

ABCDE OF BREATHING

Let us start with mindfulness of breath. All we are trying to do is cultivate attention to be in the present moment by using the breath as our anchor for our minds to focus on.

This is a good object to start with as it is easier to just rest in a physical sensation rather than our thinking mind that is very powerful. Our minds have less need to react, comment and judge what is happening with the breath. It is easier to stay with the breath as it is a neutral sensation most of the time.

As our breath is always with us it provides an easily accessible object to practice with.

Initially I would like to teach you the ABCDE of breathing. I would invite you to do this exercise with me to explore the breath and how it can be used for stress relief. I would ask you to sit up straight and close your eyes for this exercise.

Can you initially just bring your awareness to what it feels like to breathe. Just be open to the movement of the breath as it naturally flows in and out. Pick the spot where you feel the breath most dominant for you. It could be the base of your nostrils, chest or abdomen. There is no conscious control over the breath.

You may have noticed that not one breath is the same as another one. Is the breath shallow or deep? Smooth or irregular? Warm or cool? Moist or dry?

Awareness of the breath offers another valuable benefit. It can give us an opportunity to tune in to what our stress levels are. Do you notice that when you are tense your breath changes. It may become shallow and you may even hold your breath when you are anxious. On the other hand when you are relaxed your breath becomes much deeper, smoother and even.

Just as our mental stress becomes reflected in our breath, how we breathe feeds back to our brains and can influence our mental stress. A relaxed breath leads to a relaxed mind.

The other interesting aspect is did you notice that as you brought your attention to the breath it changed? It became easier, deeper, smoother and slower. The breath is constantly changing on its own accord. When we bring attention to it that creates a change as well. Its as if the breath knows that it is being watched. The only difference is that it starts to calm down as it is watched.

We also have the ability to consciously control our breath. I would ask that you BREATHE CALMLY. Take a slow deep calm even breath in and out. Just continue with this practice and allow yourself to feel the movement of your breath and its calming effects on your mind and body.

Can you now put one hand on your chest and one hand on your abdomen. Just notice which hand rises on the inhalation and which hand falls on the exhalation. We all come into this world as infants breathing from our abdomen. Over time for some of us with the stresses of life it starts to become more of a chest breathing pattern. We can slowly reeducate ourselves to become abdominal breathers. One could spend 5 or 10 minutes in the morning as one gets up or at bedtime with focusing on having the hand over the abdomen rise with inspiration. Abdominal breathing allows for greater expansion and oxygenation. Just think of times when you are stressed what happens to your breathing. Does it become very shallow, even stops and you are breathing from your chest? We can retrain the way we breathe.

I would now ask that you bring your awareness to your inhalation and your exhalations. I would like you to count as you inhale 1 to 3 or whatever and then count your exhalation. Continue to do that.

Do you breathe longer when you breathe in or when you breathe out?

The inhalation is the sympathetic or fight or flight response. This is where we are preparing ourselves for a threatening event. Stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenalin get released. The exhalation is the parasympathetic response or the relaxation phase. It makes sense that if one can breathe out longer one will facilitate relaxation. I would ask that you bring your awareness to your inhalation and count how long it takes to inhale. Then consciously try and exhale longer than you inhale. In time you may be able to exhale twice as long as you inhale.

Can we now put it all together. I would ask that you breathe consciously in a calm, deep and smooth manner, with abdominal breathing and exhalation longer than inhalation. Relaxed breathing will lead to a relaxed body and mind.

Ultimately this becomes a new habit of breathing without any need to think about how to breathe.

Please open your eyes now and thank you for doing that exercise

Our breathing is under both automatic and conscious control. Thank goodness we don't have to remember to breathe as we would all be dead by now.

We have the ability to control our breath CONSCIOUSLY to help support relaxation. Whenever you find yourself in a stressful time if you consciously bring your attention to your breath and breathe with the ABCDE practice this will help to put out the fire of stress. Continue to breathe until the stress has passed.

The more often during the day that you can remember to bring your attention to your breath and do the ABCDE practice you will work to decrease the chronic underlying emotional reactivity that you have.

One can practice breathing FORMALLY and INFORMALLY.

INFORMALLY happens whenever you remember to breathe.

However there is a FORMAL way one can remember to consciously breathe for stress relief. A common theme is I would breathe more effectively if I could only remember to do this.

*A formalized practice would be to practice 5 minutes at a DESIGNATED TIME of day. This could be before you get out of bed in the am, before lunch or dinner or before bedtime.

There are CUES that you can build into your day to help support breath awareness.

*Whenever one is under STRESS this can be a cue to breathe.

*This can be a mindfulness reminder APP.

*ALARM on your watch.

*One can use POST IT NOTES on your bathroom mirror, computer, or fridge. One can set an alarm on your phone.

*Another option is through an ACTIVITY LINK. You can choose an activity such as whenever you start to walk, before you eat, go to the bathroom, pick up your phone, wait in line, take a scheduled break or stop at a light as the reminder to bring your attention to your breath.

When you remember to bring your attention to your breath you can do what I call a TAKE FIVE exercise.

If there is enough time take 5 minutes to practice breathing with an ABCDE approach. Alternatively it can simply be conscious awareness of the movement of the breath without any control for 5 minutes.

If not as much time is available one can breathe consciously for 5 breaths. One is breathing calmly from the diaphragm and there is a prolonged exhalation relative to the inhalation. Or one can just bring awareness to the movement of the breath without any control for 5 breaths.

If there's not enough time for 5 breaths one can shift to just one breath. Breathe in for a count of 5 and a count of 6 or longer for the exhalation. Or just bring awareness to a single breath allowing it to move on its own accord.

Dropping in to your breath during the day is a wonderful way to cultivate mindfulness, let you know what your stress levels are and provide some positive feedback to calm the mind thru calming the breath.

It is calculated that we have 20000 breaths a day. How often do you consciously bring your attention to your breath? Thank goodness our breath carries on without

us having to do anything or we would all be dead now if we had to remember to breathe.

Philip Blustein