

JUST *BREATHE!*

Sounds simple, doesn't it? If you're feeling stressed, anxious, or uptight, someone is bound to tell you "just relax and breathe." Unfortunately, many people struggle with this, especially when they are anxious—they may not know how to breathe in a way that is calming and helpful.

Taking deep breaths is a specific type of breathing called "diaphragmatic breathing." This involves using your abdomen to breathe all the way down into your diaphragm rather than breathing shallowly, or into your lungs only. By using your diaphragm to breathe, you access more oxygen, which then enters your blood stream and facilitates relaxation. Now that you know what diaphragmatic breathing is, here's how to do it correctly:

1. Sit or lie in a comfortable position.
2. Place one hand on your sternum (just above your chest) and the other just below your rib cage over your abdomen.
3. Slowly breathe in through your nose, allowing the lower hand over your abdomen to rise while keeping the upper hand on your chest as still as possible.
4. Once your abdomen has filled with air, breathe additional air into your chest, allowing your upper hand to rise as well.
5. Slowly exhale through your mouth, first emptying your abdomen of air and allowing your lower hand to fall, then allowing the upper hand to fall as the air exits your lungs.
6. To ensure that your breath is slow and even, you may want to count to three in your head with each breath. For example, "in-1-2-3" and "out-1-2-3." As you become more experienced, try increasing your count to 5, 6, or even 8 counts.

If this type of breathing is difficult, you can also try "pursed lip breathing," another strategy which can be useful for slowing down your breathing and taking deeper, more full breaths.

1. Sit or lie in a comfortable position.
2. Take a normal breath in to a slow count of two (e.g., "in-1-2").
3. As you breathe out, "purse" your lips as if you were going to whistle or to blow out a candle. Breathe out gently through your pursed lips to a count of four ("out-1-2-3-4").
4. Repeat for 1-2 minutes or up to 5 minutes if possible.

For best results, practice either of these techniques daily until this type of breathing becomes a habit—you will likely feel calmer and more relaxed, and all you did was breathe! ☺

PS: If you would like more structure and/or the use of a timer for your breathing sessions, try the web site **calm.com** (also a free phone app). It offers segments of relaxing scenes and music in 2–5–10–15–20 minute increments. In addition, it provides the option of choosing "guided calm," where a pleasant voice cues you to relax your body while focusing on your breath.