

Breathe & Relax

Taking time, even if it's just a couple of minutes a day to practice mindful breathing has huge benefits on our overall health and mood.

A great, simple breathing exercise for calming both the nervous system and the overworked mind is a timed breath where the exhale is longer than the inhale. When your exhale is a few counts longer than your inhale, the **vagus nerve** (running from the neck down through the diaphragm) sends a signal to your brain to turn up your **parasympathetic nervous system** and turn down your **sympathetic nervous system**.

The **sympathetics** command your fight or flight response and when they fire, your heart rate and your breathing speed up, and stress hormones like cortisol start pumping through your bloodstream preparing your body to face a threat.

If the threat is, "A lion is chasing me and I need to run away" this is helpful. If the threat is, "I'm late for work" or, "I'm so upset with...." it is not helpful, and in fact can be damaging. For when cortisol is elevated for too long or too frequently it disturbs all the hormonal systems of the body leading to stress and disease.

The **parasympathetics**, on the other hand, control your rest and digestion, the ability to relax and even help you to meditate. When the parasympathetic system is dominant, your breathing slows, your heart rate drops, your blood pressure lowers as the blood vessels relax, and your body is put into a state of calm and healing.

So how do you activate your parasympathetic response? Really, it's easy. Mindful conscious breathing for a few minutes is all it takes!

Pick a count for your inhale and a count for your exhale that is a little longer. Comfort is key don't force yourself to breathe longer, that will come with practice. I like starting with 3 counts in, and 5 counts out, but we're all different so relax and find your own rhythm. It could be for 2 counts in and 4 out, or 5 counts in and 8 out. Notice how your breathing slows down as you relax more.

Step by step instructions:

- To begin, sit still and tall somewhere comfortable. Close your eyes and begin breathing through your nose.
- Then, inhale for your comfortable count ... exhale gently, counting out for four. Keep your breathing even and smooth.
- If the 2-4 count feels too short try increasing the breath lengths to 4 in and 6 out, or 6 in and 8 out, and so on. But if longer breaths create any anxiety there is no need to push yourself. The most important thing is that the exhale is longer than the inhale, not the absolute length of the breath.
- Set a timer and breathe this way for at least five minutes! You will see an immediate difference in how your feeling.