

7 BREATHING EXERCISES TO CALM STRESS IN YOUR WORKDAY

Contributed by Mandy Enright, MS, RDN, RYT

Stress is at an all-time high, fueled by the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021 it was reported that 79% of workers experienced some form of stress related to work. If you've noticed your stress levels have crept up a bit, know that you're not alone. This Stress Awareness Month, let's take a timeout for a breathing break. Breathing is a tool that is always available to you anytime you need it. There's no special equipment needed, and it's FREE!

Deep breathing exercises bring on the relaxation response, which helps to combat stress. Deep breathing has been shown to help calm the mind and body due to the slowing down of the breath. Other benefits of deep breathing include increased oxygen entering the body, reduced heartrate, lower blood pressure, and more focus.

Getting Started: Deep Breathing

Find a quiet place to sit or lie down. Close your computer, put away your smartphone, and remove any other distractions. If you are sitting, make sure to sit upright so the spine is elongated and relax the shoulders. If you are lying down, allow the body to relax.

To start, place one hand on your belly and take a slow breath through the nose. Image your belly is a balloon. With each inhale, you are slowly inflating the balloon, and with each exhale you are slowly deflating the balloon. Feel your belly press into your hand as it rises with the inhales and feel the belly fall with each exhale. Continue for a few moments.

Once you are comfortable with breathing more deeply, explore some other deep breathing techniques.

Equal Breathing

This deep breathing exercise helps to match the length of inhales and exhales. It is intended to make the breath smooth and steady to help with balance and relaxation.

Start by inhaling slowly for three counts and then exhaling for three counts. As you inhale, slowly fill up the belly, making sure it's full by the time you count to three, and then allow the belly to deflate as you exhale for the three counts. Do this for a few minutes.

As you become more comfortable with this practice, you can work to increase the counts to five, eight, or even 10.

Resonant Breathing

This exercise allows you to take five full breaths per minute. Breathing at this rate has been shown to maximize heart rate variability (HRV), which is a measure of time between heartbeats. When someone is in a fight or flight state, their HRV is low. When someone is more relaxed, their HRV is high, meaning there is more time between heartbeats. Resonant breathing has also been shown to reduce stress and even symptoms of depression.

To practice this breathing, inhale for five counts, and then exhale for five counts. Continue to do this for a few minutes.

4-7-8 Breathing (Relaxing Breath)

This breathing practice helps to reduce anxiety, manage food cravings, control emotional responses, and can also be helpful for falling asleep. Inhale slowly to the count of four, hold the breath for seven counts, and then exhale for eight counts.





Sitali Breath

This is a very cooling deep breathing practice that helps to reduce body temperature and relax the mind.

Start by sitting upright. Stick out your tongue and curl the outer edges of the tongue together, as if you are creating a straw with your tongue (if your tongue does not do this, simply purse your lips together instead). Inhale slowly through your mouth, feeling the cooling sensation of the breath on your tongue and throat, and then exhale out the nose. Continue doing this for 3 to 5 minutes.

Lion's Breath

This is an energizing breath that can help relieve tension in the chest and face. It also helps to let go of stress in the body. Start by inhaling through the nose with the eyes closed. As you exhale, open to eyes and mouth wide and stick out your tongue as you breathe out the mouth making a "HA!" sound.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

This breathing exercise helps both the body and mind relax through a series of tensing muscle groups while breathing in, and then relaxing the muscles while breathing out. It can be performed sitting upright, but many people find they get better benefits by lying down for this exercise. It's also helpful to do at night when you get into bed to help you fall asleep.

Start by lying down and taking a few relaxing breaths to calm the mind and body.

- Breathe in, tensing the muscles of the feet.
- Breathe out, releasing and relaxing the muscles of the feet.
- Breathe in, tensing your calf muscles.
- Breathe out, releasing and relaxing the calf muscles.
- Continue doing this as you work your way up your body, including your legs, belly, chest, fingers, arms, shoulders, neck, and face.

How to Make Breathing a Routine

- Chose a place you can sit or lie down comfortably and without distractions.
- Don't try too hard, as this can make you tense up more.
- Have a focal point, such as your breath, to help you focus on the calmness and rhythm of the breathing and body.
- Aim to practice once or twice a day, ideally at the same time, to create a sense of habit.
- Start by practicing for 2 to 5 minutes a day. Over time, this can increase to 10 to 20 minutes a day.

Ready to get started? Close your eyes, take a deep breath, and say "Ahhhhh."



Mandy Enright MS, RDN, RYT, is a Registered Dietitian, Yoga Instructor, and Corporate Wellness Expert, as well as main content contributor for Wellness Concepts. Mandy is a featured presenter, both virtually and onsite near her home in Neptune, NJ.

