

Breathing

Working with your breath – a powerful tool for self-care and self-regulation

Breath is the bridge which connects life to consciousness, which unites your body to your thoughts.”

— Thich Nhat Hanh

Introduction

Our breath is directly connected to our consciousness and immediately reflects our thoughts and feelings. When we are relaxed and calm we breathe slowly, evenly and deeply into the bigger, bottom part of our lungs. This is called abdominal breathing or belly breathing. Our lungs are shaped like pears – small at the top and big at the bottom. When we breathe into the bottom of our lungs we get much more oxygen from each breath because the lungs are bigger and there are more blood vessels in this large part of the lungs. We use our diaphragm muscle to take deep breaths. The diaphragm is between your chest and abdominal area and in contracts and pulls down on the lungs to bring air in and relaxes and pushes up to expel air out of the lungs. When we are breathing in this way our tummy expands when we inhale and falls when we exhale. Our shoulders and upper chest do not move.

The moment we become anxious, worried, frightened, stressed, alarmed or feel threatened in any way our breathing changes. The diaphragm becomes rigid, and we begin breathing in the upper, smaller part of our lungs. Our breath becomes uneven, shallow, rapid and often we hold our breath as well. This can happen whether there is an external danger or just from thoughts and feelings in our inner world.

As you become more aware of your breath you will begin to notice how even a troubling thought can cause your breath to change.

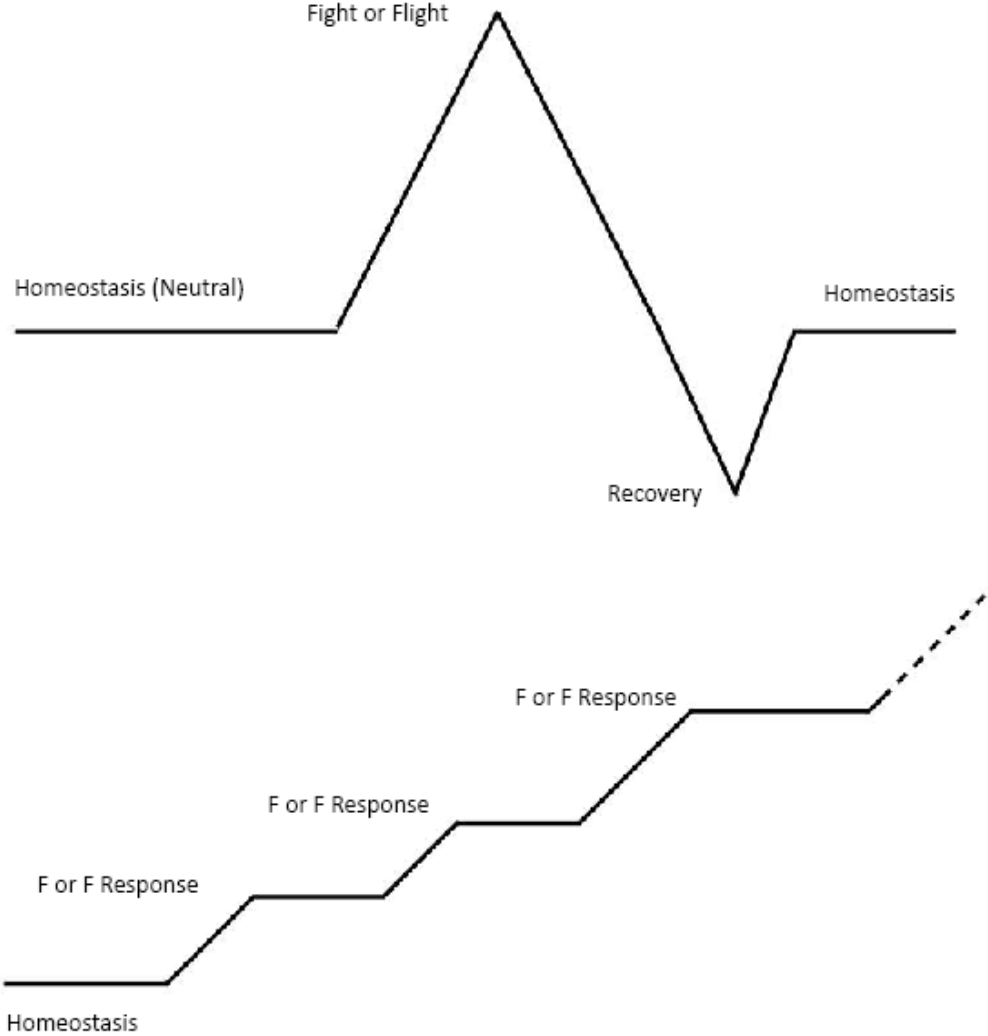
The breath changes in these ways as part of the Fight or Flight Response, which is the way we are genetically programmed to respond to anything that is frightening, worrying, troubling or a danger, whether that is external, or in our mind.

I am sure you recognize the rush of adrenalin, the butterflies in the stomach, the tightness in your throat, the tense muscles, the rapid heart rate. The Fight or Flight Response produces a lot of energy, quickly, so you can deal with the danger. **If** you can use that energy in some way, (e.g., by fighting with the danger or running away from it) then your body quickly returns to normal. You are beautifully designed to do just that. The difficulty comes when we perceive a threat and there is no outlet for the energy. There is nobody you can fight with and no where you can run. The Fight or Flight Response stays "on", and all the energy builds up inside. **THAT** is what we are experiencing when we feel stress. This can happen many times in a day and we

can end up feeling very stressed. It is very common to feel a great deal of anxiety and fear when we are in this state.

The diagram below illustrates how we move from a relaxed state (homeostasis) into the Fight or Flight and shows how we are intended to use the energy and return to our relaxed state. The second part of the diagram shows what happens when we are unable to come out of the Fight or Flight, and it keeps building up.

The Fight or Flight Response



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Why your breath is so important

Our bodies consist of many different systems that all work together. Some of these systems we can easily control, like the muscles we use to move our arms and legs. Some we are unable to consciously control, like our endocrine system. Our respiratory system, our breathing, functions automatically, if we don't pay attention to it, but if we focus our awareness on our breath we can easily begin to change the way we are breathing.

Because we can easily control our breathing, and because our breathing is directly related to our thoughts and feelings, we are able to **use our breath** to help us regulate the state we are in. In other words, we can use our breath to control the Fight or Flight Response and get ourselves back into a relaxed, calm state.

How to get out of the Fight of Flight

The first step is becoming **aware** - aware of when the Fight or Flight is triggered, and aware of your breath changing. We can only change what we are aware of.

As soon as you are aware that you are in the Fight or Flight you can begin to change your breathing and start to take slow, deep abdominal breaths. As you take control of your breath, breathing slowly, evenly and deeply, down into our abdomen, a signal goes to your brain to tell it to shut the Fight or Flight Response off. We have years of scientific and medical research which proves that this is so and that abdominal breathing is one of the fastest and most effective ways to control the Fight or Flight Response, anxiety, panic attacks and stress. Remember that when you are doing abdominal breathing your chest and shoulders do not move, just your tummy.

To the Count of 4

What is slow, deep breathing? Slow means to inhale and count to 4, by counting 100, 200, 300, 400. Then exhale counting to 4 in the same way. Don't hold your breath after you inhale and don't hold your breath after you exhale, when you are doing abdominal breathing to shut off the Fight or Flight. It is very important to make sure your breath is going right down into the bottom of your lungs and that your tummy is moving out when you breathe in, and your shoulders and chest are not moving. If you are sucking your tummy in when you try to take a deep breath, you are doing the opposite of what you need to do.

What to do if you can't get a deep breath

Sometimes when the Fight or Flight is triggered, it is really difficult to take a deep breath into your abdomen. This is because the diaphragm is tight and unable to contract and expand in the normal way to enable you to breathe deeply into your tummy. So, if that happens there are two things you can do to be able to begin deep breathing.

The first is to inhale, and keep inhaling until you can't take in any more air. Then hold your breath and keep holding it until you have to breathe out because you can't hold your breath any longer. As you hold the air in your lungs, your body heats the air and when it heats up it expands and pushes down on your diaphragm, helping it to begin to start moving again which will enable you to do slow, deep abdominal breathing. You may need to do this twice, but usually once works.

The second thing you can do is use your thumb to massage your diaphragm. Find the space where your ribs curve up and join together, just where your chest and abdomen meet. If you press into that area with your thumb you will probably find a tender area which is the diaphragm. Massage that tender area with your thumb. Don't press too hard, but make firm, circular motions to help the diaphragm begin to relax. This too, will help you be able to start breathing deeply into your abdomen and shut the Fight or Flight off.

Practicing with a book to loosen the diaphragm

If you have been anxious or stressed for a long time, your body will have been breathing in your upper lungs for a long time and your diaphragm will have become quite stiff. It can be quite helpful to practice slow, deep, even diaphragm breathing to readjust to the normal healthy breathing. An effective way to do this is to lie down on your back on a comfortable but firm surface. Place a book the size of a large dictionary on top of your belly button area. Then begin practicing the 4 – 4 abdominal breath. As you do, push the book up with your tummy when you breathe in and let the book fall back down when you breathe out.

It is helpful to do this 3 times a day for 5 minutes each time. If you practice in this way for a week, your body will be relearning the healthy way to breathe, that keeps you calm and out of the Fight or Flight.

When it becomes really comfortable to breathe to the count of 4 you can then stretch that out to 5, then 6 and eventually up to 8.

Goal

The goal in working with your breath is to be breathing into your abdomen all the time, except when there is a situation that requires the Fight or Flight. This means becoming aware of your breath and every time you notice that you are not breathing into your abdomen, you then take control of your breath and start breathing deeply, slowly and evenly. For many of us, the shallow, rapid breath that is part of the Fight or Flight (also called hyperventilation) has become "normal". In other words we breathe that way all the time. Research shows that this contributes to many other health issues. So, again, the goal is to be breathing abdominally pretty much all the time.

The Relaxation Response

When we breathe slowly and deeply into our abdomen we are activating the Relaxation Response. It is the opposite of the Fight or Flight. There are other ways to activate the Relaxation Response including progressive muscle relaxation, in which you move your awareness slowly throughout your body, consciously tensing and then relaxing all your different muscles. There are many CD's and books to help you learn progressive muscle relaxation.

Some styles of yoga, such as Hatha or Kripalu yoga, which are calm, gentle and include focus on the breath, can be effective.

Becoming aware of and controlling your thoughts can also help you access the Relaxation Response.

Usually a combination of techniques is what is most effective. However, we do know that abdominal breathing is extremely effective and can be used anywhere, anytime.

Alternate Nostril Breathing

As you become comfortable with slow deep breathing, there are some additional breathing techniques that are very helpful. One of the most helpful is called alternate nostril breathing. Throughout the day our body switches the nostril we are using to breathe through every few hours. There are many explanations for why our bodies do this, but we do know that it happens and that it seems important.

When we are feeling not very grounded or centred, using the alternate nostril breathing technique helps us feel calmer, more balanced and more grounded.

To do alternate nostril breathing we use our thumb and finger to alternately close our nostrils. Using your right hand, bend your index finger and middle finger and tuck them into your palm. This will leave your thumb and ring finger and baby finger sticking out.

Place your ring finger against your left nostril, closing it. Breathe out completely through your right nostril and then breathe in through your right nostril to the count of 4.

Place your thumb against the right nostril, closing it. Hold your breath to the count of 4.

Remove your ring finger from your left nostril, opening it.

Breathe out through your left nostril to the count of 4.

Hold your breath for the count of 4, with lungs empty.

Breathe in through the left nostril.

Place your ring finger against the left nostril and hold your breath to the count of 4.

Remove your thumb from your right nostril and breathe out to the count of 4.

Hold your breath to the count of 4, with lungs empty.

This is one complete cycle of alternate nostril breathing.

Begin again, by breathing in through the right nostril. Hold, and then breathe out through the left. Hold. Breathe in through the left and hold, then out through the right and hold.

Breath and Meditation

Meditation is a very effective way to manage stress and bring about a state of inner calm and peace. There are many different meditation techniques we can use. Most involve some form of relaxation and slow deep breathing. Finding a meditation technique that suits your nature and personality is very helpful.

Mindfulness meditation comes out of a Buddhist tradition and involves developing your awareness and the ability to observe yourself – your thoughts, feelings, perceptions, reactions, your body – without judgment or attachment. Developing this aware self is freeing and empowering and is very helpful in learning to manage stress, anxiety and worry. There are many courses, books, CD's and on-line resources available to help you learn some form of mindfulness meditation.