

Control Breathing, Control Stress



You're stuck in rush-hour traffic, glancing at your car's clock every few minutes as you strain to get to work on time. You may not notice, but your breathing is shallow, your pulse rate is high and your chest feels tight. In fact, you feel this way in many stressful situations.

Sound familiar? Modern society creates more than its share of stress. It's difficult to change some situations — but you can manage how you feel about them, experts say.

Begin with something you take for granted — your breathing. If you're on that busy highway, pay attention to what's going on around you, but pay attention to your breathing, too. It's one of the few things you can control.

“Focusing on your breathing is one of the highly effective ways of reducing stress,” says cardiologist James Rippe, M.D., author of 10 books on health and fitness, including “Healthy Heart for Dummies.” “It brings you into the here and now,” distracting you from your worries.

“We've become addicted to moving and thinking at hyper-speed,” adds Stephan Rechtschaffen, M.D., wellness expert and author of the book Timeshifting. “When we're under stress, our breathing is short, high up in the lungs. More relaxed breathing doesn't rely on the chest wall, but rather on the abdomen.”

Abdominal breathing, experts say, provides the lungs with more oxygen and is more rhythmic. It's something that opera singers and other performers have known for years: Abdominal breathing allows them to control of their breath, to sing or speak with greater power, and to help them focus on the moment.

Breathing is just the beginning. If you can adjust your breath, you can adjust other things in your life, experts say. Slow your breath down when you walk into your office or home and you'll notice that you won't jump at the first problem that hits you. When your breath is quiet, you are quiet.

Practice Your Breathing

Believe it or not, most of us could use a breathing lesson. Practice at home a few times when you're not under stress. Then, try putting these techniques into practice when a stressful situation occurs.

In a relaxed setting, take three really deep breaths, focusing on your exhalations. “Really let it out,” says Dr. Rechtschaffen. “It may feel unnatural at first, but stick with it.”

Now, begin focusing on where your breath is coming from, experts say. Here's one practice method:

- Sit on the edge of a chair, feet flat on the floor.
- Place one hand on your lower back and the other hand on your abdomen, with three fingers below your navel.
- As you breathe in, your abdomen should rise, like a balloon inflating.
- As you breathe out, your abdomen should fall, with the sensation that the balloon is losing its air.

Concentrate on your abdomen, not your chest. Practice from a few minutes to 20 minutes each day. Soon, it will come naturally.

