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Breathing and Relaxation

Relevant to: Depression:  Anxiety:  Irritability/Anger:  General emotional control: 

Breathing is one of the most interesting human activities. On the one hand there is a part of the brain (the Brain Stem) dedicated to looking after our breathing, ensuring we carry on breathing when we are asleep and that we breathe at the right rate no matter what. On the other hand (because we need to stop breathing when we are under water for example) we can deliberately interfere with it and may have been told to count while we breathe or breathe in some other predetermined way.

It is an activity which is both automatic and yet can be interfered with. Moreover it can affect us a great deal. For example 'panic attacks' are perhaps more accurately called 'hyperventilation attacks', where the person is receiving too much oxygen because they are over-breathing and feel some very distressing symptoms as a result. These can include dizziness and an inability to breathe. The latter is caused by the brain automatically preventing the person from breathing, in order to restore the correct balance of oxygen and carbon dioxide in the blood. It is obviously very distressing for the person concerned and is normally corrected by either breathing much less, stopping breathing, exhaling very slowly, or breathing into a paper bag and re-breathing the used air. Anything that reduces the amount of oxygen being breathed.



Conversely, when we allow ourselves to breathe well, it can have an excellent effect on us, calming us down, and generally putting the body 'to rights'.

Some people highlight the effect of us getting our breathing and our heart rate in synchrony with each other and the wonderful effect that we feel as a result.

Generally, most people are unable to control their heart rate, so breathing is the only variable we can look at if we are aiming for synchrony. Moreover, simply to focus on our breathing is a wonderful distraction from any other events that may be around us, preoccupying us, or distressing us.

So what do we do, and how do we do it?

Having your breathing perform as it should be is a remarkably simple thing to do, in spite of the fact that it can have such far reaching beneficial effects. All you do is to *passively observe* your breathing, making no attempt to influence it. And that is *all* you do. But what you will find is interesting; you will find that your breathing rate, the rate at which you breathe in and out, varies. You will find that the *depth* of your breathing varies, sometimes deep, sometimes shallow, you will probably find that your out-breath takes considerably longer than your in breath, and you may even find that you have noticeable pauses between breaths. Whatever, the important thing is to make no attempt to try and 'correct' it, simply to passively observe what happens. You have a whole department of the brain that is dedicated to breathing as well as is possible to do, and all you have to do is sit back and watch it happen.

When should you do this?

Most people find this 'passive observation' of their breathing both very beneficial and also very enjoyable. You might therefore wish to have a session when you do this for about 5-10 minutes, two or three times a day. Passively observing your breathing will do you no harm whatsoever, and potentially will do you a great deal of good, especially if you are prone to feel anxious, agitated, out of control or similar. It is an easy and enjoyable way of bringing back a good form of control, a control that genuinely benefits both body and spirit.



Again though, when should I do it?

Initially, whenever you will find it easiest to do it. Whenever you are practising a new skill, it's best to make things easy for yourself. After a while though, when you have become good at it, you may find you want to use such sessions as a positive, active intervention to calm yourself down. Initially though, when you are developing your skill, you may wish to do it when you are already feeling well in control and quite calm. A bit like when you're learning to drive, you start off with the most undemanding pieces of road.

In session

Discuss with your neighbour(s) what experience you have had of (a) your breathing being out of control, if ever and (b) any breathing exercises you have previously tried. The group leader will ask you what answers you came up with.

Project

Over the forthcoming week, and forever more if you wish, find yourself up to three periods per day, each period of 5-10 minutes where you can have some uninterrupted time where you can simply sit back and passively observe your breathing doing its work. You may find that this is a major beneficial addition to your life. Be prepared to tell the group how you got on, next time.

Mythbuster

It is not true that "the more oxygen you breathe in the better". In fact 'hyperventilation' can cause distressing effects, notably dizziness and a difficulty in breathing.

The best amount of oxygen is the amount you naturally want to breathe - neither more nor less.