

How to Practice Diaphragmatic Breathing

Diaphragmatic breathing, or deep breathing from the diaphragm rather than the chest, is a great way to relax and reduce anxiety. Although we are all capable of breathing this way, very few of us actually do so on a daily basis. Practice this breathing pattern while you are in a relaxed and safe environment. This way, you will be more likely to use this technique when faced with situations that trigger the symptoms of social anxiety disorder (SAD).

For those who suffer with medical conditions, please consult with your doctor prior to beginning any type of relaxation training exercise.

How to practice diaphragmatic breathing

1. Find a quiet place free of distractions. Lie on the floor or recline in a chair, loosen any tight clothing and remove glasses or contacts. Rest your hands in your lap or on the arms of the chair.
2. Place one hand on your upper chest and the other hand on your stomach. Inhale, taking a deep breath from your abdomen as you count to three. As you inhale you should feel your stomach rise up. The hand on your chest should not move.
3. After a short pause, slowly exhale while counting to three. Your stomach should fall back down as you exhale.
4. Continue this pattern of rhythmic breathing for five to ten minutes.

In addition to following these instructions, you may consider listening to a voice recording such as the free MP3 audio file offered by McMaster University which includes directions on practicing diaphragmatic breathing. Use of an audio recording allows you to fully relax and concentrate on the technique.

How to Practice Guided Imagery

Guided imagery is the use of visualization techniques to help your body enter a relaxed state. In other words, you close your eyes and imagine the sights and sounds of a place that you find relaxing. The most common visualizations often involve a tropical beach, warm sun and soothing sounds of the ocean -- in fact, this is the visualization that I find most relaxing. If you find, however, that some other imagined scene is more appropriate for you, such as sitting in front of a roaring fire on a blustery night, by all means make use of that setting. The type of scene is not important, what matters is that you imagine every sight, sound and smell and transport yourself to that place.

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In the following example of guided imagery, we will use the popular beach setting:

How to practice guided imagery

1. Find a quiet place free from distractions. Lie on the floor or recline in a chair. Loosen any tight clothing and remove glasses or contacts. Rest your hands in your lap or on the arms of the chair.
2. Take a few slow even breaths. If you have not already, spend a few minutes practicing diaphragmatic breathing.
3. When you are feeling relaxed, gently close your eyes. Picture yourself lying on a beautiful secluded beach. Picture soft white sand around you and crystal-clear waters with gentle waves that lap at the shore. Picture a cloudless sky above and palm trees swaying in the breeze behind you.
4. Breathe in and smell the scent of the ocean and tropical flowers. Notice the sound of the waves gently rolling on to shore and birds in the trees behind you. Feel the warm sand underneath you and the warm sun on your skin. Notice the taste of a refreshing tropical drink as you bring it to your mouth.
5. Stay in this scene for as long as you like. Notice how relaxed and calm you feel. Enjoy the feeling of relaxation as it spreads throughout your entire body, from your head to your toes. Notice how far away you feel from anxiety and stress.
6. When you are ready, slowly count backward from 10. Open your eyes, feeling relaxed but alert.

How to Practice Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) is an anxiety-reduction technique first introduced by American physician Edmund Jacobson in the 1930s. The technique involves alternating tension and relaxation in all the body's major muscle groups.

If you suffer with social anxiety disorder (SAD), chances are that the majority of the time your muscles are tense. By practicing PMR, you will learn how a relaxed muscle feels different from a tense muscle. PMR is generally used in conjunction with behavioral therapy techniques such as systematic desensitization. However, practicing the technique alone will give you a greater sense of control over your body's anxiety response.

If you practice this technique correctly, you just may end up falling asleep. If so, congratulate yourself on obtaining such a deep level of relaxation, and for the work that you did up until that point. For those who suffer with medical conditions, please consult with your doctor prior to beginning any type of relaxation training exercise.

How to practice progressive muscle relaxation

1. Find a quiet place free from distractions. Lie on the floor or recline in a chair, loosen any tight clothing and remove glasses or contacts. Rest your hands in your lap or on the arms of the chair.
2. Take a few slow even breaths. If you have not already, spend a few minutes practicing diaphragmatic breathing.
3. **Forehead.** Focus attention on your forehead. Squeeze the muscles in your forehead, holding for 15 seconds. Be careful only to tense the muscles of your forehead and to leave the rest of your body relaxed. Feel the muscles becoming tighter and tenser. Then, slowly release the tension in your forehead while counting for 30 seconds. Notice the difference in how your muscles feel and the sensation of relaxation. Continue to release the tension in your forehead until it feels completely relaxed. Continue breathing slowly and evenly.
4. **Jaw.** Now, shift attention to your jaw. Tense the muscles in your jaw holding for 15 seconds. Then, release the tension slowly while counting for 30 seconds. Notice the feeling of relaxation and continue to breathe slowly and evenly.
5. **Neck and Shoulders.** Now, shift attention to your neck and shoulders. Increase tension in your neck and shoulders by raising your shoulders up towards your ears and hold for 15 seconds. Slowly release the tension as you count for 30 seconds. Notice the tension melting away.
6. **Arms and Hands.** Slowly draw both hands into fists. Pull your fists into your chest and hold for 15 seconds, squeezing as tight as you can. Then, slowly release while you count for 30 seconds. Notice the feeling of relaxation.
7. **Buttocks.** Slowly increase tension in your buttocks over 15 seconds. Then, slowly release the tension over 30 seconds. Notice the tension melting away. Continue to breathe slowly and evenly.
8. **Legs.** Slowly, increase the tension in your quadriceps and calves over 15 seconds. Squeeze the muscles as hard as you can. Then, gently release the tension over 30 seconds. Notice the tension melting away and the feeling of relaxation that is left.
9. **Feet.** Slowly, increase the tension in your feet and toes. Tighten the muscles as much as you can. Then, slowly release the tension while you count for 30 seconds. Notice all the tension melting away. Continue breathing slowly and evenly.
10. Enjoy the feeling of relaxation sweeping through your body. Continue to breathe slowly and evenly.

How to Practice Autogenic Training

Autogenic training is a relaxation technique similar to the meditation first introduced by German psychiatrist Johannes Schulz in the 1930s. It is believed that through a series of self-statements about heaviness and warmth in different parts of the body, a positive effect is induced on the autonomic nervous system. Although less well-known than other relaxation techniques, such as progressive muscle relaxation and guided imagery, a meta-analytic study in 2002 found positive effects of autogenic training across a range of diagnoses. In terms of Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD), autogenic training may aid in relaxation and help to reduce symptoms of anxiety when combined with other forms of treatment.

For those who suffer with medical conditions, please consult with your doctor prior to beginning any type of relaxation training exercise.

How to practice autogenic training

1. Find a quiet place free from distractions. Lie on the floor or recline in a chair. Loosen any tight clothing and remove glasses or contacts. Rest your hands in your lap or on the arms of the chair.
2. Take a few slow even breaths. If you have not already, spend a few minutes practicing diaphragmatic breathing.
3. Quietly say to yourself, "I am completely calm."
4. Focus attention on your arms. Quietly and slowly repeat to yourself six times, "My arms are very heavy." Then quietly say to yourself, "I am completely calm."
5. Refocus attention on your arms. Quietly and slowly repeat to yourself six times, "My arms are very warm." Then quietly say to yourself, "I am completely calm."
6. Focus attention on your legs. Quietly and slowly repeat to yourself six times, "My legs are very heavy." Then quietly say to yourself, "I am completely calm."
7. Refocus attention on your legs. Quietly and slowly repeat to yourself six times, "My legs are very warm." Then quietly say to yourself, "I am completely calm."
8. Quietly and slowly repeat to yourself six times, "My heartbeat is calm and regular." Then quietly say to yourself, "I am completely calm."
9. Quietly and slowly repeat to yourself six times, "My breathing is calm and regular." Then quietly say to yourself, "I am completely calm."
10. Quietly and slowly repeat to yourself six times, "My abdomen is warm." Then quietly say to yourself, "I am completely calm."
11. Quietly and slowly repeat to yourself six times, "My forehead is pleasantly cool." Then quietly say to yourself, "I am completely calm."
12. Enjoy the feeling of relaxation, warmth and heaviness. When you are ready, quietly say to yourself, "Arms firm, breathe deeply, eyes open."