

Diaphragmatic Breathing

Diaphragmatic breathing, also called abdominal or belly breathing, helps to activate a calming response or what is referred to as “rest, digest, and repair”. It relaxes our muscles and reduces blood pressure and heart rate, countering the “fight or flight” or stress response. It’s the healthy way to breathe!

We start out in life breathing in this way. See if you can picture how a baby’s little belly moves in and out. As we get older and the stressors of life begin to impact us, our breathing often unintentionally shifts. We find ourselves more anxious, tense, and tight. We breathe more from our chest, shallow and constricted. You may notice how your chest or shoulders tend to rise the moment you begin to breathe.

The diaphragm is a large, dome-shaped muscle located at base of your lungs. It basically separates your chest (heart and lungs) from your abdomen. When you relax and expand your belly as you breathe in, the diaphragm contracts, moves down, and flattens out, which creates space for your lungs to fully expand. As you breathe out and allow your belly to pull in, the diaphragm moves back up and pushes the oxygen out of your lungs.

Play with this practice. Nice, deep, slow breaths in and out. You will begin to feel a difference over time. Repetitive practice is the way to build a habit of breathing that will serve you, your body, and your brain very well!

To practice diaphragmatic breathing:

- 1) Lie down on a flat surface, or sit comfortably and upright in a chair. If you are lying down, you may want to bend your knees or place a pillow or something comfortable under your knees if that produces less strain on your back.
- 2) Place one hand on your upper chest and the other below your ribcage, the upper part of your belly. Relax your abdominal/belly muscles.
- 3) Breathe in (inhale) slowly through your nose if possible, allowing your belly to expand outward and bringing the oxygen deep into your belly. You should feel the belly area rise, and may even feel the waist and low back expand. The hand on your upper chest should remain still, or will move out near the end of the inhalation, as the lungs finish expanding. Picture the belly moving out as a way to create space for the diaphragm to move down and out of the way, so the lungs can expand fully.
- 4) When you breathe out (exhale), do so through the nose or gently pursed lips. Tighten or contract the belly back in, which allows the diaphragm to push the air out of the lungs. Your hand should return to its original position.

Get more information on breathing techniques by taking one of our courses. Check out drmelissacarris.com.



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