



## **Take a deep breath**

Many of us are feeling stressed and anxious at the moment due to the changes taking place around us. People often say 'take a deep breath' when we're feeling like this but what does this mean and why should we do it?

Here we'll look at what taking a 'deep breath' actually means, and how it can help calm you.

### **The Autonomic Nervous System and breathing**

Breathing is one of the bodily functions that is controlled by the Autonomic Nervous System (ANS). By understanding how the ANS works, we can better understand how we can work with the breath to help us feel calmer.

The ANS has two branches: the Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS) and the Parasympathetic Nervous System (PSNS).

The SNS is called the 'fight or flight' mode and it is responsible for mobilising our energy (we sweat, our digestion slows down, our heart rate speeds up, we take fast, shallow breaths using the muscles around the upper chest and shoulders).

The PSNS is called the 'rest and digest' mode and when we are in that type of stimulation our heart beats slower, our digestion speeds up and we are able to absorb nutrients. We also take longer, steady breaths.

The Vagus Nerve is responsible for switching us into the PSNS - 'rest and digest' mode. It is a two-way highway that transfers messages from the brain to the body (slowing down the breathing, slowing down the heart rate) AND from the body to the brain. That means that if we consciously slow down our breathing (especially our exhalation) and breathe into the belly, we send a message to the brain that we are safe. That way we are able to switch ourselves into the 'rest and digest' mode.

### **Breathing tips for calming down the nervous system**

By working with the breath, we can help ourselves to feel more relaxed. If you do decide to do the exercises listed below, please pay attention to how you respond to changing your breathing and stop if you feel uncomfortable or strange in any way.

It is very common to hold tension in our bodies and breathing exercises can release some of that energy which might result in feeling emotional or overwhelmed, so please be gentle with yourself.

The exercises listed here are focused on two ways we can activate the Vagus Nerve and bring ourselves into the 'rest and digest' mode: bringing the breath down into the belly and elongating the exhalation.

### **Bringing the breath down**

This type of breathing is called 'belly breathing' because when we take a breath in, the diaphragm contracts down, making space in the lungs for the incoming air and gently pushes the abdominal organs out. That is felt as a gentle expansion of the belly. Here are some exercises you can use to encourage 'belly breathing':

a) Place one hand on your chest, and one hand on your belly (a few inches about the belly button) - try to breathe into the hand that is resting on your belly.

b) Place your hands on your lower ribs with middle fingers touching - if you are using your diaphragm, when you breathe in, the middle fingers draw away (just a few inches) from each other and when we exhale, they touch again.

c) Hug yourself with your hands on opposite shoulders (to stabilise the upper chest muscles and make it more difficult for them to be involved, which can help with sending the breath down).

d) Three-part inhalation (you can imagine taking three sips of air in) and a steady long exhalation. If you feel that the third sip strains your shoulders, feel free to do two instead.

### **Elongating the exhalation**

a) 1:2 - inhale:exhale ratio - you can breathe in for two and out for four, in for three and out for six or any other count that works for you. If counting doesn't work for you, you can breathe in naturally and exhale for as long as you can.

Breathing in and out through the nose can help us to be more in control of our breath and it can support longer and slower cycles of breath, but if it makes you anxious, feel free to breathe through your mouth. Exhaling through the mouth with a sigh a few times can be great for releasing tension.

You might find it difficult to breathe into the belly and make the outbreath long at first. If you decide to practice breathing exercises, you can start with a few minutes at a time, gradually building yourself up to ten minutes.

Please try to be patient with yourself. If you would like to incorporate breathing exercises into your daily routine, you might find our article on habit formation useful, which you can read [here](#).