

DR. KEOUGH'S GUIDE TO
**USING BREATH
TO STAY HEALTHY**



DR. FELICITY KEOUGH-BLIGH

Dr. Keough's Guide to Using Breath to Stay Healthy
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1. HEA009000 HEALTH & FITNESS / Healing 2. OCC011000 BODY, MIND & SPIRIT / Healing / General 3. OCC010000 BODY, MIND & SPIRIT / Mindfulness & Meditation

The Secret of the Breath

“Feelings come and go like clouds in a windy sky. Conscious breathing is my anchor.”

– Thich Nhat Hanh

It is not uncommon for many people today to feel overworked and stressed out. Running on empty without any more fuel to keep going, consumed by endless thoughts is accepted as normal almost everywhere it seems.

Achieving a stress-free life does not have to feel like climbing a mountain. You don't have to fork over the money for an expensive massage just to relax- you can spend some time just with yourself, breathing, as one of the best tools for stress relief. And the best part? It's free!

Breathing is so paramount to human life that it has been valued for thousands of years as a staple to overall wellbeing. Techniques to control and internalize the breath have been codified and passed down from ancient practices in the East as methods to extend life. And indeed, if you look at certain animals, you will notice that those that breathe slower often live longer!¹

The secret to unlocking your body and mind lies in the gateway of the breath. Your breath is an automatic function that occurs day in and day out. Every day you breathe, you are alive! It is a sign to rejoice. Your breath is unique in the fact that even though it is an automatic process, you can also control it, too. This is unlike your heartbeat or digestion. You cannot change your heart or digestion directly, but you can influence them through your breath's impact on the nervous system.

When was the last time you gave your breath the time of day?

When you learn to control your breath, you improve your life.

If your breath feels disturbed or panicked, you may feel your life is out of control. There is a connection between how we feel on the inside and how our behavior manifests on the outside. If you can harness the power of your breath you can

learn to control your thoughts and feelings when the going gets tough. This is one way to unravel your unconscious thoughts and patterns and bring them to conscious awareness.

The Benefits of Deep Breathing

- Increased energy
- Improved sleep
- Better digestion
- Relieve symptoms of anxiety and depression
- Enhanced immune system
- Clarity of mind

Breathing Basics

Your lungs are housed inside the dome of your ribcage and they are responsible for bringing you life-sustaining oxygen. When you breathe in, this is called the inhalation. When you breathe out is known as the exhalation. The inhale provides you with oxygen and the exhale releases carbon dioxide from your body. Carbon dioxide is a water byproduct of your cells. Awareness of your lungs can help improve your quality of life, too.²

How Breathing Works

Humans average between 12-20 breaths per minute, up to 21,000 times per day!³

Most people likely do not use their full lung capacity, which means they are not getting the full amount of oxygen they could be receiving. Many people breathe only from their chests, which is shallow breathing. Deep breathing uses deep abdominal or diaphragmatic breathing which promotes more oxygen to nourish your body. Additionally, you can strengthen your lung muscles, which are often overlooked. When you breathe deeper and strengthen your lungs, you will enhance and increase your lung capacity.

Our bodies crave oxygen like a vital nutrient. One of the most important things is that breathing oxygenates the bloodstream. Without oxygen, life as we know it would cease to exist.

Breathing is also called respiration. In cellular respiration, oxygen is used to produce energy in the body. If there is not enough oxygen in the body, then you may feel tired and lethargic. The overall body systems may not function to their optimal capacity, either.

Additionally, breathing is a detoxification process. Our body is constantly burning through billions of cells every day, and these old cells become toxic. Breathing eliminates these toxins so that new energy can be made.

The Benefits of Deep Breathing

Deep breathing is known to soothe the mind through the stimulation of the parasympathetic nervous system. This is the body's restorative system also known as the rest and digest system. When this system is activated, the heart rate slows so the body has time to heal itself.⁴

Do you wonder how exactly this works? It's possible because of the vagus nerve. The vagus nerve is a special nerve channel that is between the neck and abdomen. It is responsible for shutting off the fight or flight response and is activated by deep breathing.⁵

Our survival instinct mechanism is turned on by the opposite of the parasympathetic known as the sympathetic nervous system or the fight or flight response. When breathing is shallow, the heart rate can elevate, body temperature increases, and digestion begins to shut down. More cortisol will be released, which is the stress hormone. Just imagine if you feel like this every day and you didn't even know why! This is why we always here the saying "Take a deep breath" when we feel upset, anxious, or nervous. By strengthening the parasympathetic nervous, you can decrease the amount of cortisol released and decrease your stress levels naturally.

"When the breath wanders the mind also is unsteady. But when the breath is calmed the mind too will be still, and the yogi achieves long life. Therefore, one should learn to control the breath."

– Hatha Yoga Pradipika

Breath and Meditation

Using the breath during meditation helps pull you into the present moment. Many times, we spend a lot of our lives working for the future or staying attached to the past. This can be harmful and prevent us from experiencing true happiness. And sometimes we may find when we sit down to meditate that a lot of thoughts and emotions rise up that we don't want to deal with.

The breath is a basic tool used in various styles of meditation, in particular mindfulness meditation and also Zen meditation. Through a basic awareness of the breath, you can learn how to retrain, redirect, and refocus the mind any time a spare thought comes into the mind.

The practice of yoga contains a variety of breathing techniques known as pranayama. The word pranayama in Sanskrit translates to “control and expansion of the life force energy.” Our breath is the closest thing we have to connect with our vital life force energy, which is actually more subtle than air. According to yoga philosophy, pranayama precedes meditation as a technique to harness our energy and focus the mind.⁶

“For breath is life, and if you breathe well you will live long on earth.”

– Sanskrit Proverb

Breathing Techniques

The Basics

When you practice breathing techniques, it is important to maintain good posture and also good breathing practices. This means you need to breathe in and out through the nose and not through the mouth. The nose was designed to filter the air around you and inside of you more effectively than your mouth. For some, this may mean a bad habit that needs to be broken. Can we change this too, for some, this is a life long habit due to poor mouth and facial development and takes time to retrain. Give yourself grace with these changes. If mouth

breathing is a difficult habit to break, it may be helpful to seek out the help of a chiropractor, craniopath and or dentist for assistance with these changes.

To sit for breathing practice, you can elevate the hips on a cushion for comfort. This also helps to elongate the spine so the lungs and chest cavity don't sink down. For the most optimum breathing, the spine needs to be long without any collapsing in the chest. The shoulders stack over the hips and the head is aligned with the rest of the body. You can also close your eyes for comfort. Some people benefit from body work such as chiropractic and massage to allow the body more comfort in these positions.

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“Breath is the bridge which connects life to consciousness, which unites your body to your thoughts. Whenever your mind becomes scattered, use your breath as the means to take hold of your mind again.”

– Thich Nhat Hanh

Mindfulness Breath

This is part breathing technique and part meditation. Sit quietly and begin to observe your natural breath. You don't need to change anything about it all. Just notice your inhale and exhale. Then, begin to count each breath up to the count of 10. For example, each inhale and exhale will equal 1, then 2, and so on. Once you reach 10, just begin again. When the mind becomes distracted or you lose count, just begin again at 1.

Abdominal Breathing

One of the first steps to understanding the breath starts by learning how to breathe into the belly. If you are used to shallow chest breathing, this technique helps redirect the breath downward into the abdomen to learn how to use the full lung capacity.

To learn this breath, lay down on your back with your knees bent and feet on the floor. Place one hand on your belly and as you inhale, allow your belly to inflate like a balloon. Some people may feel like it's wrong to breathe into the belly at first because of social conditioning to not stick the belly out. But with time, it will feel more natural. This is the first step to using your diaphragm, your breathing muscle, which lies between your rib cage and abdomen!⁷

3 Part Breath

Once you have an understanding of abdominal breathing, you can begin the 3 Part Breath. For this technique, you will begin with abdominal breathing. You can practice seated with one hand on the belly. Then, place the other hand over the bottom of the rib cage. Breathe into both hands from the bottom to the top as you inhale, then from top to bottom as you exhale. This is a 2-part breath to start. Once you are comfortable with this, take your bottom hand and place it over the center of the chest. Feel the breath rise from the base of the belly and into the top cavity of the chest as you inhale. Squeeze all of the air out from top to bottom as you exhale.

Sama Vritti/Harmonious Breath

Sama Vritti is a breathing technique that uses an even counting ratio to ensure the inhalation and exhalation take up the same amount of time. It has a very calming effect on the nervous system. Sama means harmony and vritti is often translated to mean our thoughts or fluctuations in the mind. So, this technique seeks to calm the mind.

To begin, start your 3 Part Breath and then count how long your inhales and exhales are. You may notice one part of

your breath is longer or shorter than the other. This may even change day to day. Now to practice the Harmonious Breath, you can start with a 4-count inhale and a 4-count exhale. Start small and slow and gradually build yourself up from there. Over time, you can take longer breaths up to 5, 6, or more counts as your lung capacity increases. Use a timer and start with 2 minutes of practice.

Square Breathing

Square Breathing is a continuation of Sama Vritti with the addition of breath retention, also known as holding the breath in or out. This also is a great technique for stress relief. It is called Square Breathing because you keep the ratio even, just as in the Harmonious Breath.

To practice this, you can again start with the 4-count breath cycle. Inhale for 4 counts, then hold the breath at the top for 4 counts. Exhale for 4 counts and then hold the breath at the bottom for 4 counts. Use a timer and start with 2 minutes of practice.

4-7-8 Breathing

In this technique, you will inhale for 4 counts, hold the breath for 7 counts, and exhale for 8 counts through the mouth. This is a great practice in learning how to exhale much deeper than usual and is useful in helping people fall asleep.

Nadi Shodhana/Alternate Nostril Breath

Alternate Nostril Breath is a technique used to focus the mind and balance the right and left hemispheres of the brain. It is performed by switching the breath between the nostrils. To practice this technique, lift your right hand up and curl down your index and middle fingers. On an exhale, close the right nostril with your thumb. Inhale through the left nostril and then close the left nostril with the ring finger. Exhale through the right nostril as you release the thumb. Inhale through the right nostril, close with the thumb, and then exhale through the left nostril. The rule here is to always inhale through the same side you just exhaled from.

Kapala Bhati/Breath of Fire

Breath of Fire is both a heating and energizing breath, best performed in the morning on an empty stomach and definitely not before bed! To practice this breath, you will forcefully exhale through the nose in a rhythmic fashion while pumping the belly inward toward the spine. Begin with 30-50 rounds and build your way up to 100. Feel the inner fire and let it wash away your thoughts!

Lion's Breath

If breathing could be fun, this would be the breath to have fun with! The Lion's Breath is a great stress reliever and also good for releasing excess heat in the body. After an inhale, exhale forcefully through the mouth as you stick out your tongue and open your eyes as wide as you can. Feels silly and can bring a sense of lightheartedness to any situation!

Hissing Breath

The Hissing Breath is a cooling breath and one of the only techniques where you breathe through the mouth. It not only helps to regulate the body temperature but also helps cool a hot-tempered mind or mood! To practice this one, bring your teeth together and open your mouth wide. As you inhale, suck the air in through your teeth. It will actually feel cool on the way in. On the exhale, breathe out through your nose.

At the end of the day, we all contain the power and wisdom within us for healing. You can improve your mood, lift your own spirits, relieve stress, and make choices just through conscious breathing.

Endnotes

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PART OF THE HEALTHY LIVING SERIES:

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