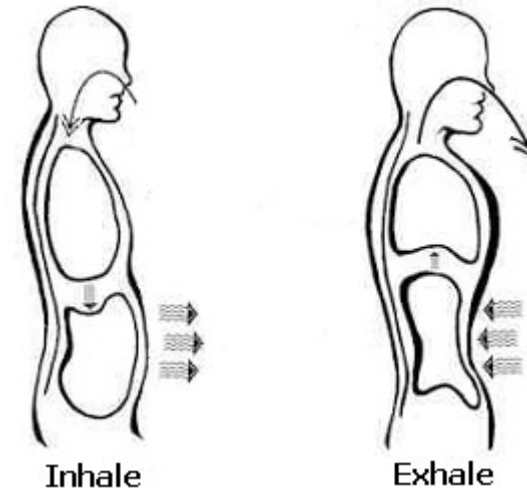
Here’s a quick exercise to check how you breathe. Either lying down or standing, place one hand on your chest and one hand over your belly button. Now, without trying to change anything, just notice what your hands feel as you breathe in and out.



If you use your diaphragm to breathe, the hand on your stomach will move. If you use your chest muscles to breathe, the hand on your chest will move. Try both ways of breathing and feel the difference.

Here is an exercise to help you relearn diaphragmatic breathing. You can do the exercise lying down or sitting.

- Place your hands just below your belly button.
- Close your eyes and imagine a balloon inside your abdomen.
- Each time you breathe in imagine the balloon filling with air.
- Feel your abdomen rise as the balloon fills.
- Each time you breathe out imagine the balloon collapsing.



Sometimes when people focus on their breathing they breathe deeper, and/or more rapid. This can make you feel anxious, dizzy, or light-headed. If this happens to you, just pause the practice until you start breathing normally again and the symptoms disappear. Then begin again.

Some of the benefits of abdominal breathing include:

- Increased oxygen supply to the brain and musculature.
- Stimulation of the parasympathetic nervous system. This branch of your autonomic nervous system promotes a state of calmness. It works in a fashion exactly opposite to the sympathetic branch of your nervous system, which stimulates a state of emotional arousal and the very physiological reactions underlying a panic attack.
- Greater feelings of connectedness between mind and body. Anxiety and worry tend to keep you "in your head." A few minutes of deep abdominal breathing will help bring you down into your whole body.
- Increased oxygen supply to the brain and musculature.
- More efficient excretion of bodily toxins. Many toxic substances in the body are excreted through the lungs
- Improved concentration. If your mind is racing, it's difficult to focus your attention. Using abdominal breathing will help to quiet your mind.
- Abdominal breathing by itself can trigger a relaxation response

Your breathing directly reflects the level of tension you carry in your body. Under tension, your breathing usually becomes shallow and rapid, and occurs high in the chest. When relaxed, you breathe more fully, more deeply, and from your abdomen. It's difficult to be tense and to breathe from your abdomen at the same time.

If you suffer from phobias, panic, or other anxiety disorders, you will tend to have one or both of two types of problems with breathing:

- You breathe too high up in your chest and your breathing is shallow.
- You tend to hyperventilate, breathing out too much carbon dioxide relative to the amount of oxygen carried in your bloodstream. Shallow, chest-level breathing, when rapid, can lead to hyperventilation. Hyperventilation, in turn, can cause physical symptoms very similar to those associated with panic attacks.

Abdominal breathing can help you counter either of these.

Take a minute to notice how you are breathing right now. Is your breath slow or rapid? Deep or shallow? Does it centre around a point high in your chest or down in your abdomen?

You might also notice changes in your breathing pattern under stress versus when you are more relaxed. If you find that your breathing is shallow and high in your chest, don't despair. It's quite possible to retrain yourself to breathe more deeply and from your abdomen. Practicing abdominal breathing on a regular basis will gradually help you to shift the centre of your breath downward from your chest. Regular practice of abdominal breathing will also increase your lung capacity helping you to breathe more deeply.

Five Deep Breaths

1. Place one hand on your abdomen right beneath your rib cage.
2. Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose (if possible) 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 out-ward.)
3. When you've taken in a full breath, pause for a moment and 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.
4. Continue breathing like this for 5 breaths, or longer if you want.

If you're having trouble concentrating on your breath and your mind keeps wandering, here are some techniques to keep your attention focused on your breathing:

Count Your Breaths: Count your breaths from one to ten. At first you can count "one" on the inhale, then "two" on the exhale. Once you're able to make it to ten without losing track, then count one number per inhale/exhale cycle, counting on each inhale. If you continue for longer than five breaths, once your count gets to ten, start over again at one. If you lose track, don't worry about where you were, just start over again at one.

Measure Your Breaths: Each time you take a breath, silently measure the length by counting to yourself:

Inhale ... two ... three ... four ... five

Exhale ... two ... three ... four ... five

Don't force your breaths to be a certain length. Just breathe slowly and slowly, measure your breaths, however long they take. You may count to five or six, or maybe only to three. As you do this exercise, you may find your breaths naturally become longer.

In ... Out: Each time you inhale, say the word "In" silently to yourself. Each time you exhale, say the word "Out." Or you can try saying a short phrase to yourself. For example, when you inhale, say: *Breathing in I calm myself.* When you exhale, say: *Breathing out I relax.*