



Therapeutic Breathing: The Basics

Who? Everyone can benefit from a therapeutic breathing practice, especially those experiencing:

- Heightened stress
- Anxiety, depression
- High blood pressure
- Chronic pain
- IBS
- Migraines, tension headaches
- Sleep issues
- Performance anxiety
- Anger/irritability

What? Therapeutic breathing is an intentional practice of breathing diaphragmatically in a low and slow pattern with a steady inhalation to exhalation ratio for a set amount of time. Although everyone is a bit different, generally, breathing at a rate of 10 seconds per breath (5 second inhale with a 5 second exhale) is ideal to help regulate the nervous system.

Why? Therapeutic breathing helps to shift our nervous system out of sympathetic mode (aka “Fight or Flight”) where we experience feelings of anxiety, fear, panic, frustration, and anger. It helps put us into the parasympathetic mode (“Rest and Digest”) where we feel calm, relaxed, connected, and grounded. When we are in this relaxed state, our physiology responds by decreasing elevated heart rates, lowering elevated blood pressure, increasing circulation throughout the body, increasing digestion, stimulating the immune system, and helping to regulate our blood sugar. When we practice often enough, these effects become long lasting.

Where? The nice thing about therapeutic breathing is that it can be done anywhere. In the beginning we recommend practicing in a space you feel comfortable and relaxed with minimal distractions. But as time goes on, your practice can be performed anywhere at any time, including during or around stressful times.

When? Start with small chunks, around 5 minutes twice daily working your way up to longer durations. Research indicates that 20 minutes twice a day is the most ideal for health benefits, but really, even 5 minutes is enough to change your physiology for the better. The most important thing is to strive for a goal that is reachable and sustainable, so find a duration that works best for you but still offers a reasonable challenge.



How? The three main pointers to focus on:

- 1. Breathe through the diaphragm:** As you inhale, imagine the breath extending down into the space between your ribs. No need to force the breath, just allow it to expand down into your diaphragm, gently inflating your lower rib cage. If you are able to breathe through your nose this is ideal as it will help to slow and warm the air as it enters the body.
- 2. Slow and steady:** It is important not to over-breathe in this practice. You are extending the *length* of your inhale and the *length* of your exhale in a normal, fluid way. Imagine the breath as a wave, you want that wave to rise and fall at a slow and steady rate without any sharp inclines or descents. If you can hear yourself breathing or notice that you are feeling dizzy or lightheaded, that is a sign that you are taking in too much air; just reset and focus on going slow and steady.
- 3. Pace yourself:** For most people, the ideal breathing rate is somewhere between 9.5 and 11 seconds per breath. To start, we recommend 5-second inhalations followed by 5-second exhalations. You can play around with this ratio as long as you ensure that the inhalations are either equal to or slightly shorter than the exhalations. For example, a 4-second inhalation followed by a 6-second exhalation, or a 5-second inhalation followed by a 6-second exhalation. To help keep a steady pace, there are many breath pacing apps that allow you to set your breathing rate, including: Breathe+ for iPhone and Paced Breathing for Android. For a breathing rate of 10 seconds, doasone.com has an online pacer.

For guided breath meditations, check out the Resources page at www.foothillsnaturopathic.com