

Directed Breathing

Key for Controlling Stress and Mood

Resources (& Excerpts from):

Gay Henricks, PhD, [Conscious Breathing: Breath Work for Health, Stress Release, and Personal Mastery](#)

Manda Greenblatt, [A guide to Ujjayi breath](https://www.ekhartyoga.com/articles/a-guide-to-ujjayi-breath) <https://www.ekhartyoga.com/articles/a-guide-to-ujjayi-breath>

Start with the Diaphragm Breath

What if our stomach muscles are so tight that we can't fully allow a healthy breath to occur? The diaphragm can't flatten all the way as it is supposed to. We can't take a full breath. This is what happens when we're anxious or angry. The fight-or-flight reflex kicks in and tightens our belly muscles, so that there is no room for our diaphragm to go through its full range of motion. This forces the breath up into the chest. Healthy breathing equals relaxed abdominal muscles and room for the diaphragm to move. Unhealthy breathing equals a tight belly and compensatory inflation of the chest, what can be called upside-down breathing.

As babies early in life, the full diaphragmatic breath comes naturally. But, as the years and stress and trauma pile on we end up more often and too often stuck in the upside-down breathing, keeping our abdominal muscles tight as if we're living in the wild and are about to receive a physical blow (just like an animal freezing with fear for gearing up to either attack or run). Tight abdominal muscles are nature's way of protecting our vital organs when we're truly in physical danger.

While excessive and cumulative life stress is the major cause of this upside down breathing, the cultural taboo against rounded bellies (e.g., the familiar military dictum, 'stomach in and chest out' or fashion dictating that both men and women must have flat bellies) adds considerably to the problem. We end up trapped in overly tight clothing, so that for example full diaphragmatic breathing can be hindered even by a too-tight belt.

To get a clear sense of what a full belly breath feels like - Lay on your back take a big breath into your chest and hold it. Don't let any breath out for a moment. Imagine the pressure in your chest as a ball of breath. Push this wall down so that your stomach bulges out. Then push it back up into your chest by contracting your stomach muscles. Roll this ball of pressure back and forth from chest to belly several times. See if you can do it while keeping the rest of your body relaxed.

To get a clear sense of why your diaphragm usually doesn't get to move through its full range of motion, what happens and what it feels like when your stomach muscles are tense and you're in a fight-or-flight reflex - As you lay on your back, rest your hands on your abdomen and lift your head a few inches off the floor. Notice with your head lifted, the muscles of your abdomen tighten. And try to take a deep breath in this position and feel how difficult it is. Now relax your head back on the floor and take several deep breaths into the abdomen, keeping your stomach muscles very soft. Notice that this is the opposite of the fight-or-flight reflex.

Step-by-step specific instructions for practicing the Diaphragm Breath -*

Begin by lying down on your back and with your hands at your sides. Let your feet be a comfortable distance apart. Take a moment to get comfortable in this position. You can close your eyes or keep them open, whichever is more comfortable for you.

Now bring your legs up so that your knees are bent and your feet are flat on the floor. Make sure your feet are a comfortable width apart and a comfortable distance from your buttocks. Do your best to find a position that allows your legs to feel balanced and relaxed. If at any time your legs get tired of being in this position, stretch them out for a moment to rest them.

Begin to arch the small of your back gently, then flatten it again on the floor. Keep doing this very slowly, taking several seconds to arch the small of your back, then several more seconds to flatten the small of the back against the floor. Make it a smooth, gentle, meditative movement, not short or choppy. Sense and feel the tiny sensations of the movement as you arch and flatten the small of your back.

Now begin to take a deep, slow round-belly-breath as you arch the small of your back, and a deep, slow out-breath as you flatten the small of your back. Breathe in and fill your belly as you arch the small of your back, then breathe out fully as you flatten the small of your back. Keep it slow and gentle. It doesn't need to be a huge movement - just a few inches of arching and flattening.

As you continue this, let your attention go to your tailbone. Sense the movement of your tailbone as you breathe. As you arch the small of your back and breathe into your rounded belly, notice that your tailbone is rolling down the floor toward its tip, the coccyx. As you breathe out and flatten your back, notice that your tailbone is rolling up the floor toward where it joins your spine. Breathe slowly for a few cycles, keeping your awareness focused on your tailbone. Sense how this often-forgotten part of your body is linked perfectly to each breath you take. Continue this movement very slowly and cautiously - Take a full round-belly-breath as you arch the small of your back and a complete out-breath as you flatten the small of your back.

Practice for another minute or two, then relax and rest. Notice how your body feels now, compared to when you first lay down. Remind yourself that throughout the day when you're up and about or seated, any time you wish you can relax your belly muscles and slowly fill your abdomen with a deep slow in-breath and then let it flatten toward your spine with an equally deep-slow out-breath. And tell yourself you can feel confident and in control with this kind of purposeful diaphragm breathing; that it is available to you anytime, anywhere; whenever you want to feel more relaxed or you feel the need to calm yourself down or unwind.

** You may want to make a recording of this Diaphragm Breath script, so that you can proceed through and practice the steps without having to stop and read the script along the way. You can have make your own audio of the script or if you prefer to not listen to your own voice, a friend, family member, or partner can do it for you and/or that person can read it out loud to you, while you practice.*

Add in the Ujjayi Breath

The diaphragm breath is most effective when it is combined with the Ujjayi breath which in simple terms is a 'breath regulating technique where the inhale and exhale are the same'. With Ujjayi breathing, you breathe evenly in and out of the nose with the lips sealed - no breath passes the lips. The lips gently close and although the breath is passing through the nostrils, the emphasis is in your throat. *You draw the breath in and out from a soft constriction you create at the top of your throat and you make it so you hear the sound of air passing from your throat instead of hearing it from your nostrils.*

To learn what this soft or slight constriction in your throat feels and sounds like, first exhale with your mouth open into your palm and vocalize with "Ha..." while you exhale, as if you are fogging up a mirror or piece of glass. And then exhale with your mouth closed and lips sealed, while vocalizing with 'hmm...'

Eventually, you learn to soften the 'hmm' sound on the exhale so it sounds more like the sound of the ocean or a bed partner in deep sleep, maybe even a bit like Darth Vader. And you'll learn to make the same sound when you inhale, make the tone in and out the same, maintain the same the soft or slight throat constriction for both the inhale and the exhale. Just like vocalizing 'hmm' with the exhale is a good way to learn how to do the softer ocean sound, at first placing your finger in your ear on the inhale will allow you to better hear the sound and so can be a good lead in to learn how to maintain the same ocean or deep sleep or Darth Vader sound, whether you're inhaling or exhaling.

<https://www.doyogawithme.com/content/ujjayi-breath>

Any time you choose, you can transform your breathing into steady and smooth Diaphragm-Ujjayi breaths - Start by loosening your abdominal muscles to let your diaphragm fall and lungs expand for a slow-deep inhale while at the same time, you focus on the ocean sound from the back of your throat (not on the sound of the air passing through your nostrils). And when you're reached the top of your inhale, shift back down with a similarly sounding long-deep exhale. And then you can settle into rhythmic, even exhales and inhales (the same length and sound, in and out).

There are times when pausing the rhythmic breathing can add to your sense of calm. But to make that most effective, do it at the end or the bottom of your exhale, not at the top of your inhale. And along with pausing at the end of your exhale, to make sure you're fully emptying your lungs (fully completing the out-breath), you may want to tighten your abdominal muscles for a few seconds, up until your body calls you to resume the in-breath and you return to the rhythmic, even exhales and inhales.

Speed Up the Breath for Energy / Slow the Breath Down for Rest

While the Diaphragm-Ujjayi breath is always a deep rhythmic in and out, the speed of the breath can be varied according to whether you are seeking greater calm and relaxation or more energy and activation. *You speed it up to energize and slow it down to de-energize, but either way you keep your breathing deep. No matter how slow or fast you choose to breathe (whether you're wanting to energize or de-energize), the inhale starts by allowing the abdominal muscles to loosen (the belly to rise, the diaphragm to*

fall) - But when you want to use the Diaphragm-Ujjayi Breath to energize, let the inhale start from the expanded belly but then let it include a full expansion of the ribs in your chest and the ribs in your back. And with that additional expansion on the in-breath along with a stepped-up speed on the inhale and the same quicker rhythm, the same deep draw in and out, the same ocean sound in and out, you'll produce maximal energy; the kind of energy you'll want to have whether you're winding up to better get through your work day or exercising and wanting to enhance your strength and stamina.

Get a Quick Stress Release with a Loud Vocal Exhale

Fast but deep-long diaphragm breathing is energizing and does not cause panic or mean we're in a stressed out panic-type state. But when we are stressed out if not panicking, that means we're locked into a shallow-fast chest breadth. And that makes us prone to hyperventilation. *Hyperventilation means greater amounts of (too much) oxygen being sucked in, but at the same time greater amounts of (too much) carbon dioxide being blown out. Carbon dioxide is necessary for metabolizing oxygen. And so when we hyperventilate, we end up not having the carbon dioxide we need to breathe properly and we feel like we can't breathe, even while we've actually taken in more oxygen than we need.*

Whenever we feel a bit breathless or feel stress with tightness in the chest or uptight in any other way, likely to some degree we've been breathing too fast and shallowly, so hyperventilating or headed in that direction. *To best avoid or get out of hyperventilation, it works best to focus more on the out-breath - So after maybe a relatively brief expansion of the belly to pull the air from the back of the throat in through the nostrils, open the mouth and blow out slowly (after briefly 'smelling the roses', place your focus mainly on 'blowing out the candles').*

This quick stress release, being most mindful of the exhale through the mouth and less mindful of the inhale through the nose, can be even more effective if we allow ourselves to be loud with the exhale. We do this naturally by letting out a big sigh or vocalizing a long 'phew' when we exhale. A loudly vocalized yawn can do the same thing ('aww...' or 'ohh...' or something like that). In yoga, exhaling with the sound of 'om' or the 'lion's breath' exhale provides this same kind of quick release. If nothing else to de-stress, you can go just vocalize the 'hmm' with your exhale, the same 'hmm' you use to learn the ocean sound of the Ujjayi Breath.

Fall Asleep or Deeply Relax by adding in Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Step-by-step instructions for diaphragm breathing with Progressive Muscle Relaxation -*

As you're settling into deep-slow and long Diaphragm-Ujjayi breaths, on the inhale tighten your right fist enough so that you know it's tense. Keep the rest of your body and your breathing very relaxed; just focus all your attention on that right fist. And on the out breath, let go of the tension in your right hand. Let it all go, and keep letting go throughout your long out-breath. Then pause after the out-breath and wait for your next in-breath to surprise you. When it does, tense your

right fist again all the way through the in-breath to the top, then let go of the tension throughout the out-breath.

On the in-breath a couple of times after tensing-relaxing with the right fist, tense your whole arm along with the fist, all the way up to your shoulder. Throughout your long, slow in-breath, keep the rest of your body completely relaxed. Let go of the tension on the out-breath, continuing to let go more and more all the way to the end of the out-breath. Pause and wait for the next in-breath. Repeat this a couple times with your right hand and arm: the fist and hand up the arm to the shoulder tensing with the in-breath, followed by letting the tension fall out with the out-breath.

Now relax and rest from the conscious tensing-relaxing of your right hand and arm. Continue your breathing as before - long, slow in-breaths melting into long, slow out-breaths. Then, pause and wait for the in-breath when your body calls for it. As you breathe, notice the sensations in your right arm and compare those sensations to your left arm. Notice any differences you feel.

Now repeat the same with your left hand and arm. Start by making a fist with your left hand and keep it tense on your long, slow in-breath, then let go of the tension all the way through the out-breath. Pause at the end of the out-breath, tensing your left fist again only when you are surprised by the in-breath. And after a couple times of doing this, add your left arm to the sequence, tensing both your hand and arm with the in-breath. Do this a couple of times.

Now again, relax your whole body as you continue to breathe. Simply feel and listen to your body sensations. Compare your right arm to your left arm. Notice any differences and similarities.

And when you're ready to resume, tense both hands and arms on the in-breath. Let go of the tension on the out-breath, then wait for the in-breath to come when your body calls for it. Do several cycles with both arms. And then pause and rest from the tensing for a minute or two. Feel and listen to your body sensations.

Now let's move to your lower body. As you tense your right leg on the in-breath, keep the rest of your body very relaxed and let your breathing be very long and smooth. Relax the tension on the out-breath. When the last little bit of breath is gone, pause and wait for the in-breath. When it comes, tense your right leg again. Repeat this sequence a few times.

Add your right hip and buttocks to the tension pattern. Tense your leg, hip, and buttocks on the in-breath and let them go on the out-breath. Use the longest, slowest breaths you comfortably can.

Pause and rest for a minute or two. Tune into the sensations in your right leg. Compare the sensations to those in your left leg. Notice any differences and similarities.

Now do the same sequence with your left leg. Start with the leg only, then expand the tension pattern to your left hip and buttocks. Repeat it a few times. Rest and

listen to your sensations. Compare the sensations in your left leg to those in your right.

Now, tense your right and left legs together, all the way up into your hips and buttocks. Tense all the way with the in-breath, then let go throughout the long, slow out-breath. Pause until the in-breath surprises you, then do the tension pattern again. Repeat the sequence several times.

Finally, tense your hands, arms, and legs at the same time. Tighten your fists and arms, legs and buttocks, as you breathe slowly in. Melt right into the out-breath and simultaneously let go of the tension in your arms and legs. Keep letting go all the way until there is no more air, then pause and wait for the in-breath. Repeat the sequence several times.

Rest now and take your mind off your breath. Let your body breathe however it wants to breeze. Tune into your whole-body sensations. Notice what you feel in your body and your mind.

Rest and enjoy your body sensations for long as you want or until you fall asleep.

**Just like with the Diaphragm Breath script, you may want to make a recording of this Progressive Muscle Relaxation script, so that you can proceed through and practice the steps without having to stop and read the script along the way (an audio of the script absolutely what you need, if you're using it to fall sleep). You can have make your own audio or if you prefer to not listen to your own voice, you can have a friend, family member, or partner do it for you.*