

# Breath is Life

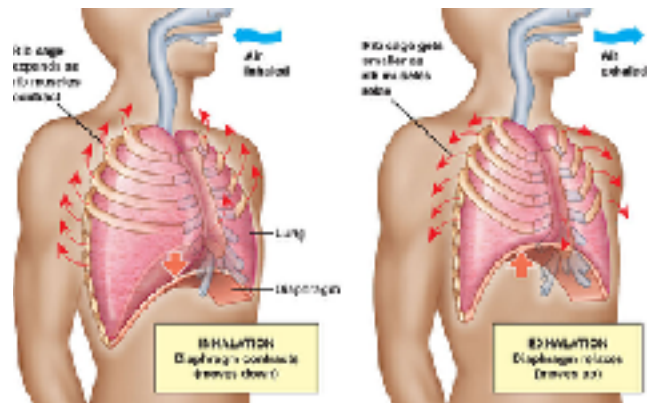
The flow of the breath constantly helps shape your body's energy patterns. Dealing with every day stress can cause the breath to become shallow and constricted, resulting in poor body function and loss of mental focus. Studies show that proper breathing and relaxation techniques can reduce muscular tension, improve circulation, reduce stress and foster overall well-being.

## Breathing techniques

Breath awareness is ultimately the most important aspect of learning about the breath. Just becoming aware of your breath can be relaxing. It is important to learn to observe the breath with curiosity and no judgment. Observe the location of the breath, the length of inhalation and exhalation, pauses, rhythm, patterns of holding tension, and any other aspects of the breath that come to your attention. As often as you can during the day, notice your breath and how it changes with your activities, emotions and time of day.

You can do these breathing exercises while standing, sitting in a chair, seated comfortably on the floor, or lying on your back. When standing or seated, keep your spine erect, chest open, with shoulders relaxed and down. Practice these breathing techniques regularly, whenever it's convenient. Try breathing in and out through your nose. If this is uncomfortable at first, breathe through the nose and out through the mouth.

**Diaphragmatic breathing** – Before you begin, assume a comfortable position. Mindfully relax your body, releasing any areas of tension or constriction. Observe your breath. As you inhale, the lower edge of the rib cage in the abdomen should expand. As you exhale, the opposite should occur. Do not force the movement of the abdomen. Allow the breath to naturally move the body.



**Three-Step Breathing** – Exhale through your nose to empty your lungs. Inhale through your nose by first filling the abdominal area with air. Continue breathing into the middle chest (rib cage area) and finally into the upper chest (sternum and collarbones). Pause. Then reverse and release all the air from the upper chest. Second, release air from the middle chest. Third, contract your abdominals and empty the remaining air. Do this in a slow and controlled fashion.

**Pursed-Lip Breathing** – Sit or lie down quietly and comfortably. Close your eyes and inhale deeply and slowly through your nose, then exhale slowly through pursed lips as if to blow out a candle. Relax your muscles with each exhalation, releasing tension. Do this eight times. When you feel comfortable with this, inhale slowly to the count of four, hold your breath for two counts and exhale slowly to the count of eight. Relax as you exhale. Hold out for a count of two.

Practicing these breathing techniques regularly will help keep your mind and body relaxed and refreshed, as well as enhance your sense of wellness.

## Learn how to breathe...

Proper breathing is key to sustained focus in the classroom.

The idea is to keep your awareness on your breath whenever you feel distracted or your attention is waning. And depending on whether you want to relax, balance, or energize, you can vary your breathing pattern to get the desired effect.

In the table below see how different ratios of breathing can enhance your mental focus.

Lengthening and then holding your exhalation after all the air is expelled relaxes you, while lengthening and holding your inhalation increases your energy. Be careful, though – if you're feeling stressed, you're better off using a balanced breath pattern, as holding your inhalation can make you more tense.

The breath ratios at the top of this chart are very relaxing, while those at the bottom are energizing. If you pay careful attention and adjust your breathing accordingly, you can both relax and energize yourself at the same time.

### Breath Ratio Chart

In the first example, inhale for four counts, hold for 1, exhale for 8 counts, and hold out for 4. Then repeat. Your counts may be faster or slower depending on your lung capacity.

INHALATION	HOLD	EXHALATION	HOLD	EFFECT
4	1	8	4	Relaxing
4	1	12	1	Relaxing
6	1	10	1	Relaxing
6	1	8	4	Relaxing
8	1	8	1	Balanced
6	2	6	2	Balanced
6	4	6	1	Energizing
6	6	6	1	Energizing

Source: Yoga Journal

#### FOR FURTHER READING:

*The Breathing Book: Good Health and Vitality Through Essential Breath Work*, Donna Farhi. 1996, Owl Books

*Science of Breath a Practical Guide*, Rudolph Valentine. 1998, Himalayan Institute Press.

Source: Canyon Ranch