

07/2015

## Simple Breathing Methods Reduce Stress



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No meaningful job will be completely stress-free. Without some short-term stress, often called good stress, you would not meet deadlines, nor would you strive to hit performance targets or increase your productivity. Meeting the demands and challenges of a job and accomplishing greater things are what make work interesting and rewarding. Good stress makes you feel in control and very motivated to take ownership over the outcome. However, bad stress leaves you feeling out of control, helpless, and trapped and can interfere with your performance and productivity, take a toll on your health, and make the difference between success and failure on the job.

Is your stress fueling your drive to meet the challenges of your job, or does it drain your energy and make you less productive? If you find yourself frazzled instead of alert, relaxed and in control, there are three simple breathing techniques from Yoga that promote a more relaxed state, an alert and focused mind, and reduce tension and stress. Let's look at these three breathing exercises that you can do at work.

### ***Abdominal Breathing***

The most basic breathing exercise of all, abdominal breathing can be done sitting at your desk. Place your feet flat on the floor. Press your sitting bones into the seat and feel your spine lengthen all the way through the crown of your head, chin parallel to the floor. Rest your hands on your lower abdomen, fingertips touching. Direct your next inhalation "into the belly" allowing the abdomen to expand gently with the inhalation. Feel the belly gently lift your fingertips on the inhale and on the exhale feel the belly retract back toward the spine. Let go of any tension in your face, shoulders and arms. As you learn through practicing

Abdominal Breathing, each breath becomes deeper and longer *naturally*, there is no need to force the breath. Practice focusing your attention on the simple expansion and contraction of the belly with each breath cycle. This will activate and tone diaphragmatic muscles and free tension from the abdominal area. If you wish, set a timer for a minute or two, close your eyes, follow the breath and allow yourself to rest into this healing practice.

### *The Complete Breath*

Building on Abdominal Breathing, the Complete Breath can slow your heart rate, lower blood pressure, and induce the relaxation response—the opposite of the “fight or flight” response. Like Abdominal Breathing, Complete Breath can be used anytime to relax the entire body-mind system. It also helps expand lung capacity and stretch the intercostal muscles of the rib cage. For this breathing exercise, begin by taking your seated position: feet flat on the floor, spine lengthened through the top of your head, chin parallel to the floor and, with an exhalation, let the shoulders relax. Then on your next inhale, send your breath into the lower belly, then into the middle torso, and finally into the upper chest “lifting the collar bones.” Exhale and release the breath from the upper chest first “releasing the collarbones,” then the midsection and, lastly, the abdomen. In this way, one full cycle of breath reaches from the lowest part of the lungs to the highest on the inhalation while expanding the torso, followed by a release of breath from the top of the lungs, then from the midsection, and finally from the abdomen - all in one exhalation. It may feel awkward at first, but with practice, it will get easier very soon.

### *The Ocean Breath*

The Ocean Breath increases your concentration using the sound of your breath as a focal point. It helps move you into a state of calm as the mind becomes absorbed into the sound of the breath. It also promotes greater control of the breath, and opens the alveoli in the lungs, allowing more complete absorption of oxygen.

To begin, take long, slow, deep breaths in through the nostrils while slightly contracting the back of the throat. This muscular contraction creates a subtle, smooth and continuous sound in the back of the throat that mimics the rising and falling of the ocean tide, or the hissing sound you might hear while holding a conch shell to your ear. Once mastered, Ocean Breath is a powerful means of sharpening concentration and inducing deep states of tranquility. Imagine exhaling slowly through the mouth to fog a hand mirror. Notice the gentle sound that naturally comes from the throat. Then try making the same sound on the inhalation. After repeating this several times, try “fogging” the mirror with your mouth closed, inhaling and exhaling through the nostrils while continuing to contract the back of the throat. Hear the gentle sound in the back of your throat while allowing your breaths to become slower, softer and more refined. With practice, each inhalation and exhalation becomes lengthened without creating tension anywhere in the body.

These three Yogic breathing exercises can be summoned by anyone, anytime and at a moment’s notice. Take a few moments and try them while seated at your desk. You will notice that *how* you breathe plays a significant role in calming your nervous system and relieving stress. You owe it to your health and your job performance.



*Kait and Colleen blend their different areas of expertise in bringing health and wellness into the workplace.*

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