

How to Breathe to Promote Healing

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By

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Breathing is an activity most of us don't think about, but there are many ways to breathe and we breathe differently in different situations. Breathing a certain way can assist us in how we relate to a situation, and therefore impact our wellness. Changing how we are breathing can relax the body, help our mind focus, change our emotional state and reduce the impact of stress. Changing how we are breathing can foster the self-healing powers of our body.

For thousands of years, ancient cultures emphasized special breathing practices because they were found to have value for a person's health and wellness. Eastern meditation, relaxation and movement practices including yoga, t'ai chi and qigong incorporate breathing as an integral component of the activity.

We take over 17,000 breaths a day. In addition to providing us with oxygen, breathing triggers numerous physiological mechanisms. Most of us have learned to breathe a certain way and we can learn to breathe in alternative ways. Changing the way we breathe can result in physiological changes that benefit us.

We take in oxygen through our mouth or nose. The process of breathing takes place mainly in the chest cavity, which includes the lungs, diaphragm and rib cage. The top and sides of the chest cavity house the ribs and intercostal muscles. The bottom of the chest cavity includes the dome-shaped diaphragm. Inside the chest cavity is the heart and two lungs. The diaphragm is located in your abdomen area.

Two basic ways of breathing are chest breathing and deep breathing. Many people use shallow chest breathing.

Deep breathing is sometimes called diaphragmatic breathing, natural breathing or abdominal breathing. The breath is focused in the diaphragm rather than in the chest. Deep breathing serves to trigger relaxation, which causes the blood capillaries to expand, allowing more oxygen to travel to locations where healing is needed. Deep breathing using our diaphragm

efficiently pulls oxygen into all areas of our lungs, which is more beneficial than shallow chest breathing.

Deep breathing is more effective in pumping lymph fluid throughout the body, which stimulates self-healing.[1] The lymph fluid contains immune cells which are targeted to fight bacteria and viruses. In addition, deep breathing shifts the production of brain chemicals which promote healing.

When we mainly use shallow upper-chest breathing, we reduce the efficiency of our lungs and the respiratory system. Compared to deep breathing, shallow breathing results in less blood flow and less productive distribution of the vital lymph fluids. It also reduces the amount of digestive juices available for the digestive process and weakens the functioning of various systems in the body.

Here are two ways to tell if you're a chest breather or a diaphragm breather. Place your right hand on your upper chest and your left hand on your abdomen in your navel area. Breathe normally. If the right hand rises first, you are upper-chest breathing. If the left hand rises first, you are deep diaphragm breathing. Another method is to see which hand rises more. If your right hand rises more, you're a chest breather. If your left hand rises more, you are an abdomen breather. Now perform the exercise by breathing slowly through your nose and see if you notice a difference.

To relax and practice deep breathing, take a slow deep breath through your nose and fill the lower portion of your lungs first and then fill the upper portion of your lungs. Then exhale slowly through your nose. Repeat the exercise. This practice is best performed lying on your back or sitting erect.

You can use deep breathing to create an environment in your body favorable to healing. You can use it to reduce the impact of stress, relax and calm yourself, stop an automatic reaction to a situation and create a pause to allow you to act rather than react, stop a negative thought from occurring or minimize its effect, and refocus your mind.

During the day take deep breaths and see how your body and mind respond.

You can learn more about this topic and other self care/personal empowerment topics in Marc Levin's book Eight Shifts for Wellness: Practical Transformative Steps to Enhance Health, Wellness, and Well-Being and at www.eightshifts.com.

For more by Marc B. Levin, click [here](#).

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References:

[1] Roger Jahnke, *The Healer Within* (San Francisco, Harper Collins, 1997)