

Breathing for Balance

Goals:

- **Understanding the basics of the stress response**
- **Learning a basic breathing exercise to restore mental and physical balance**

The Benefits of Mindfulness Meditation and Conscious Breathing. No matter what our personal stress style, all human bodies respond physically to stress in the same way. Fortunately we have some simple and free tools at our disposal to help us counter the stress response. These tools can be practiced anywhere! Deep breathing allows us to access the underutilized rest and digest response. This response causes blood pressure to decrease and slows the heart rate. Gastric juices are released so that the body can digest and absorb the maximum amount of nutrition available in food.

The opposite of the rest and digest response is the over utilized fight or flight response. In fight or flight mode, the heart rate increases, pupils dilate, and blood flow is rushed to the limbs to help us escape danger. This response happens whether the stressful situation is at work or at home; whether it is real or imagined.

The fight or flight response helps us remove ourselves from dangerous situations. Problems occur when these stress reactions happen too frequently and/or too close together. Then occasional stress becomes chronic stress. The body is then bombarded with stress hormones such as cortisol, and we run the risk of developing conditions such as sleep disorders, depression, heart disease, and chronic fatigue, among others. Stress can make us more vulnerable to illness and can prematurely age us. How we respond to chronic stress – going for a walk as opposed to smoking, for instance – will ultimately slow down or speed up these unwanted processes.

Mindful Breathing and other mindfulness practices help you to achieve moment to moment awareness in a non-judgmental, detached way, thereby increasing the amount of time per day spent in rest and digest mode. Conscious attention to breathing is common in many forms of meditation and is used by top athletes to enhance performance. Why not start treating yourself like a top athlete and try this peak performance tool?

Exercise:

- Sit in a comfortable position either on a chair with your feet on the ground, or on the floor with your legs comfortably crossed. Sit tall with your spine extended so that your breath can enter your entire torso. Relax your shoulders down and move your shoulder blades towards each other. • Place one hand on your abdomen and the other above your chest near your collarbone.
- Inhale deeply from the bottom of your abdomen. Feel the expansion pressing against your lower hand.

- Continue to fill your torso until you feel the hand on your upper chest expand. Hold the breath for one second.
- Release the breath from the chest to the abdomen. Picture a cup of water emptying from the top to the bottom as you exhale. Note how it feels to be empty of breath just for a second before your next inhale, then repeat this long, slow even breath nine more times. Return to the breath count as your mind wanders, which it naturally will.
- Return to natural breathing. Take a moment to stretch, and write about your experience in your centering journal. Don't worry if mindful breathing feels awkward or uncomfortable. It will feel more natural the more you practice. Remember, these are muscle responses. You can't throw a football like Tom Brady or play the trumpet like Wynton Marsalis right off the bat, either. Practice, practice, practice.