



www.nidhigupta.com * nidhi@globalvisionscoaching.com * 416.830.5285

Relaxation technique 1: Breathing exercises for stress relief

With its focus on full, cleansing breaths, mindful breathing exercises are simple, yet powerful relaxation techniques to reduce stress and promote feelings of calm. They are easy to learn, can be practiced almost anywhere, and provide a quick way to get your emotions regulated, leaving you more centred and balanced. Relaxed, abdominal breathing (as opposed to shallow, chest breathing) greatly increases the effectiveness of these exercises. All you really need is a few minutes and a place to stretch out.

Here are two simple places to start:

COUNTING BREATHING

Breathe in.....Breathe out, say, "One."

Breathe in.....Breathe out, say, "Two."

Continue until "ten" is reached, then start over.

BECOMING CALM BREATHING

Breathe in, think or say, "I am."

Breathe out, think or say, "becoming calm" or "letting go." (Use any phrase that promotes relaxation).

WALKING BREATHING

Walk very slowly, synchronizing your breath with your steps: one step for each inhalation, one step for each exhalation.

1. Practicing deep breathing exercise

The key to deep breathing is to breathe deeply from the abdomen, getting as much fresh air as possible in your lungs. When you take deep breaths from the abdomen, rather than shallow breaths from your upper chest, you inhale more oxygen. The more oxygen you get, the less tense, short of breath, and less anxious you feel.

- Sit comfortably with your back straight. Put one hand on your chest and the other on your abdomen.
- Breathe in through your nose. Practice breathing into each hand in order to feel the difference between chest and belly breathing.
- Use an image to help focus on taking a slow, full breath to completely expand lungs, and then to exhale fully, emptying the lungs.
 - *Imagine blowing up a balloon and then watching it deflate.*
 - *Inhale at a pace to comfortably suck through a straw and exhale at a pace to blow off the petals of a flower one by one.*
 - *Use counting at a regular pace to keep inhale and exhale long and even.*

Tip: learn to *expand* the belly when inhaling and allow it to naturally be soft and empty when exhaling.

Regulated breathing moves more into the belly rather than high in the chest. However, it is important not to *push* too hard to change one's breathing. Start with just one or two longer deeper breaths then allow breathing to go back to natural rhythm. With gentle practice we can expand our ability to slow and regulate the breath.

Continue to practice these techniques at a consistent time in the day (e.g.: upon waking, before eating, while riding the bus, when settling into bed, etc.).

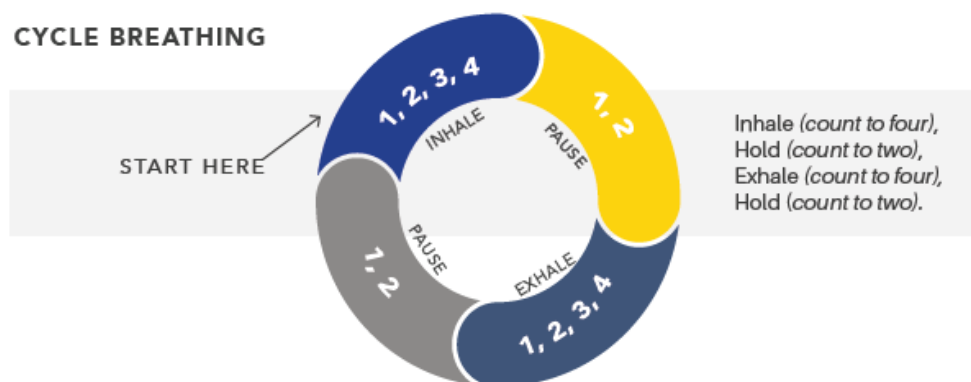
2. Guided Observing Breath Exercise

Guiding instructions:

- Get as comfortable as you can in your chair or lying down. Look gently around the room and bring your awareness to the ceiling for a moment, then to a wall or point far away from you.
- Next bring your awareness to the space just in front of you, about two feet in front of you. Notice how you can move your awareness around to different spots.
- Now let your attention go inward – feel free to close your eyes if that's comfortable. We're going to explore your inner mind and take a look around – as if we were floating comfortably on a calm lake (or sitting in a pleasant meadow, etc.)
- Allow your awareness to find your breath wherever you can feel it easily – your nostrils, chest, belly, lungs... And just follow the wave of your breath... in and out. [pause]
- Recognize your breath as the "anchor" for a buoy in the centre of your lake (or a central spot in your meadow – like holding on to the string of a kite).
- Your breath can be the anchor for the rest of the activity in your mind, such as your thoughts, any images, etc. So when you notice your thoughts floating away somewhere else – allow your anchor (or kite string) to catch and gently pull your awareness back to your breath.
- Continue to follow the waves of your breath for a few minutes. Practise this every day.

3. Cycle Breathing Exercise

- First take a few breaths to settle your attention on your breath – wherever you can best notice it – your nostrils, belly or chest.
- Begin to gently structure your breathing: as you inhale count slowly to 4 matching your full inhale with the count 1-2-3-4.
- Pause and hold your breath for a count of 2.
- As you exhale slowly and until your lungs are completely empty, count so that you are matching your full exhale with the count 1-2-3-4.
- Repeat several times gradually lengthening your count.



Relaxation technique 2: Body movement and exercises for relaxation

1. Stretching exercises

Moving and stretching muscles and ligaments allow the release and flow of built-up stress hormones and chemicals in the body and brain from anxiety.

- Intentionally yawn and stretch the jaw and face muscles. This pairs well with remembering to do some regulating breath exercises.
- Sit or stand with spine upright, stretching shoulders back, opening up chest.
- Dynamic stretching (exploring full range of motion).

Shoulder and arm circles, going from small to big and exploring directions.

Hip circles – place your hands on your hips and swing the hips forward, then circling them around – go in both directions.

Knee circles – place your hands on your knees as you bend them slightly, slowly circle the knees together – go in both directions.

Ankle circles – one ankle at a time either with your toe on the ground or holding foot in the air – circle the ankle around – go in both directions.

Neck rolls:

Stand or sit with your spine upright and so you are well supported. Gently release your head so that it tips forward – only as far as is comfortable. Explore small, gentle neck rolls from side to side (caution going back) and stretching. Find what is comfortable right now. Clicks and cracks in the neck muscles are normal as they release and let go. Do not push or strain this movement—listen to the limit of your body.

Tip: Any physical activity that involves and allows full range of motion of different muscle groups can greatly aid emotion regulation if it is approached with an attitude of leisure, relaxation and pleasure. Example: basketball, soccer, running, walking, hiking, biking, tai chi, yoga, dance, skating, etc.

2. Rhythmic Movement

Activities with consistent physical rhythms help with physical and emotional regulation.

- Walking is a natural rhythmic movement – matching the breath to the pace of walking supports the body and mind working together to settle.

1. As you step, inhale and say to yourself “breathing in”.
2. As you step, exhale and say to yourself “breathing out”.
3. Continue – you can also replace these with other phrases.

3. Rhythmic exercise

Rhythmic exercise, such as running, walking, rowing, cycling, drumming, clapping, music, dancing, swinging, jump rope, swaying and stretching, can all be intentional rhythmic movements used to support regulation, and can be effective at relieving stress when performed with relaxation in mind.

As with meditation, mindfulness requires being fully present in the moment, focusing your mind on how your body feels. As you exercise, focus on the physicality of the body's movement and how your breathing complements that movement. If your mind wanders, gently bring it back to breath and movement. Humming or singing while doing simple movements can also be helpful.

If walking or running for example, focus on each step – ie. the sensation of your feet touching the ground, the rhythm of your breath while moving, and the feeling of the wind against your face.

Relaxation technique 3: Progressive muscle relaxation & body scan for stress relief

Progressive muscle relaxation involves a two-step process in which you systematically tense and relax different muscle groups in the body.

With regular practice, progressive muscle relaxation gives you an intimate familiarity with what tension—as well as complete relaxation—feels like in different parts of the body. This awareness helps you spot and counteract the first signs of the muscular tension that accompanies stress. And as your body relaxes, so will your mind. You can combine deep breathing with progressive muscle relaxation for an additional level of stress relief.

1. Progressive muscle relaxation

Before practicing Progressive Muscle Relaxation, consult with your doctor if you have a history of muscle spasms, back problems, or other serious injuries that may be aggravated by tensing muscles.

Most progressive muscle relaxation practitioners start at the feet and work their way up to the face. Move slowly up through your body, contracting and relaxing the muscle groups as you go.

Inhale and tense each muscle group (hard but not to the point of cramping) for four to ten seconds, then exhale and then completely relax the muscle group (do not relax it gradually). Give yourself 10 to 20 seconds to relax.

Steps:

- Get comfortable. Take a few minutes to relax, breathing in and out in slow, deep breaths.
- **Right foot:** Take a moment to focus on the way it feels. Slowly tense the muscles in your right foot, squeezing as tightly as you can. Hold for a count of 10. Relax your right foot. Focus on the tension flowing away and the way your foot feels as it becomes limp and loose.
- Stay in this relaxed state for a moment, breathing deeply and slowly.
- **Left foot:** Follow the same sequence above of muscle tension and release.
- **Lower legs:** Tense the lower legs and feet. This can be done one leg at a time. Lift each foot up at the ankle to tense the front of the leg.
- **Thighs & hamstrings:** Clench the big muscles in your upper legs hard. This can also be done one leg at a time.
- **Hips and buttocks:** Press the buttocks together tightly, and then loosen and relax.

- **Stomach:** Suck it into a tight knot, and then gently let go.
- **Back:** Arch your back backwards. Then relax. Circle your back forward so you are folding in toward your chest. Then relax.
- **Chest:** Take a deep breath and hold it, then exhale.
- **Around the mouth:** Press your lips together tightly, and gently release.
- **Cheeks and jaws:** Smile as widely as you can, and open the mouth as wide open as you can.
- **Around the eyes and bridge of the nose:** Close your eyes as tightly as possible. (Remove glasses/contact lenses before beginning the exercise.)
- **Forehead:** Wrinkle it into a deep frown, relax and release.
- **Shoulders:** Shrug them up to your ears.
- **Biceps and upper arms:** Clench your hands into fists, bend your arms at the elbows, and flex your biceps.
- **Wrists and forearms:** Extend fingers and bend your hands back at the wrist.
- **Hands:** Clench and release them both together.
- It may take some practice at first, but try not to tense muscles other than those intended.

2. **Body scan meditation**

A body scan is similar to progressive muscle relaxation except, instead of tensing and relaxing muscles, you simply focus on the sensations in each part of your body.

- Lie on your back, legs uncrossed, arms relaxed at your sides, eyes open or closed. Focus on your breathing, allowing your stomach to rise as you inhale and fall as you exhale. Breathe deeply for about two minutes, until you start to feel comfortable and relaxed.
- Turn your focus to the toes of your right foot. Notice any sensations you feel while continuing to also focus on your breathing. Imagine each deep breath flowing to your toes. Remain focused on this area for one to two minutes.
- Move your focus to the sole of your right foot. Tune in to any sensations you feel in that part of your body and imagine each breath flowing from the sole of your foot. After one or two minutes, move your focus to your right ankle and repeat. Move to your calf, knee, thigh, hip, and then repeat the sequence for your left leg. From there, move up the torso, through the lower back and abdomen, the upper back and chest, and the shoulders. Pay close attention to any area of the body that causes you pain or discomfort.
- Move your focus to the fingers on your right hand and then move up to the wrist, forearm, elbow, upper arm, and shoulder. Repeat for your left arm. Then move through the neck and throat, and finally all the regions of your face, the back of the head, and the top of the head. Pay close attention to your jaw, chin, lips, tongue, nose, cheeks, eyes, forehead, temples and scalp. When you reach the very top of your head, let your breath reach out beyond your body and imagine yourself hovering above yourself.
- After completing the body scan, relax for a while in silence and stillness, noting how your body feels. Then open your eyes slowly. Take a moment to stretch, if necessary.

For a guided body scan meditation, see the Resources section below.

Relaxation technique 4: Mindfulness for stress relief

Mindfulness is the ability to remain aware of how you're feeling right now, your "moment-to-moment" experience—both internal and external. Thinking about the past—blaming and judging yourself—or worrying about the future can often lead to a degree of stress that is overwhelming. But by staying calm and focused in the present moment, you can bring your nervous system back into balance. Mindfulness can be applied to activities such as walking, exercising, eating, or meditation.

Meditations that cultivate mindfulness have long been used to reduce overwhelming stress. Some of these meditations bring you into the present by focusing your attention on a single repetitive action, such as your breathing, a few repeated words, or flickering light from a candle. Other forms of mindfulness meditation encourage you to follow and then release internal thoughts or sensations.

Mindfulness meditation

Key points in mindfulness meditation are:

- **A quiet environment.** Choose a secluded place in your home, office, garden, place of worship, or in the great outdoors where you can relax without distractions or interruptions.
- **A comfortable position.** Get comfortable, but avoid lying down as this may lead to you falling asleep. Sit up with your spine straight, either in a chair or on the floor. You can also try a cross-legged or lotus position.
- **A point of focus.** This point can be internal—a feeling or imaginary scene—or something external - a flame or meaningful word or phrase that you repeat it throughout your session. You may meditate with eyes open or closed. Also choose to focus on an object in your surroundings to enhance your concentration, or alternately, you can close your eyes.
- **An observant, noncritical attitude.** Don't worry about distracting thoughts that go through your mind or about how well you're doing. If thoughts intrude during your relaxation session, don't fight them. Instead, gently turn your attention back to your point of focus.

Relaxation technique 5: Visualization meditation for stress relief

Visualization, or guided imagery, is a variation on traditional meditation that requires you to employ not only your visual sense, but also your sense of taste, touch, smell, and sound. When used as a relaxation technique, visualization involves imagining a scene in which you feel at peace, free to let go of all tension and anxiety.

1. Self-soothing activities using the 5 senses

With **Vision**:

Buy one beautiful flower; make one space in a room pretty; light a candle and watch the flame. Set a nice place at the table for a meal using your best things. Go to a museum with beautiful art. Go sit in the lobby of a striking old hotel. Look at nature around you. Go out in the middle of the night and watch the stars. Walk in a nice part of town. Fix your nails so they look pretty. Look at beautiful pictures in a book. Go to a ballet or other dance performance.

With **Hearing**:

Listen to beautiful or soothing music, or to invigorating and exciting music. Pay attention to sound of nature (waves, birds, rainfall, leaves rustling). Sing to your favourite songs. Hum a soothing tune. Learn to play an instrument. Be mindful of any sounds that come your way.

With **Smell**:

Use your favourite perfume or lotions, or try them on in a store; spray fragrance in the air; light a scented candle. Put lemon oil on your furniture. Put potpourri in a bowl in your room. Boil cinnamon, bake cookies, cake or bread. Smell the roses. Walk in a wooded area and mindfully breathe in the fresh smells of nature.

With **Taste**:

Have a good meal; have a favourite soothing drink such as herbal tea or hot chocolate; treat yourself to a dessert. Put whipped cream on your coffee. Sample flavours in an ice cream store. Suck on a piece of peppermint candy. Chew your favourite gum. Get a little bit of a special food you don't

usually spend the money on, such as fresh-squeezed orange juice. Really taste the food you eat, eat one thing mindfully.

With **Touch**:

Take a bubble bath; put clean sheets on the bed. Pet your dog or cat. Have a massage; soak your feet. Put creamy lotion on your whole body. Put a cold compress on your forehead. Sink into a really comfortable chair in your home or find one in a luxurious hotel lobby. Put on a silky blouse, dress or scarf. Try on fur-lined gloves or fur coats in a department store. Brush your hair for a long time. Hug someone. Experience whatever you are touching; notice touch that is soothing.

2. Butterfly visualization exercise

Imagine a caterpillar. You can watch it crawling about on the tree where it lives. Attaching itself to a branch of the tree, the caterpillar starts to form its cocoon. Gradually it surrounds itself with golden, silken threads until it is totally hidden. Observe the cocoon for a few moments.

Now be inside the cocoon...Surrounded by the softness of silk...you rest in the warmth of the golden darkness... You are only dimly aware, so you do not know exactly what is happening to you, but you sense that in this apparent stillness a hidden, transforming intelligence is at work...

At last the cocoon breaks open, and a ray of light penetrates through a chink... As the light touches you, you feel a sudden surge of vitality and realize that you can shed the cocoon. As you feel the cocoon falling away, you discover that with it you have shed the defences and supports of your safety and your past...

You are now freer than you ever dreamed you could be; you are a beautiful, multicoloured butterfly... You soon realize that your boundaries have extended infinitely... you can fly... You find yourself dwelling in a totally new realm of colors, of sounds, of open space... You experience yourself flying...being supported by the air, being gently borne up by the breeze, gliding down, flying up again...

Below, you see an immense meadow full of flowers of every kind and color...You settle on one...then on another...then on another still, so gently that the petals are not even disturbed. You experience each flower as a different being with its own color and perfume...its own particular life and quality. Take your time in experiencing the many aspects of your expansion, your freedom and your lightness.

3. Practicing visualization

Choose whatever setting is most calming to you, whether it's a tropical beach, a favorite childhood spot, or a quiet wooded glen. You can do this visualization exercise on your own in silence, while listening to soothing music, or with a therapist (or an audio recording of a therapist) guiding you through the imagery. To help you employ your sense of hearing you can use a sound machine or download sounds that match your chosen setting—the sound of ocean waves if you've chosen a beach, for example.

Find a quiet, relaxed place. Beginners sometimes fall asleep during a visualization meditation, so you might try sitting up or standing.

Close your eyes and let your worries drift away. Imagine your restful place. Picture it as vividly as you can—everything you can see, hear, smell, and feel. Visualization works best if you incorporate as many sensory details as possible, using at least three of your senses. When visualizing, choose imagery that appeals to you;

don't select images because someone else suggests them, or because you think they should be appealing. Let your own images come up and work for you.

If you are thinking about a dock on a quiet lake, for example:

- Walk slowly around the dock and notice the colors and textures around you.
- Spend some time exploring each of your senses.
- See the sun setting over the water.
- Hear the birds singing.
- Smell the pine trees.
- Feel the cool water on your bare feet.
- Taste the fresh, clean air.

Enjoy the feeling of deep relaxation that envelopes you as you slowly explore your restful place. When you are ready, gently open your eyes and come back to the present. Don't worry if you sometimes zone out or lose track of where you are during a guided imagery session. This is normal. You may also experience feelings of stiffness or heaviness in your limbs, minor, involuntary muscle-movements, or even cough or yawn. Again, these are normal responses.

Making relaxation techniques a part of your life

The best way to start and maintain a relaxation practice is to incorporate it into your daily routine, between work, family, school, and other commitments, many of the techniques can be practiced in between other tasks.

Tips for fitting relaxation techniques into your life

- **If possible, schedule a set time to practice each day.** Set aside one or two periods each day. You may find that it's easier to stick with your practice if you do it first thing in the morning, or last thing at night.
- **Practice relaxation techniques while you're doing other things.** Meditate while commuting to work on a bus or train, or waiting for a dentist appointment. Try deep breathing while you're doing housework or mowing the lawn. Mindfulness walking can be done while exercising your dog, walking to your car, or climbing the stairs at work instead of using the elevator. Once you've learned techniques such as tai chi, you can practice them in your office or in the park at lunchtime.
- **If you exercise, improve the relaxation benefits by adopting mindfulness.** Instead of zoning out or staring at a TV as you exercise, try focusing your attention on your body. If you're resistance training, for example, focus on coordinating your breathing with your movements and pay attention to how your body feels as you raise and lower the weights.
- **Avoid practicing when you're sleepy.** These techniques can relax you so much that they can make you very sleepy, especially if it's close to bedtime. You will get the most benefit if you practice when you're fully awake and alert. Do not practice after eating a heavy meal or while using drugs, tobacco, or alcohol.
- **Expect ups and downs.** Don't be discouraged if you skip a few days or even a few weeks. It happens. Just get started again and slowly build up to your old momentum.

More help for relaxation and stress relief: helpful links

- [Stress Management: How to Reduce, Prevent, and Cope with Stress](#)
- [Stress Relief in the Moment: Using Your Senses to Quickly Change Your Response to Stress](#)
- [How to Stop Worrying: Self-Help Strategies for Anxiety Relief](#)
- [Benefits of Mindfulness: Practices for Improving Emotional and Physical Well-Being](#)
- [12 Ways to Reduce Stress with Music: Fill Your Life with Music that Reduces Daily Stress](#)

Resources and references

General resources for relaxation techniques

[You Really Need to Relax: Effective Methods \(PDF\)](#) – Includes progressive muscle relaxation and relaxation through visual imagery. (University of Michigan Health Center)

[Mindfulness and Mental Health](#) – Explore the connection between mindfulness-based relaxation techniques and mental health. (National Alliance on Mental Illness)

[Relaxation Techniques](#) – Learn about different types of relaxation techniques and how they can help reduce many psychological and physical symptoms. (University of Maryland Medical Center)

[Body Scan Meditation](#) – How body scan meditation can help you achieve a clearer mind and improve your concentration. (ABC-of-Yoga.com)

Audio exercises to guide you through relaxation techniques

[Guided Body Scan Meditation](#) – Free 10-minute body scan meditation that can also be downloaded for use on an MP3 player. (MeditationCoach.com)

[MindBody Lab – Audio Relaxation Tracks](#) – A selection of audio relaxation exercises from the University of Texas Counseling and Mental Health Center. Download the tracks at the bottom of the page or access the individual exercises here:

- [Deep Breathing Exercise](#) – Free sampling of a 7-minute deep breathing audio meditation exercise. (UT Counseling and Mental Health Center)
- [Muscle Relaxation Exercise](#) – 18-minute progressive muscle relaxation audio exercise. (UT Counseling and Mental Health Center)
- [Forest Imagery Visualization Exercise](#) – 19-minute visualization audio exercise that guides you through forest imagery. (UT Counseling and Mental Health Center)
- [Cruise Imagery Visualization Exercise](#) – 12-minute visualization audio exercise that guides you through the imagery of a relaxing cruise. (UT Counseling and Mental Health Center)

[Mindful Meditation Audio Exercises](#) – Offers free mindful meditations available to play online or as an mp3 download. Depending on your browser, these may be easy or challenging to access. (UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center)



www.nidhigupta.com * nidhi@globalvisionscoaching.com * 416.830.5285

Nidhi Gupta is a Masters level registered Psychotherapist, certified Life & Relationship Coach, and a Spiritual Counselor. She has had many years of working with clients, and she understands the spectrum of emotions we all carry, both internally and externally. She is also trained in Energy healing work which she does through body psychotherapy and chakra balancing. GVCP runs regular workshops and offers online courses and coaching programs, and does virtual counselling with clients internationally.