Self-Care: Take a Breath to Relax

In the past, humans faced dangers that were either immediate threats, such as attacks from lions and bears, or chronic threats such as a drought threatening the food supply. Our bodies developed responses to these stressors that would protect us and help us to survive. This fight / flight mechanism is still in play for us today, causing release of hormones that increase heart rate and blood pressure, and cause the blood to thicken and increase in the stickiness of the platelets in order to reduce blood loss if we are injured. Rapid shallow breathing is initiated to increase oxygen to the muscles in case we need to sprint. These mechanisms are necessary for immediate danger, but also occur under stress.

Therefore we need to find ways to stop this reactive cycle and help return the body to a relaxed state. Breathing is one of the few actions (laughing is another) that resides in both the somatic nervous system (which we can consciously control) and the autonomic system (which we cannot easily access). Breath can be a bridge between the two systems. By consciously slowing down our breathing, we can de-escalate the primal fear response and the resultant stress. The following breathing exercises have been gathered from various educational sources to help teach you how to stop the stress response and return to a relaxed physiological state.

Deep Breathing

**American Lung Association:** [http://www.lungusa.org](http://www.lungusa.org)

Correct deep breathing should be done with your belly muscles.
The idea is to let your stomach go out as far as possible as you inhale. In this way you will fill your lungs more completely. Try one breath this way before doing the exercise. Put a hand on your abdomen and, as you inhale deeply, feel your stomach expand as though it were being filled by a balloon. Now, let the air out and feel your stomach return to its normal position. As you do the exercise, pause comfortably at the end of each exhalation until you feel ready to take the next deep breath. You can achieve even greater relaxation if you close your eyes during deep breathing and let your mind focus on a restful scene or a word like "calm" or anything that gives you a feeling of mental quiet.

**Breathe in deeply, letting your stomach expand until your lungs are filled.**

Now, pause for a moment and then exhale until you have emptied your lungs. Pause for a moment. Now, take another deep breath in, filling your lungs from the bottom. Hold a moment...and now let the air flow out, focusing your mind on restful thoughts. Keeping the pace regular, again breathe in deeply...hold a moment...and now let the air out, feeling more and more relaxed. Take another breath in...hold it for a moment...now gently breathe out, letting the tension escape from your body. Once more breathe in...pause a moment... Now, exhale, feeling deep relaxation. Continue this exercise with your eyes closed.

*Many combat and police departments use a method like this: breathe in for 4 counts, hold for 4 counts, breathe out for 4 counts, hold for 4 counts, then start the sequence again.*
Progressive Muscle Relaxation


Get as comfortable as possible.
This exercise will help you relax all of your muscles. It will also teach you to be more aware of parts of your body that are especially tense and show you how to relieve most stress. The object of this exercise is to tense and then release the pressure in different muscles. In this way, you will progressively achieve deeper relaxation.

Start by raising your eyebrows as high as possible—feeling the tension build. Hold that tension for a moment. Now relax, and feel the tension flow out. Now squeeze your eyes shut as tight as you can. Hold that tension. Let it build. Now relax your eyelids. Feel the relief from the tension.

Now clench your teeth together tightly. Let the tension build. Hold it. Now release your jaw, letting it go loose. Now squeeze your whole face up into a knot and hold it there. Hold it. Let the tension build as you squeeze your eyes, mouth, and nose hard. And now relax. Notice how loose and relaxed your whole face feels.

Now bring your chin slowly down toward your chest, feeling the tension building in your neck and shoulders. Hold it. And now relax. Feel the relief.

Now make your right hand into a tight fist and raise your right arm to shoulder height, stretching it way out. Feel the tension build as you clench your fist and keep your arm stretched. Now relax, letting your arm fall slowly to your side.

Now with your left hand make a hard fist. Raise your left arm to shoulder height, stretching it out as far as you can, straight ahead. Feel the tension build in your clenched fist and arm. Hold it. Now relax, letting your arm fall back to your side. Now, make fists with both hands and raise both arms to shoulder height, stretching straight ahead as far as you can. Let the tension build. Hold it. Now, let your arms fall back to your sides and relax. Feel the relief in these muscles.

Now, focus on your stomach. Pull these muscles in tight, as tight as you can. Hold it. Let the tension build. And now, relax.

Now, raise your right leg, tensing your thigh and calf muscles and pulling your toes back toward you. Hold it. Feel the tension build. Now, put your leg back down and relax. Now, raise your left leg and tighten your calf and thigh muscles as you pull your toes back. Let the tension build. Hold it. Now, put your leg back down and relax. Now raise both legs together and tighten your calf and thigh muscles as you extend your toes and point them straight forward as far as you can. Let the tension build. Hold it. Now put your legs back down and relax. Feel the sense of relief.

Now, take a few moments to think about how the muscles feel throughout your body. Check your neck, shoulders, arms, chest, stomach, legs and feet.
Now, spend a few moments experiencing the deeply relaxed restful feeling throughout your body. Sense the quiet and restfulness that comes from releasing the tension in your muscles. Now, take a full deep breath, hold it a moment, and then, as you let out the air allow any remaining anxieties and tensions to just flow away. You are now very deeply relaxed and at ease. Now, open your eyes, stretch your arms and legs, moving them about. Get up when you feel ready.

Dr. Andrew Weil, MD: The 4-7-8 (or Relaxing Breath) Exercise


This exercise is utterly simple, takes almost no time, requires no equipment and can be done anywhere. Although you can do the exercise in any position, sit with your back straight while learning the exercise. Place the tip of your tongue against the ridge of tissue just behind your upper front teeth, and keep it there through the entire exercise. You will be exhaling through your mouth around your tongue: try pursing your lips slightly if this seems awkward.

- Exhale completely through your mouth, making a whoosh sound.
- Close your mouth and inhale quietly through your nose to a mental count of four.
- Hold your breath for a count of seven.
- Exhale completely through your mouth, making a whoosh sound to a count of eight.
- This is one breath. Now inhale again and repeat the cycle three more times for a total of four breaths.

Note that you always inhale quietly through your nose and exhale audibly through your mouth. The tip of your tongue stays in position the whole time. Exhalation takes twice as long as inhalation. The absolute time you spend on each phase is not important; the ratio of 4:7:8 is important. If you have trouble holding your breath, speed the exercise up but keep to the ratio of 4:7:8 for the three phases. With practice you can slow it all down and get used to inhaling and exhaling more and more deeply.

This exercise is a natural tranquilizer for the nervous system. Unlike tranquilizing drugs, which are often effective when you first take them but then lose their power over time, this exercise is subtle when you first try it but gains in power with repetition and practice. Do it at least twice a day. You cannot do it too frequently. Do not do more than four breaths at one time for the first month of practice. Later, if you wish, you can extend it to eight breaths. If you feel a little lightheaded when you first breathe this way, do not be concerned; it will pass.

Once you develop this technique by practicing it every day, it will be a very useful tool that you will always have with you. Use it whenever anything upsetting happens - before you react. Use it whenever you are aware of internal tension. Use it to help you fall asleep. This exercise cannot be recommended too highly. Everyone can benefit from it.
Deep Breathing/Muscular Relaxation Exercise:
Take a Mini-Vacation
UA Life & Work Connections.
Time: Approx. 15 minutes

1. Find a comfortable place where you won't be disturbed or distracted.
2. Sit in a comfortable position with both feet on the floor, legs uncrossed, hands resting on your thighs or armrests. You can do this lying down, however many feel it’s more effective when done while seated.
3. Close your eyes.
4. Slow your breathing down. Breathe deeply through your nose and make your belly rise as you fill your lungs. Keep your breathing regular - don't hold your breath.
5. Starting at the top of your head, imagine a line that is slowly descending, (like the surface of water as it drains). As this line slowly comes down around your head and through your body to your feet and toes, consciously choose to relax the particular muscle group in that part of your body. For example, as the level passes your cheeks, focus on relaxing your cheek and jaw muscles.
6. Overall, imagine feeling like a lump of ice cream that’s slowly melting.
7. Your body should be as relaxed as it can be, and your breathing is slow and deep.
8. Keep yourself in that state as best you can, mentally go on a vacation and imagine yourself in a very beautiful, peaceful place. Often, the mountains or beaches are good places to think about.
9. Imagine yourself in that place, and let your mind focus on what your senses would register. Let your mind be actively creative with this part. What do you see? What do you feel? What do you hear? Are there any pleasant fragrances? Can you taste something wonderful?
10. Stay relaxed by breathing deeply and enjoy this vacation for 5-10 minutes.
11. Through sound, begin to bring yourself back into the present. For example, focus on the sounds around you such as a fan, the muffled sounds of people talking in another room.
12. When you are ready, open your eyes, stretch, and go about your day.