

# Breathing Exercises

Breathing and stress can influence each other. In situations involving mental or physical tension, anxiety or stress, many of us often start to breathe superficially and fast. Some even experience a feeling of breathlessness. Breathing is usually a subconscious process, which can nonetheless be consciously influenced. Relaxation can be induced or sustained by breathing deeply and slowly.

In this information sheet, you will find two simple breathing exercises which are used in clinical practice and which you can try out when you experience restlessness, anxiety or stress. In addition, these exercises can be incorporated in everyday life as a preventive measure, in order to reduce your general stress level.

## Deep Breathing

1. Find a comfortable and relaxed position while sitting or lying down. Put your hands on your belly.
2. Take a slow deep breath, and let the air flow behind your hands and into your belly. You will notice that your abdomen expands and that your hands are moved away from each other.
3. Now, let go and exhale. Your abdomen will go back to its normal position and your hands will again come closer.
4. Once you have completely exhaled, try to wait a little, until you feel a natural desire to take your next deep breath.

## Prolonged Exhalation

1. Find a comfortable and relaxed position while sitting, standing or lying down. You should be able to breathe freely and unrestrictedly.
2. Try to become aware of your breathing: how the air flows through your nose and throat, how your chest or belly move throughout inspiration and expiration.
3. Now change the rhythm of your breathing. Slowly count to 4 while inhaling. Then exhale, while slowly counting to 6.
4. Do not put too much pressure on yourself, especially if you get distracted or sometimes fail to exactly follow the rhythm. The more often you exercise, the easier it gets. It is only important that expiration be longer than inspiration.
5. To come to an end, slowly let your breathing flow naturally again.

## Feel the Difference!

Try to notice how your respiration has become deeper and calmer and how maybe even your body or heart rate have changed.

If the exercises make you feel uncomfortable or unwell, you can stop at any time.

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## Practice & Frequency

These exercises can be very effective in stressful situations and you can use them everywhere, anytime and without any equipment. You can practice long enough to cover a few breathing cycles or during a few minutes, whatever works best for you.

You can integrate them in your daily activities: for instance, while cooking, or as you go to sleep or prepare your coffee.

## References and Resources

- Schmid GB: *Optimale Atmung für die Entspannung: Die 4- bis 6 Atemtechnik*. Schweiz Z Ganzheitsmed 2011;23:84–86. (German)
- [Breathing Exercise](#) by the Institute for Complementary and Integrative Medicine, Universitätsspital Zürich (Mind Body Medicine, German)
- [Breathing Exercise](#) by the National Health Service (England & Wales)

### Further References:

- Jerath, R., Crawford, M.W., Barnes, V.A. et al. *Self-Regulation of Breathing as a Primary Treatment for Anxiety*. Appl Psychophysiol Biofeedback 40, 107–115 (2015).
- Zaccaro, A., Piarulli, A., Laurino, M., Garbella, E., Menicucci, D., Neri, B., & Gemignani, A. (2018). *How Breath-Control Can Change Your Life: A Systematic Review on Psycho-Physiological Correlates of Slow Breathing*. Frontiers in human neuroscience, 12, 353.

## Any Questions?

If you have further questions, please see the contact details for mental health support that are listed in our leaflet „[Mental Health Support](#)“, as well as the references and links in this document. Please note that while we select links to external websites carefully, we cannot guarantee for the accuracy or quality of these websites.