

You have the power to change your physiological reaction to stress. Here's how.



Breathing is one of those physiological things we tend not to think too much about. But breathing actually provides a powerful connection to the automatic functions in the body.

When you're excited, breaths become quick and shallow, which is associated with elevated levels of the stress hormone adrenaline. On the flip side, **slowing and deepening your breathing inhibits the release of adrenaline, decreases heart rate and blood pressure, and normalizes systems.**

Slower breathing is automatically relaxing. The average person breathes about 12-15 times per minute when going about daily activities. **An anxious individual may be breathing 30 times per minute—that's 1 second in, 1 second out.** Wonderful things happen when you slow your breathing down to 6 times per minute (5 seconds in and 5 seconds out).

Here are two exercises for tapping into the calming power of slow, deep breathing.

**EXERCISE #1:** Lie comfortably on your back, and begin to observe your breathing. Control and slow your inhalations (in-breaths) and exhalations (out-breaths) to an easy rhythm. Place one hand on the abdomen, just under the belly button. As you breathe, try to keep your chest wall relatively still, and pull air into the lungs by expanding the abdominal muscles. Your hand should rise and fall with each breath. Breathing should be done through the nose, not through the mouth. Ideally, your inhalations and exhalations should be equal in length, and the breath should never be held. It takes a little practice, but relaxation happens quickly, even after only a few minutes.

**EXERCISE #2:** Using abdominal breathing, try to extend your breath for as long as possible without holding your breath. Inhalations and exhalations should be equal in length. At first, your inhalation and exhalation will likely be about 5 seconds each, but your ultimate goal is to extend each to 15 seconds, resulting in only two complete breaths in 1 minute. Don't strain. Make it easy and comfortable. Work up to 15 seconds slowly. You can practice this anywhere, even at a stoplight!

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