

# Breathing techniques for better speaking



When you're first learning to breathe consciously, you may find it easiest to practice lying flat on your back, knees bent, feet flat on the floor. Place one hand on your chest and one hand on your abdomen. As you practice, you'll be able to do the exercises sitting in a chair and even standing just before you go on stage.

## Reduce anxiety

Everyone who speaks in front of an audience feels nervous. We all sit somewhere along the continuum from mild excitement, to sheer terror. Even experienced speakers feel nerves, they just know how to control them.

1. Hold your breath and count to 10.
2. Then breathe out and think 'relax' to yourself.
3. Then inhale slowly through your nose for 3 seconds. The hand on your abdomen should rise whilst the hand on your chest should stay relatively still.
4. Then exhale through your mouth for three seconds, making a whooshing noise as you breathe out. Think 'relax' as you exhale. The hand on your abdomen should fall as you exhale.
5. After a minute of breathing in and out in a 6-second cycle, hold your breath again for 10 seconds
6. Keep repeating this process for 5 minutes.

## Improve Focus

One of the best things about breathing exercises is that they can be done anywhere. So next time you're struggling to focus, why not try the following steps.:

1. Sit in a comfortable position with your back straight.
2. Inhale through your nose for four counts.
3. Purse your lips and gently breathe the air out of your mouth very slowly, as though you're breathing out through a straw. At the same time, relax all of the muscles in your body.
4. Exhale for eight counts, imagine a wave of relaxation flowing down your body from the top of your head to the soles of your feet. Ground your thoughts. Don't let them fly off out the top of your head.
5. Repeat the process for 5-10 minutes.

Length: Start with 1-3 minute spot drills several times a day before doing anything that makes you nervous (like speaking to others or walking into a room). Work up to 5-10 minutes a day.

## **Control nerves - reducing the fight or flight response)**

When we're nervous, our bodies produce adrenalin to make us ready for action. You want to try to 'get back in your body' and get centred, rather than subconsciously prepare to run. Inhale and exhale solely through the nose. It stimulates the nerves that activate the parasympathetic nervous system and counters the fear response of the sympathetic nervous system.

1. Inhale for a count of 5, expand the belly, then the diaphragm, then the upper chest.
2. Retain and hold the breath for a count of 5.
3. Exhale all the breath from the lungs for a count of 5, letting it go first from the upper chest, then the ribcage, then the belly.
4. Retain and hold the breath for a count of 5.
5. Repeat.

## **Increase lung capacity (to stop you running out of breath)**

Diaphragmatic breathing, or 'belly breathing,' engages the diaphragm, which is supposed to do most of the heavy lifting when it comes to breathing.

1. Place one hand on your belly and one on your chest. Inhale through your nose for 2 seconds, feeling the air move into your abdomen and feeling your stomach move out. Your stomach should move more than your chest does.
2. Breathe out for 2 secs
3. Breath in for 3 out for 3
4. Breath in for 4 out for 4
5. Keep increasing your count to 10 and exhale to 10, then breathe normally for 5 breaths and repeat.

You will find that you can gradually go longer and longer if you do this every day. As your capacity increases, start counting to 5 on the in breath and work your way up to 15 seconds inhale, 15 seconds exhale.

Remember to just relax and breath normally between cycles and lie down if you feel dizzy.

## **Breath while you talk**

Often when we are speaking in a formal situation, our nerves make us hold our breath. This can lead to hyperventilation, because we keep breathing in to get more oxygen, but we stop exhaling as we speak.

1. Take a book, magazine or some kind of script that's about 2 minutes long to read out loud.
2. Take a normal breath in, then start reading out loud, forcing the breath out with the words.
3. Take a slightly bigger breath and repeat, forcing the air out with the words.
4. Take the biggest breath you can then force the air out as fast as you can while speaking.
5. Breathe normally for a minute. Now that your brain has had a practice at breathing out with words, do it again in a controlled manner.
6. Take a good breath in and then speak at a normal pace and volume while focusing on breathing out. It doesn't matter what the words sound like.
7. Experiment with bigger breaths and longer sentences, until you find your personal 'sweet spot' where the breath feels natural.
8. Now focus on the words. Read with expression and meaning while breathing.
9. Rest and breathe normally for a minute.
10. Repeat the process, taking notice of where it 'feels' right to take a breath, and how much air you need to exhale with your words.

### **Give yourself time to breathe**

- If you're doing a presentation and you fear you'll hold your breath, create places to breath, by marking them in your script. It will help you remember, replenish and refocus you.
- If you have a power point, every time you look to the screen, just take a breath. If you are walking from one side of the stage to the other, breathe as you do so.
- If you're using cue cards, make sure you've fully exhaled before you begin each point. It's OK to pause.
- Use a 'pregnant pause' as a creative device during your speech. Check Margaret Thatcher on You Tube for inspiration.