

4. Abdominal breathing

This is a relaxation practice focusing on abdominal breathing for dealing with challenges of stress and anxiety. Abdominal breathing can be a useful tool because we take our breath with us wherever we go.

You might like to start with just placing your hand on your belly and feel whether it expands as you inhale and contracts as you exhale. If it doesn't, this exercise will help you to bring our breath down to the abdominal area out of the higher parts of your chest & ribcage.

Abdominal breathing or belly breathing helps to regulate irregular breathing patterns especially those that are due to stress or irritation. Anxiety, as you're probably aware can lead to shallow, rapid breathing and even hyperventilation. Sometimes a panic attack can cause increased shortness of breath, thoughts of losing control and pains in the chest.

By bringing the breath back into the belly you can help the body return to balance. So, when anxiety arises, first acknowledge the feeling then gently practice bringing your attention back to the breath – the breath at the abdomen or at your belly.

Start by sitting either on the floor on a cushion with your legs crossed or in a symmetrical posture on a chair, and just start to notice the gentle sensations of air flowing in and out of your nostrils. You can have your eyes closed or open...

Just starting to take notice, spending a few moments sensing the breath there at the nostrils – in and out.

And now notice how your attention can move down to the level of your chest and sense the movement in and out of the chest, as the air moves in and out of your lungs. Upper chest, middle chest, ribcage part of the chest, just riding the waves of your breath, focusing on the sensation of your chest rising and falling with each breath.

And now noticing how you can let your attention move down to the level of your abdomen as you sense the inward and outward movement of your belly. You can put your hand over your abdomen if you find it difficult to sense your belly's movement at first.

As air moves into your lungs, the diaphragm pulls downwards and pushes your abdomen outward. As air moves out of your lungs, your belly moves inward. Just sense the breath in and out, riding the waves of the breath as you focus on the sensation of your abdomen, moving in and out.

Gentle natural breaths at the abdomen. No need to change your natural breath, no need to force it. You can practice this calming abdominal method of breathing wherever you are during the day; whether you're standing in a queue waiting for your lunch, whether you are driving the car; just starting to become aware of where your breath is most prominent and moving your attention to where it is in your body.

We take our breath with us wherever we go so it's a tool we can use in times of stress, anxiety, frustration, irritation, just noticing... noticing the breath at the abdomen, will often allow you to recapture being grounded and some calm to move on with your day.

While you are sitting in this practice right now, focusing on your breath at the abdomen, you will notice that thoughts arise. They may be about 'what am I doing this for?', 'this is a bit crazy', 'I'm never going to be able to do this' – just notice those thoughts as thoughts and let them go. And bring your attention back lovingly to your breath at the abdomen. As your abdomen gently rises and falls. Breath after breath, in and out, moment by moment.

Shoulders relaxed, face relaxed, the only movement is your abdomen rising and falling.

And now this exercise is finishing. Open your eyes if they were closed, looking around you, coming back to the space where you're sitting, taking a few long deep inhalations and exhalations, stretching the body, and moving on with your day.