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Focus on... **optimal breathing**

I'm going to start with a quote from a lovely book called 'The Art of Breathing' because I think it acts as a useful reminder that our breath has a much bigger role to play than simply bringing in O² and removing CO² –

“As the breath waxes and wanes, the abdominal organs rise and fall by 4-5 centimetres. This pumps oxygen and nutrient-rich fluids through the lymphatic system, flushing out toxins. The physical movement of the breath in the body also massages the liver, kidneys, intestines, joints of the spine, indeed everything, so they're kept healthy, supple and well lubricated”

How cool is it that this unconscious act plays such a big role in the physical state of our bodies, as well as having the power to calm us and promote positive mental health!

The anatomy of breathing:

As we inhale, the diaphragm contracts and flattens, drawing air into the lungs which are suspended in a vacuum within the chest cavity. In response to the contraction of the diaphragm, the abdominal organs are compressed and displaced forwards (because the spine prevents them from going backwards) and the ribs expand upwards and out to the sides. The muscles of the abdominal wall lengthen and the belly expands to make room for this movement of our organs.

If we try to suck the tummy muscles in as we inhale, we prevent the natural rise and fall of the belly and inhibit our breathing, which in turn creates compensatory actions such as lifting the shoulders to allow the lungs to expand, which in turn causes neck and shoulder tension. Sucking in the belly as we inhale will also add to an already increased intra-abdominal pressure and contribute to abdominal weakness, pelvic floor weakness and/or pelvic organ prolapse. In contrast, unrestricted exhalation creates a natural hollowing of the abdominal wall, along with a functional relationship between the diaphragm and the pelvic floor muscles.

As we exhale, the diaphragm travels in an upward direction and the abdominal muscles shorten, bringing the organs and pelvic floor upwards too. At the same time, the ribs are drawn downwards and together to expel the air from our lungs.

If you ever find yourself feeling stuck in a pattern of shallow breathing, eg. when stressed or anxious, focus on exhaling fully & slowly as that will automatically stimulate a deep inhalation and promote a sense of calmness.



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Optimal breathing:

In our busy lives we don't always breathe in the most effective way and so it is good to stop from time-to-time and check-in with our breathing habits. Given that we breathe in and out around 22000 times a day, we may as well do it well, at least some of the time!

There are many ways to bring focus to our breathing but I think the best way to start is to **find some stillness and simply notice where you feel your breath in your body as you inhale and exhale** – what did you notice?

Once you have spent a bit of time in observation-mode, try changing your breathing pattern and see how it feels then:

- **with your hands on the upper part of your ribs/sternum, try to only breath into this area of the body** – how does it feel? does it feel normal for you? do you experience and tension in the neck or shoulder muscles?
- **now, with your hands on each side of your rib-cage, just above the waist, try breathing into this area of the body** - how does it feel? does your breath feel deeper than before? is your breath in the front of the ribcage, or the back of the ribcage? do your ribs expand widthways into your hands?
- **finally, with your hands on the lower part of your belly, try breathing into the weight of your hands** – how does it feel? do you feel your belly rise and fall? does your breath feel deeper than before?

To create a really full breathing pattern, we ideally want to incorporate a little bit from each of these three types of breathing. To do this:

- start by breathing into the belly, then into the ribs and then into the sternum
- as you exhale, start by breathing out from the belly, then the ribs and then the sternum
- keep the breathing relaxed as you try this to make sure that there is no feeling of pushing the belly out and then sucking it in again; think instead of allowing the body to gently expand and open as you inhale, and soften and become heavy as you exhale
- if you exhale through your mouth*, imagine that you are gently sighing at someone slightly annoying, rather than pursing your lips to blow out a candle
- think of your breath covering a full 360° - ie. it reaches the front, sides and back of the body, as well as all the way from your feet to the top of your head

(* don't feel that you need to breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth, as is sometimes suggested – do what feels most natural for you)



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Visualisation:

Imagery can sometimes be helpful when trying to establish good breathing habits. Try these (from [Eric Franklin](#)) and see if any of them work for you:

- visualise your diaphragm as an elevator (try this in standing, seated or lying face-up) – it moves down as you inhale, and moves up as you exhale
- visualise a balloon situated in your pelvis (try this lying face-up) – as you inhale the balloon expands equally in all directions, as you exhale the balloon collapses back to the centre of your pelvis
- think of the ripples that come from a pebble dropped into water and then visualise those ripples starting from your belly button and spreading outwards into space as you inhale; rest your mind as you exhale (try this lying face-up)
- focus on exhaling tension (try this lying face-up) – as you inhale imagine your body releasing its tension into your incoming breath; as you exhale the tension leaves your body

The process of breathing is a mechanical one which will happen whether or not we concentrate on it, but we can take some simple steps to improve how we breathe and that can make a big difference to how we feel.

You can see my 'breathing' video by [clicking here](#)

Jx

If you want to read more about imagery or breathing for mindfulness/meditation, here are a few books which I would highly recommend:

1. ['Dynamic Alignment Through Imagery'](#) by Eric Franklin
2. ['The Art of Breathing'](#) by Dr Danny Penman
3. ['Breathe'](#) by Jean Hall
4. ['Pilates without Tears'](#) by Jeannie di Bon