

Breathing Exercises

Finding Your Breath

1. Start by breathing naturally through your nose. Find a comfortable rhythm and pace. Your eyes can be open or closed.
2. Now feel the sensation of the breath as it travels in and out of your nose. Notice how you can put your attention right there, at your nostrils. With each slow inhalation, notice how the air you take in is cool against the skin around the edges of your nostrils. Notice how, on the out-breath, the air is now warmer, heated by the body. Notice how this warmth makes the sensation of the outgoing air even more subtle against the skin.
3. Keep breathing. Notice how you can detect ever more subtle variations in the quality of the breath: air speed and pressure, temperature, smoothness, little whistling noises, and so on. You will notice the other sensations going on both inside and outside your body. If you find your mind wandering off, gently bring your attention back to your nostrils and your breathing.
4. Feel free to continue as long as you like. Five or ten in-out cycles, done with attention, is sufficient practice and perhaps all a young child may be able to do at one time.

Whistling, pinwheels, and blow cups

Whistling a tune is practicing breath control. You can play with pinwheels and blow cups, the pipe-shaped objects with a little basket and ball that you blow into and keep the ball suspended above the basket.

Basic “Belly” or Diaphragmatic Breathing

Belly breathing is a great tool for quickly gaining control over the body and steadying the mind when it is alarmed. Belly breathing can be done anywhere, at any time, and it is inconspicuous.

1. Sit in a chair comfortably but with your back straight and feet on the floor.
2. Find your belly button, poke it with your finger, and then place your other hand on your belly just above where finger is.
3. Breathe in. As you do so, imagine that you are blowing up a balloon that is expanding against your hand. Continue to inflate this balloon with your breath until the inhalation is complete.
4. Breathe out, deflating the balloon until your belly collapses a little underneath your hand.
5. Repeat.

Eight or ten breaths is sufficient practice for one sitting. Practice a couple of times a day; first thing in the morning and at bedtime work well.

Another good way to practice belly breathing is lying on your back. You might do this right after your child gets into bed at night.

1. Have your child lie on his back.
2. Place his hand or a small, light object (e.g., a rubber duck) on the belly just above the belly button.
3. Ask him to belly breathe. As your child breathes in, the duck rises up as if on a wave that's passing beneath it. As he exhales, the duck sinks back down.

The Darth Vader Breath

This is my name for what is known in yoga as “ujjayi” (pronounced oo-ji-ee) breathing. You make this sound every time you say “hat” or “how”. This involves a slight narrowing at the high back of the throat just behind and below the nose. This will create that soft rushing “h” sound while breathing in and out. It would be a growl if you got the bottom of the throat involved and a snoring sound if it's too high in the nose. Some describe this sound as ocean waves rolling in and out again.

1. While slightly narrowing the high back of your throat, breathe in.
2. Continue narrowing the back of your throat and breathe out.
3. Repeat for four or five cycles of inhaling and exhaling.

Narrowing the throat in this way restricts the flow of air just a little, slows down the breath, and allows for a long, even inhalation and exhalation. Like sipping liquid through a straw, ujjayi breathing makes it hard to “gulp” air. Additionally the sound it makes, like Darth Vader breathing, makes you more conscious of your breath and what it's doing: slow, fast, steady, halting. Practice will help you and your child develop a long, steady, and smooth breathing pattern that will be incompatible with the fight-or-flight response.

The Up-and-Over Breath

This is a very simple but very engaging technique. As you breathe in, imagine a wave of water rising up from your low belly, washing up over your chest, your face, and your forehead. As you reach the fullness of the in-breath this wave goes over the top of your head and, as you breathe out, cascades down the back of your head, neck and back. The cycle starts again with your next in-breath. If you like you can think of a rising, cresting and descending current of air or wind, a stream of light, or whatever

image you like. This breathing technique is simple and encourages long, steady and even breaths. It is a soothing and relaxing sensation.

The Ferris-Wheel Breath

This is sometimes called the “square breath” in yoga, although in reality it’s more like a rectangle. I want you to imagine a Ferris wheel, the kind you might find at a county fair. Imagine it turning in a slow circle, down one side, up the other. Imagine that you are riding it and it stops—and there you are in the car at the very top, paused in your arc. Now the Ferris wheel starts again and you descend. Now, for the Ferris-Wheel Breath, do the following:

1. Breathe in naturally, counting about once per second. You may get to a count of three, four, or five when the inhalation is complete. How long the breath is isn’t important.
2. Breathe out, counting again—one, two, three, four. Do this a few times, breathing in and out naturally, counting as you go.
3. Now breathe in to the top of your inhalation and then pause while you count one, two, and so on—again about one count per second.
4. Exhale fully. At the bottom of the exhalation, pause and count again—one, two, and so on.
5. Repeat steps 3 and 4 for four or five cycles of inhaling and exhaling.

Like the Ferris wheel pausing in its cycling, your breath will rise, pause, descend, pause, rise again, pause, and so on. This pause should not be a straining or gripping action or even really “holding” your breath. The goal is to establish rhythm, control, and mindful awareness of your breath. Introduce this image to your child and practice the Ferris-Wheel Breath a few minutes each day as you would practice the other techniques. Look for opportunities to gently suggest using the Ferris-Wheel Breath when you notice your child is anxious or upset in some way.

Lion’s Breath

1. Take a long, deep breath
2. Open your mouth wide
3. Make your eyes big
4. Let your tongue hang out
5. ROAR!!

The Alien Breath

This is a very interesting experience. You are going to breathe in the manner of an alien from a planet where creatures breathe not through their mouths and noses but through the palms of their hands and the soles of their feet.

1. Sit comfortably or lie down and breathe naturally. Hands and feet can be positioned in any way that is comfortable. You can be wearing footwear.
2. Find your breath- Breathe through your nose and notice the tingly coolness of the air as it passes through your nostrils during the inhalation. Notice the subtle and warm feeling of the air as you exhale through your nose. Notice those sensations now as you breathe in and out.
3. After a few breaths, use your mind to picture the palms of your hands.
4. Breathe in. Use your imagination to feel a sensation of movement across your palms from outside to inside. "Feel" the air, cool and tingly, pass through your palms and into your hands, and travel up your arms and into your lungs.
5. Breathe out. Use your imagination to feel a sensation of movement from inside to outside. Feel the air leave your lungs, travel down your arms, and out through the palms of your hands, warm and subtle.

Now, in the same way, try breathing through the soles of your feet.

1. Breathe in. Feel the cool air enter the bottoms of your feet, travel up your legs, and into your chest.
2. Breathe out. With your exhalation, push the air all the way down and out the soles of your feet, the breath warm now from having traveled through your body.

For variation, you can breathe in through your hands and breathe out through your feet, or the reverse. Have fun with it. This imaginative breathing is subtle and may be difficult for some younger children to grasp. It can be quite intriguing to older children. Alien breathing takes the mind out of the head and creates some distance from the habitual chatter in the brain. This can be especially helpful when you or your child is having difficulty "turning the mind off" in order to fall asleep.