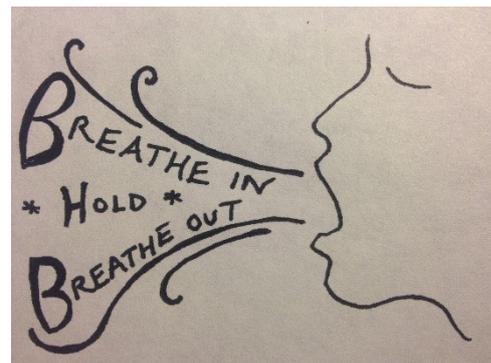


The Soothing Breath

We can breathe automatically. Our body knows how to breathe and it does it all by itself without us thinking about it. However, neuroscience is finding that the way we breathe is crucial in regulating our physiology and emotions. Because of the feedback loop between our body and our mind, we now know that certain types of breathing can increase or decrease the stress response, that is either agitate or slow down the body and mind. Breathing intentionally using the soothing breath is a simple, quick, and yet powerful way to take charge of our physiology. In this way, we can learn to soothe, to regulate stress and difficult emotions to access the relaxation response.



Breathing

The breath is soothing and calming when we:

1. focus on breathing out longer than we breathe in
2. breathe in and out of the lower part of our lungs using the abdominal muscles (belly-diaphragm breathing).
3. breathe slowly

When we breathe this way, we stimulate the vagus nerve in the parasympathetic nervous system which controls our physiological response of rest-digest and attend-befriend, to ease the stress response of fight-flight-freeze (sympathetic nervous system). The parasympathetic nervous system is at the centre of the soothing system.

Breathing consciously using the soothing breath becomes an essential skill in regulating stress, anxiety, agitation, panic attacks and other difficult emotions. When we slow our breathing down and breathe in and out of the belly with longer exhale, we feel a little calmer, so we can access the higher functions of the brain to gain focus, clarity and perspectives.

For some, to be asked to be aware of the breath triggers anxiety. So, if you feel that attending to your breath consciously would make you uncomfortable, instead simply focus on the awareness of your feet touching the ground and the sensations under your feet.

The stress response

When we are feeling stressed, the stress response (sympathetic nervous system) activates many automatic physiological changes in our body, such as faster heart rate, increased muscle tension, as well as faster breathing and racing mind. When we are stressed, we tense our shoulders, we breathe fast and shallow, using mostly the upper chest. The more we breathe in this way the more the fight/flight/freeze in the sympathetic nervous system is activated and our mind becomes more anxious, thinking faster, being more focused on the threat or problem with sometimes feelings of doom, gloom or helplessness.

The stress response was essential thousands of years ago when we needed to run away from a tiger or fight the enemy tribe. But today the stress response is activated when we are stuck in a traffic jam, running late for an important meeting or we are getting an email about an overdue invoice. Most of the situations that trigger the stress responses in the 21st century require us to regulate the stress response; that is to shift from the sympathetic nervous system in the limbic system (primitive/reptilian brain) to access the more evolved part of the brain in the neo-frontal cortex to allow us to have more perspective, broader focus and better ability to learn and problem solve.

Soothing Breathing

There are many ways to engage in the soothing breath as long as we follow some fundamental principles.

- Breathing longer exhale than inhale
- Breathing slowly
- Breathing in and out of the lower part of the lung (diaphragm) as in belly breathe
- Softening and straightening the shoulders
- Using an inner voice that is gentle, friendly, comforting, supportive and kind

Soothing breath method

You can do this sitting, standing or lying down. The soothing or belly breath is easier initially if you do it lying down, since it seems more natural for the body, as many of us, when we sleep, naturally, engage in belly breathing.

1. Placing one hand on your chest and one hand on your belly
2. Maybe smiling within yourself gently.
3. Turning to your breath with kindness, like a caring friend/mother/father attending to a young child.
4. Softening, straightening, relaxing the shoulders and the chest.
5. Starting with a long exhale, (without taking first an exhale). Gently breathing out with the nice long breath. When breathing out, contracting your belly in, with your hands pushing gently your belly in.
6. Then breathe in, slowly expanding your belly, like you would blow a balloon
7. Then slowly breathe out counting up to 7, as you breathe out slowly, keeping your hand on your belly
8. Followed by breathing in, slowly counting to 4
9. Holding to the count of 2
10. Then breathing out, slowly counting to 7 again
11. Repeating breathing in, to 4 slowly, then holding to the count of 2
12. One last time, breathing out to the count of 7, breathing in to the count of 4 and pausing to the count of 2.
13. You can repeat breathing out to 7, breathing in to 4 and hold for 2, a few times.
14. Then resume to an even flow counting to 6 as you breathe out, and counting slowly to 6 as you breathe in, and pausing to the count of 2 in between breaths... gentle hand on the belly...
15. Continue breathing in this easy way for as long as you like: breathing out 1,2,3,4,5,6, pause 1, 2, breathe out 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and so on
16. Meanwhile, feeling the reassuring, comforting touch of the hand on the belly moving up and down as you are breathing in and out
17. You can finish the soothing breath by offering yourself some kind thoughts such as:
May I give myself the kindness that I need,
May I have peace,
May I be happy
 Or use other loving-kindness phrases that are supportive for you.

When to do it

Soothing breath is a skill that needs practice. Throughout the day, you can have many short practices such as every time you sit for a meal or have a drink of water. You can have a longer practice at night, as you are lying in bed, just before you want to go to sleep as it will also help you to sleep better. The more you practice this soothing breath, the more easily you can use it during the day when you are stressed, by simply stopping and breathing out a long slow exhale, to disengage the stress response to find balance and to be able to think more clearly.

You can use the soothing breath to regulate stress and other emotions such as anger, anxiety and sadness. It is very portable, you can use this anywhere and anytime, when you need it, when you are waiting for something to happen, waiting patiently practising the soothing breath or when lying awake at night when you want to sleep, in the car, on the bus, in a meeting, standing in line, and so on. You can also use this practice when you want to feel more grounded when you are beginning to criticise yourself harshly, or to ruminate, to obsess or to think about a problem in a way that is not helpful.

Please note that the aim of the soothing breath is not to eliminate the stress response or the difficult emotion. The goal is to take the edge out of the stress response, so it is no longer so intense or overwhelming. The soothing breath helps you to regulate the emotion to a manageable level, so you can still function appropriately, responding skillfully and wisely.

Please note that this advice is general only and does not take into account particular physical or mental conditions. For further assistance contact a general practitioner or psychologist.

This handout was written by Marie Bloomfield, Clinical Psychologist, M. Psychol., MAPS. June 2020.

Websites: www.bloomfieldpsychology.com.au or
www.mindfulpath.com.au

For more information please email marie@bloomfieldpsychology.com.au