

Deep Breathing Exercise*

This exercise is called “diaphragmatic breathing.” You take deep breaths using your diaphragm, and you take in more air, allowing you to relax.

Read the instructions before beginning the exercise to familiarize yourself with the experience. If you feel more comfortable listening to the instructions, use an audio-recording device to record the directions in a slow, even voice so that you can listen to them while practicing this technique. Set a timer or alarm clock for five minutes and practice breathing until the alarm goes off. Then, as you get more accustomed to using this technique to help you relax, you can set the alarm for longer periods of time, like 10 or 15 minutes. But don’t expect to be able to sit still that long when you first start. Five minutes is a long time to sit and breathe.

To begin, find a comfortable place to sit in a room where you won’t be disturbed for as long as you’ve set your timer. Turn off any distracting sounds. Take a few slow, long breaths and relax. Place one hand on your stomach. Now slowly breathe in through your nose and then slowly exhale through your mouth. Feel your stomach rise and fall as you breathe. Imagine your belly filling up with air like a balloon as you breathe in, and then feel it deflate as you breathe out. Feel the breath moving in across your nostrils, and then feel your breath blowing out across your lips. As you breathe, notice the sensations in your body. Feel your lungs fill up with air. Notice the weight of your body resting on whatever you’re sitting on. With each breath, notice how your body feels more and more relaxed.

Now, as you continue to breathe, begin counting your breaths each time you exhale. You can count either silently to yourself or out loud. Count each exhalation until you reach “4” and then begin counting at “1” again. To begin, breathe in slowly through your nose and then exhale slowly through your mouth. “1.” Again, breathe slowly through your nose and slowly out through your mouth. “2.” Repeat, breathing in slowly through your nose, and then slowly exhale. “3.” One more time, breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. “4.” Now begin at “1” again.

When your mind begins to wander and you catch yourself thinking of something else, return your focus to counting your breaths. Try not to criticize yourself for getting distracted. Just keep taking slow breaths into your belly, in and out. Imagine filling up your belly with air like a balloon. Feel it rising with each inhalation and falling with each exhalation. Keep counting each breath, and with each exhale, feel your body relaxing, deeper and deeper.

Keep breathing until your alarm goes off, and then slowly return your focus to the room you’re in.

** adapted from the exercise entitled “Mindful Breathing” in The Dialectical Behavior Therapy Skills Workbook, by Matthew McKay, Ph.D., Jeffrey C. Wood, Psy.D., and Jeffrey Brantley, MD, New Harbinger Publications, Inc., 2007*