

9. Breathing and Containing

Our breath and breathing is another resource to turn to when it comes to balancing past and present.

‘To breathe’ means being alive. At birth, life starts with the first inhalation of air, followed by the exhalation accompanied by the most audible and life-affirming voice-performance. Throughout life, we survive by a continuous wave of breathing, alternating between the inhalation of oxygen needed for the body-processes, and the exhalation of excessive carbon dioxide.

In the literature, ‘breathing’ and ‘breath’ are sometimes referred to as ‘breath of life’ and are associated with ‘spirit’ and ‘wind’. In a medical context, inhalation is referred to as ‘inspiration’ and exhalation as ‘expiration’.

Usually we talk about inspiration in relation to creativity, indicating that you are inspired and motivated to create and produce, or we talk about spiritual inspiration, which helps one search for meaning and purpose in life. Whether one is talking about the body or mind, inspiration is a motivator within life, and takes us forward. However, expiration is just as important for balancing body, mind and spirit. Through the exhalation, your lungs expire what you do not need in order to find an optimal arousal level for activation, relaxation, and functioning in a daily life. Through the expiration you express what you are inspired to express.

Our breath and breathing is described by some clinicians as the most important single factor supporting our healing, health and coping with life. Without ‘side-effects’, it has helped many to regulate stress, anxiety and depressive symptoms. The shape and frequency of our breathing indicates the level of arousal level as well as assists in balancing it.

Inspiration stimulates your sympathetic nervous system, which is important for increasing the arousal level, and the expiration stimulates the para-sympathetic nervous system, important for decreasing the arousal level. Thus, you may think of inspiration as a ‘turn-on button’ and expiration as a ‘turn-off button’. The longer the inspiration is – the more you stimulate an increase of arousal, the longer the expiration is – the more you stimulate a decrease in arousal and towards relaxation. Thus our breathing can help us to regulate negative over- as well as under- activation related to past trauma and connect safely to the present moment.

I suggest that you start with getting to know your breath, befriending it without judgement, and you may choose to inhale and exhale during your nose, if not otherwise specified.

I will start with introducing probably the simplest way to use your breath for regulation of arousal that you can do anywhere. That is, to direct your attention to your breathing, notice it, just notice it as it is, without thinking about trying to change it, notice your inhalation, and thereafter notice your exhalation, etc. Just be present and notice. If your mind drifts away to something else, it is okay, this happens to all of us. Gently – without being critical of yourself – direct your attention back to your breathing. If helpful to keep focusing on your breathing, you may imagine that ‘you are your breathing’.

You can add some nuances to this approach: Again, as a start, direct your attention and awareness to your breathing, just notice it, without thinking about trying to change it. Sense the inhalation and after that, sense the exhalation. Sense the air against the tip of your nose and nostrils, sense the temperature of the air you inhale, and the air you exhale. Notice the difference in temperature, the cooler temperature of the air being inhaled compared to the warmer air being exhaled. Take time to notice. Notice the movements of your stomach and chest during inhalation and during exhalation. If it is helpful for the sensing of the movements, you may put one hand at your stomach and one hand at your chest, and notice the movements during inhalation and exhalation. You can add the following to the exercise: As you inhale, you may think of a positive word or statement, which strengthens you, as e.g., 'I am safe', 'It is okay', 'Calm', or any positive statement. While exhaling, you may think of exhaling all stress and negative energy that you want to be released from. You may think of a statement that reinforces this, such as: 'Let go', or 'It is over'. Alternatively, you may think of inhaling a color that symbolizes positive inspiration and motivation, and during the exhalation you may think a color that symbolizes the stress and negative energy being exhaled. – Choose and find the expressions that feel right for you. Do the exercise in your own pace, find a rhythm that you are comfortable with.

It may be helpful to calm down *racing thoughts* by bringing your focus to your breathing by counting slowly during inhalation, and think calming statements or words during exhalation, for example 'relax', 'peace'. Continue to do this until you have done it ten times, and then start from the beginning again. If your thoughts 'wander' away, do not become frustrated, but allow those thoughts to pass through your mind, and redirect your attention back to your breathing as often as needed. Some people prefer to focus on the counting or saying calming statements like e.g. 'calm' (or something else). Do experiments and see what works best for you.

As you regulate yourself within the window of tolerance, balancing the past and present, your breathing will gradually, more and more involve the lower parts of your lungs, thus the hand on the stomach will rise during inhalation while the hand on the chest will stay more and more still. - Gently and slowly inhale a normal amount of air through your nose, filling your lower lungs. Then exhale easily. If you have one hand on your stomach and one at your chest, you will notice as you inhale gently, that your lower hand rise while your upper hand stays still.

The process of breathing is both involuntary and voluntary: If we do not pay attention to it, it follows its own rhythm and pattern. We can take control, and by doing so we can influence and regulate our arousal level, over- as well as under- activation. Thus, it may help us follow a flatter arousal-curve within the window of tolerance.

You may use *slow deep breathing* to reduce negative emotions, stress, anxiety, depression, and to increase well-being: Sit (or lie flat) in a comfortable position. Put one hand on your stomach just below your ribs and the other hand on your chest. Bring focus to your breath. Take a deep breath slowly in through your nose, and let your stomach push your hand out. Breathe out slowly through pursed lips as if you were whistling. Do this breathing 3 to 10 times.

Add some nuances: Begin to lengthen each inhalation and each exhalation: As a start, inhale for a count of three, exhale for a count on three, add a pause between each inhale and exhale. When your body is ready, try to add one more count between each breath. Find your own pace.

The frequency of one's breathing has importance for stress and arousal level. For reduction of stress a recommendation is to have a breathing cycle of around 5 per minute while resting.

Counting while inhaling and exhaling may be helpful as a way to influence one's breathing and guide it into the direction one wants. The pattern of counting you choose is up to you. The important issue is that you find the one or ones that help you regulate yourself when you need it.

Counting while breathing is helpful for some, to stay focused and 'anchored', while it for others is disturbing. One may experience it helpful to use counting in the beginning of the exercise, and then to stop counting when the breathing has deepened.

Some suggestions for counting patterns are:

5 – 3 – 5: Inhale on a slowly count to 5, pause and count to 3, exhale while slowly counting to five.

4 – 4 – 4 -4: Inhale while counting slowly to 4, pause while counting slowly to 4, exhale while counting slowly to 4, pause while counting slowly to 4. This pattern is called 'box-breathing'.

6 – 6: Inhale while slowly counting to 6, exhale while slowly counting to 6. Some prefer and suggest that the exhale should be a little longer than the inhale. You can use this pattern in daily life situations to help you find balance. Many practice this regular breathing pattern for 5 minutes at the start as well as the end as a way to find balance.

If you want to calm down stress, you may extend the exhalation. If you want to increase your arousal level you may extend the inhalation.

The following pattern may be helpful to reduce stress (including sleep-problems):

4 – 7 – 8: Inhale as you slowly count to 4, pause while you slowly count to 7, exhale as you slowly count to 8.

Other similar counting frequencies that often are used for respectively the inhalation, the pause between inhalation and the exhalation, and exhalation are among others:

4 – 4 – 8 and 4 – 8 – 8.

Again I remind you that if your thoughts and focus wander away from the breathing, do not become frustrated, but allow those thoughts to pass through your mind. Just observe and notice without judgement, and redirect your attention back to your breath and that you are breathing in and breathing out as often as needed.

You may include the practice of such skills in your plan for the day.

This was an introduction to some breathing techniques! There is much more to learn on about how your breathing can assist you in your healing process! I encourage you to be curious and explore more together with your therapist. I wish you good luck!

Thank you!