

Coping With Stress

Stress affects your mind, body, and overall health. When you are feeling stressed, changes may occur in your body:

- Your blood pressure may increase.
- Your heart rate rises.
- Your immune system does not function as well.

Your body's response to stress could lead to illness.

You can control your stress level by practicing simple relaxation techniques to train your mind to lower your response to the tension. By using relaxation techniques regularly, you can lower the amount of stress hormones in your blood. This will help you protect yourself from the harmful mental and physical effects of stress.

Breathing

Breathing provides oxygen to your bloodstream and body. When you breathe in, you inhale oxygen. When you breathe out, you exhale carbon dioxide. Your diaphragm (DIEeh-fram) is a sheet-like muscle that separates your stomach (abdomen) and your chest. Your diaphragm works to help you breathe in and out.

When you inhale, the diaphragm lowers, your stomach pushes out, and your chest cavity swells. This gives the lungs more space to expand into and increases the amount of air that you can inhale.

Chest Breathing vs. Abdominal Breathing

As we get older, our breathing gets shallower, and most of us use only the upper parts of our chest to breathe. When you breathe from your chest, you inhale about a teacup of oxygen. Instead, you should breathe from your abdomen. When you breathe from your abdomen, you inhale about a quart of oxygen. The more oxygen you inhale, the better.

How you breathe also affects your nervous system. Chest breathing makes your brain create shorter, more restless brain waves. Abdominal breathing makes your brain create longer, slower brain waves. These longer and slower brain waves are similar to the ones your brain makes when you are relaxed and calm. So, breathing from the abdomen helps you relax quickly.

Practice Abdominal Breathing

It may be easier to practice abdominal breathing when you're lying down. With practice, you should be able to do abdominal breathing anywhere.

1. Put your right hand on your abdomen, at the navel (belly button), and put your left hand on the center of your chest. You may find it helpful to close your eyes.
2. Inhale through your mouth more deeply than usual, and pay attention to your abdomen. If you are breathing from your abdomen, you should feel your abdomen rise as your lungs fill with air. The hand on your chest should move only slightly. If your chest rises more than your abdomen, then you are breathing from your chest.
3. To change from chest to abdominal breathing, exhale all of the air in your lungs. Keep pushing the air out. When you feel like you can't exhale any more air, pause. Then inhale slowly. When you breathe this way, you push the air out from the bottom of your lungs, and create a vacuum that will pull in an abdominal breath when you inhale.
4. Do steps 2 and 3 again, but this time, breathe in through your nose. Breathing through your nose is better than breathing through your mouth because your nose:
 - Warms the air
 - Filters the air
 - Adds moisture to the air
 - Lets you breathe in more air

Mini Relaxation Exercise

A mini relaxation exercise can help you reduce stress and tension immediately. The important part of these exercises is to focus on your breathing. During the exercises, try to breathe from your abdomen. You should feel your stomach rising about an inch as you breathe in, and falling about an inch as you breathe out.

Remember, it is impossible to breathe from your abdomen if you are holding your stomach in. Relax your stomach muscles. You can do these exercises with your eyes open or closed. There are a variety of mini relaxation exercises. Choose the one that works best for you.

The following mini relaxation exercises were adapted from the Mind/Body Medical Institute in Boston, Massachusetts.

Exercise #1:

Count very slowly to yourself. Count from 10 down to 0. With the first abdominal breath, say 10 to yourself; with the next breathe, say 9, and so on. If you start feeling light-headed or dizzy, slow down the counting. When you get to 0, see how you are feeling. If you are feeling better, great! If not, try doing it again.

Exercise #2:

As you inhale, count to 4 very slowly and say to yourself "1,2,3,4." As you exhale, count backwards very slowly and say to yourself "4,3,2,1." Do this several times.

Exercise #3:

After each time you inhale, pause for a few seconds. After you exhale, pause again for a few seconds. Do this for several breaths.

When to Practice

You can practice the mini relaxation exercises almost anywhere, in any situation, including when you are:

- Waiting in line or stuck in traffic
- Put on hold during an important phone call
- Bothered by something someone has said
- Overwhelmed by what you need to accomplish
- In pain