

Airs and graces: how breathing correctly can blow away stress

Learning how to breathe properly can reduce stress and improve well-being

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Taking a deep breath and counting to 10 is a simple and familiar way to remain calm in stressful situations.

Beyond this simple technique, Stephen Clasper, executive coach for Shakti Associates, says controlling one's breath can be a powerful tool for coping with stress.

Being yelled at in the workplace is a common stressor for many. Most handle the tension that arises, usually in the stomach, the wrong way, Clasper says.

"Instinctively we sit forward, compressing our stomach and diaphragm and making the problem worse," he says.

A better approach, he says, is to sit back in the chair, straighten your back and raise your chin. "This will lengthen your diaphragm and allow you to begin slow, gentle breathing, lowering your pulse and making it much easier to handle your nerves," he says. "It won't stop them shouting but it will certainly help you deal with it better."

Osteopath Damien Mouellic says being seated at work makes breathing properly difficult.

"People who sit at desks all day breathe using their neck and shoulder muscles to elevate the rib cage. As a result, muscular tension in the shoulder and neck increases," Mouellic says.

"Poor abdominal breathing leads to reduced abdominal drainage, constriction of abdominal organs and reduced efficient body oxygenation, which leads to an increase in stress of the lymphatics, decreasing general well-being."

At Pure Yoga, Mouellic instructs trainee yoga teachers about the human anatomy, particularly the importance of utilising the diaphragm when

breathing.

"Watch how a baby breathes when it is lying down. You see its stomach rising and falling. As adults, we breathe upwards, using our neck muscles."

Wanda Hewitt, the owner of Yoga Limbs in Central, agrees on the importance of breathing using the diaphragm. She suggests the following routine: "Breathe in through the nose and out through the nose. As you breathe in, drop your hand on to your belly and watch it rise as the breath comes up into the lungs. You want to fill up the lungs all the way to the collarbone.

"Do that for at least 10 minutes a day. You want to learn to breathe like that without being conscious of it. This kind of breathing allows our bodies to function properly. If your breath is quick and short, it signals the fight or flight alert, which is stress mode. But [diaphragm breathing] automatically signals the body to go in to the parasympathetic system, which is where all the healing is done, so the internal organs are replenished.

"We naturally know how to do this, it's just that we're under stress, so the body starts to alert the [fight or flight response]. The diaphragm is like any other muscle: if you think about how you breathe it will become stronger and allow you to breathe more deeply."

Breathing from the diaphragm has been shown in medical studies to have physical and emotional health benefits.

A report published in the April edition of *Harvard Health Publications* found that a type of controlled breathing with roots in traditional yoga showed promise in providing relief for depression.

Known as sudarshan kriya yoga (Sky), it involves several types of cyclical breathing patterns ranging from slow and calming to rapid and stimulating. The technique is taught locally through regular courses run by the Art of Living Foundation on Nathan Road in Kowloon.

"One study compared 30 minutes of Sky breathing, done six days a week, to bilateral electroconvulsive therapy and the ... antidepressant imipramine in 45 people hospitalised for depression," the Harvard report says.

"After four weeks of treatment, 93 per cent of those receiving electroconvulsive therapy, 73 per cent of those taking imipramine and 67 per cent of those using the breathing technique had achieved remission."

The report mentions another study examining the effects of Sky breathing on the symptoms of depression in 60 alcohol-dependent men. After a week-long detoxification programme at an Indian mental health centre,

participants were randomly assigned to either two weeks of Sky or a standard alcoholism treatment regime.

"After three weeks, scores on a standard depression inventory dropped 75 per cent in the Sky group, as compared with 60 per cent in the standard treatment group."

Levels of two stress hormones also dropped in the Sky group, but not in the control group, according to the report.

"The authors suggest that Sky might be a beneficial treatment for depression in the early stages of recovery from alcoholism," the report concludes.

Along with reducing workplace stress, learning to breathe properly can help lessen feelings of hostility, which, according to a 2007 study in the journal *Healthy Psychology*, can impair lung function. Using a sample of 4,629 healthy adults aged 18 to 30, researchers determined their levels of hostility using a questionnaire and then administered breathing tests.

"On the basis of these cross-sectional findings, the authors hypothesise that higher hostility will predict a more rapid decline in pulmonary function [pulmonary arteries carry blood from heart to the lungs]," the report concluded.

Reiki is used by its practitioners to increase feelings of peace and harmony. Pervin Clasper, a reiki master, suggests the following exercise: "Lower your breathing rate and begin to visualise your body rhythmically and slowly taking in and letting out breath through every cell in your body. After 10 minutes you will feel calm, restorative energy flowing through you."