

Week Four Topic: Breath

Breath is a unique bodily function in that it is under both voluntary and involuntary control. We can control our breathing, but also our body will breathe itself, all by itself, even without us thinking about it.

The quality of our breathing can be another cue as to how we are feeling. For example, when we are under more stress sometimes we breathe faster or even hold our breath without noticing. This can be caused by anxiety but it can also make anxiety worse! Breathing and stress are interconnected.

When we learn to breathe deeply and regularly, we calm our central nervous system. There are many breath awareness or breathsensing practices. We will practice some of these breathing exercises today. Instructions for each one are included in your handouts.

These exercises can be done seated or lying down. They should not be done while driving or doing other complex tasks. If you have asthma, COPD, or another heart or lung condition, talk to your PCP before doing anything other than breath counting.

You may find it awkward or difficult at first. Sometimes raising awareness of your breathing can make you feel a little anxious. If this happens, it is okay to step away and try again later. Over time and with practice, these breathing exercises help us reduce anxiety and stress. They may even help you relax before you go to sleep. With practice, you will get to know if a particular breathing exercise suits you more than another.

Jon Kabat-Zinn: “As long as you are breathing there is more right with you than wrong with you, no matter what is wrong.”

Week Four Homework: Incorporate one breathing exercise into your daily life for 2 minutes each day. You can choose to do more, but let's set the goal at 2 minutes once per day. It is more important to practice self-care 'little and often' than to set overly ambitious goals and then feel bad if we have a challenging day or a setback. You can try the same exercise each day or change it up - whatever works for you.



Breathing Exercises:

Breath Counting: Breathe normally but mindfully. As you inhale, count (in your head) "1"; as you exhale, count "1". Continue this (1-1, 2-2, 3-3, etc.) until you reach "10". When you reach "10", begin again at "1". It is very normal to lose track of your counting. When this happens, just start again at "1". If you are not sure what number to say, return to "1".

Diaphragmatic "Belly" Breathing: Breathe by inhaling deeply through your nose, until you notice your abdomen expanding fully. This may take 2, 3, or even 4 seconds. Then, exhale through your mouth for longer than you took to inhale. With practice, ideally your exhalations will be 2 to 3 times longer than your inhalations.

4-7-8 Breathing: Inhale through the nose for 4 counts, then hold your breath for 7 counts, exhaling through your mouth for 8 counts with a 'whooshing' sound (tip of tongue resting on the front of the roof of your mouth can help)

Coherent Breathing: Inhale through your nose for 6 seconds, then exhale through your nose for 6 seconds. It is much easier to start with 3 or 4 seconds for each inhale and exhale. Six seconds is a long time. You may

find 5 is better. The point is to mindfully inhale and exhale in a way that slows our respirations down enough to help us feel calmer.

Alternate Nostril Breathing: Using your dominant hand, hold your hand in front of your nose so that your thumb is just above one nostril and your middle finger is just above the other nostril. If you are right-handed, your thumb will align with your right nostril and your middle finger with your left nostril. Use gentle pressure to block your right nostril with your finger and exhale fully through your left nostril. Then, switch and use your other finger to apply gentle pressure to block your left nostril as you inhale through your right nostril. Keep the same position as you exhale through your right nostril. Switch fingers again to inhale and exhale through your left nostril. Continue to alternate in this way.

Notes: