

# Breath: The Great Equalizer and Conditioning Presence

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Stop. Catch your breath. Do you feel that?

Most likely right up until now, you were chasing something. Success, love, achievement, your social media feed, your to do list, or even your kids. I'm not sure where it happened in the evolution of humanity, but the vast majority of the human race seems to be in that exact frame of mind. A race.

We're constantly in a never ending battle with time. Trying to use it wisely. Hoping for more of it. Swearing we don't have enough.

In those moments of stress, rushing from one thing to the next in the existential race against time, our body replies. The stress-handling systems get triggered and the body prepares for response. Our digestion slows down. Blood flow goes to the extremities. Adrenaline and cortisol are produced. It's primal as fuck. It's our biological defense.

This can happen from the subtle stress of information overload, someone cutting you off in traffic, an argument with your partner, getting caught in comparison, or an unexpected change of plans that sends you spinning into anger, [blame, and pointing the finger](#).

Often times, months or years go by before we ever notice that something's wrong, or that a change is needed. We're simply just too busy.

Let's get one thing straight before I dive any deeper... finding states of calm through breathing and other forms of self-regulation does not mean everything is going to magically be ok. It does however have the potential to give you those much needed moments of pause for self-reflection and choosing how you want to show up and who you ultimately want to be in any situation.

While there are more advanced breathing techniques like kalabati breathing, and other badass yogic style breaths, what I'm going to focus on in this article are a few ways I've found super useful to integrate conscious breathing and mindfulness into my day to better navigate the inevitable contrast of life.

## Some fascinating things about breath

The breath is a very interesting thing. It's the only autonomic function we can consciously control. Our body just automatically does it because it's required to keep this biological machine

going. And we can also control it. We have the ability to slow it down, speed it up, deepen it, force it out, hold it... and a myriad of other things too.

It's been revered by ancients and mystics with the ability to produce mind altering experiences similar to fasting, psychedelics, and meditation.

Yet it's this super simple thing we do all day without even batting an eye.

But like I said when we started, I'm going to keep this practical and simple. Just know there's way more available if you choose to dive down the rabbit hole.

On a simple day to day basis, fine tuning and honing the breath can relax the mind and put the body at ease. It can activate the rest and digest part of the nervous system that triggers many repair mechanisms of the body.

A relaxed state of mind and body simply handles life better. You're less likely to react when shit hits the fan, and more likely to take a breath or pause before you respond in a situation where you may end up saying something you'll later regret.

Before we dive into a few how to's, let's talk about why our breath gets heavy, shallow and constrained.

### **Shallow breath, stress, and your body**

This isn't going to be some long explanation of the nervous system. Just consider it the bullet point version so you have a frame of reference for the why and the how of two very important things. The stress response and the relaxation response.

When we are in a stressful state, our bodies get triggered in response to the perceived stress which our biology sees as a threat. The breath gets shallow and quickens. You likely experience an increase in blood pressure and heart rate. Stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol are produced. Digestion slows down. Blood flow goes to the extremities. Your sympathetic nervous system is now highly active and your physiology is in a state of readiness, preparing to fight, flee, or freeze.

Being caught in the stress cycle through worry, aggravation, reaction, or doubt activates the sympathetic nervous system and aspects of our biological defense. That's why stress can feel so real. Sure, we need these all systems go when we are actually in danger, but how often is that really? Honestly this day and age it's pretty rare.

The parasympathetic nervous system is the rest and digest portion of the nervous system. It stimulates the relaxation response in the body. It slows down the heart rate, lowers blood

pressure, and calms the body and the mind. As the parasympathetic nervous system upregulates, or gets more active, the sympathetic downregulates and becomes less active.

We've gotten really good at activating and staying in sympathetic mode. The challenge is we weren't built that way. We were meant to toggle back and forth. To be neurologically flexible. To be able to spring into action and rest and repair relatively quick.

Being in a constant state of readiness is like always being at attention. It keeps the body in a constant perceived state of stress without allowing the systems of the body to rest and repair. One of simplest ways to trigger the relaxation response is by consciously breathing.

### **Shifting from fight or flight to rest and repair**

When it comes to training any new habit there are essentially two points of contact. In the moment and back stage. There's the moment when you require that skill, and there's essentially everything else.

Think of it this way. Expecting to show up to an argument or a stressful situation in life and to just automatically take a deep breath without ever practicing it is like showing up for a big game without practicing. If you've ever played a sport, you know exactly what I'm talking about.

Carving out the time to create a habit is something we all struggle with. But that's also why the breath is such a great tool. No matter where you are or what you're doing, you can practice this one.

When it comes to breathing exercises, having a chunk of time where you just train the breath is key if you're just starting. Injecting it into your day by partnering it with other activities will make it stick and help you rely on it when you need it most.

Awareness is key here. Once you start to experience a new level of awareness, feeling, or state of mind you'll have a natural barometer of what it's like to feel good. As you're diving into these exercises, be sure to catalog and make a mental note of how you feel right when you're done. Do you feel more relaxed? More at ease? Do you feel calm?

Having the experience and then paying attention to how you feel in a way gives your consciousness a new option. The next time you go spinning into stress and when you get off track, you'll have a new skill in your tool box to come back to a more grounded and resourceful state.

### **The Practice**

Practice as much as you need to in order to make it stick. If you see the benefit in being able to access more moments of calm and pause, then train one or more of these exercises enough until you see results.

I know you want a prescription of sorts at this point and the reality is we're all at different points in our personal evolution and what takes one person 20 minutes a day of training to be efficient may take another person an hour. So practice till you see results.

With all that said, here's what I found useful to start. Set aside 5-10 minutes first thing in the morning or right before bed and practice one of the exercises outlined below. Then do 2-3 more mini sessions throughout the day.

Why the mini sessions? you may ask.

Think about it. If you only practice for a super contained time first thing in the morning or last thing at night, how likely do you think it is that you'll actually use it when you need to? Not very likely.

Now remembering to actually do the practice can be tricky too. This is why habit triggers are great. Basically it's something that reminds you to do a practice.

Here are some ways to do that...

- Set an alarm to go off on your phone to remind you
- Do it right before you eat
- Carve out 5 minutes right when you wake up and right before you go to bed
- Every time you walk in your front door take a few deep breaths
- When you get in your car or before you get out of your car take a few deep breaths

Really, you can partner this with anything. Any time you pick up your phone, which may be too much to start or with :), or when you brush your teeth.

As a general rule of thumb, when you're starting up a breathing practice, please make sure you're not driving, operating heavy machinery, or doing anything else that could prove fatal if you get distracted.

For the more focused practice period these can all be performed in a comfortable seated position with your spine long and tall. For the others, just do them as you're performing whatever activity you're doing.

Exercise #1 and #2 are more conducive to partnering with the day to day whereas #3 is better suited for a dedicated chunk of time.

## **Exercise #1**

Diaphragmatic breathing - There is a muscle that sits under your rib cage at the base of the lungs and almost looks like an umbrella resting on top of the liver, stomach, and digestive system. As you inhale, you'll fill the area around your belly, sides, and lower back while your chest and shoulders remain relatively still.

On the exhalation gently constrict your abdomen, sides, and lower back as you exhale to help push out any remaining air.

There are many ways you can practice the exhalation. Through the mouth, through the nose, or with pursed lips. I personally find inhaling through the nose and exhaling through the nose to work best for me. Switch them around and see which produces the best result for you. When I first started these puppies, I just focused on a few rounds of breath a few times a day... it's that simple.

## **Exercise #2**

This next one I picked up through Vipassana Meditation. It's helped me be more present with intense feelings, get more acquainted with the sensations in my body, and get in touch with the more subtle signals that let me know when to slow down or speed up.

It falls into the category of a mindfulness meditation and is a practice you can do as you're sitting in a formal meditation practice, or as an anchor to help slow yourself down. You may have heard me talk about this before, and you may have even done this one yourself. This is my personal favorite. Clearly teaching you the entire Vipassana style of meditation here isn't gonna cut it. We'll focus on one aspect of it.

Just simply start by paying attention, sensing, and feeling the passage of your breath in and out of your nostrils. As you inhale, focus your attention on the air passing in through your nostrils and the area between your upper lip and your nose. As you exhale, focus your attention on the air passing out through your nostrils and the area between your upper lip and your nose. Focus on the actual sensation of the air touching the skin.

This one is my absolute go to. While I'm working. If I'm having trouble sleeping. Just the simple act of focusing on my breathing time and time again calms my mind.

## **Exercise #3**

This one's actually still really tough for me, but something about it feels right. So I keep practicing it. When I do this consistently I notice my focus is way more on par and I naturally experience an easier time finding better feeling thoughts.

This is an exercise outlined by [Penney Peirce](#) in her book *Frequency: The Power of Personal Vibration*.

1. Sit upright, feeling supported, let your muscles just hang and be at ease. Stop your internal dialogue and listen to the silence. Be still, feel subtle variations in your body, and place your attention on the idea that the oxygen in the air is going to supercharge your blood and make your body feel extra-alive. Let your breathing be silent, very slow, continuous, and seamless — so it seems to curve without pauses at the end of the outbreath and inbreath.
2. Draw in your breath to fill all possible cavities, from your sinuses to your deep belly. When you think your lungs are full, breathe in a little bit more, filling every pocket. Imagine your ribcage is stretching beyond its normal capacity.
3. Exhale by slowly collapsing your ribs, drawing in your stomach muscles, and tightening your diaphragm until you've squeezed out all the air.
4. Continue, counting 1-10, one number on the inhale, one on the exhale. Think only of the number, and if others thoughts intrude, stop and start over. Try it for 20 minutes.<sup>1</sup>

I found it really helpful to start with 5 minutes and work my way up as trying to keep my attention for 20 minutes in the beginning while counting and starting over if a thought intruded felt frustrating. Try starting with 5, then work your way up to 10, 15, and eventually 20 minutes.

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1. "Freeing Yourself from Negative Vibrations." *Frequency: the Power of Personal Vibration*, by Penney Peirce, Atria Books, 2011, p. 91.