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Knowledge, Skills & Support for Massage Therapists

Breathing Techniques

Why should you consider changing your pattern of breathing? Breathing is an automatic, unconscious activity that we don't need to think about unless there is unaccustomed effort, such as when we run up a flight of stairs, have a cold or maybe an asthma attack. However, there is more to breathing than meets the eye.

Breathing is a function of the diaphragm muscle that separates the organs of the chest (heart and lungs) from the organs of the abdomen (digestive organs). It is a dome-shaped muscle that lines the inside margin of the bottom of the rib cage. When we breathe in, the diaphragm flattens and increases the internal size of the chest. This decreases the air pressure in the chest and air rushes into our lungs. It also compresses the abdominal organs and stretches the abdominal wall.

When we exhale or breathe out, the diaphragm relaxes and the elasticity of the abdominal wall and the pressure in the abdomen pushes the diaphragm up into its original domed position. Pressure rises in the chest and air rushes out of our lungs. This exhalation is a relaxed, almost energy-free activity

This diaphragmatic action is very efficient; it takes little energy to breathe in this way. Because of the fluctuation in pressure in the abdomen, the abdominal organs get massaged with every breath taken. The blood and lymphatic vessels that return blood from the legs and the abdominal organs work more efficiently as the fluctuation of pressure in the abdomen helps draw these fluids back toward the heart.

An additional method of breathing is to use the shoulder and neck muscles to lift the rib cage up like a bellows or an accordion. This is the method we use when we are under stress or threat. When combined with the action of the diaphragm it allows us to suck the maximum amount of air into our body for fight or flight.

Unfortunately, this pattern of shoulder and neck breathing can become a habit. When this happens our neck and shoulder muscles become tight and dense from all the exercise. This usually causes neck pain and headaches. Because these muscles are using the neck and head as a staging area to lift up the rib cage and shoulders, the long-term effect is to pull the head forward and compress the neck. This neck compression can cause problems with the nerves that leave the spine and go to the arms and hands, resulting in carpal tunnel syndrome symptoms. The forward head position also puts strain on the jaw, resulting in increased jaw tension that can lead to clenching of the jaw (when we are awake or asleep!) and temporomandibular joint problems.



Your next appointment is _____ at _____

Breathing Techniques, cont'd

There are many things we can do to become aware of our breathing pattern and improve our health. This Self Care Manual focuses on three powerful techniques.

Breathe In – Belly Out



Breathe Out – Belly In



Diaphragmatic Breathing puts us in touch with how to feel and activate the diaphragm muscle. This is done by placing one hand on the belly and the other hand on the chest. By feeling the pattern of breathing we can gradually shift from a stressful pattern of breathing to one that encourages the entire body-mind to relax.



Pranayama Breathing is a cyclical pattern of breathing that puts more emphasis on the exhalation than the inhalation. It is a method of consciously slowing the nervous system down, lowering blood pressure and mastering stressful thoughts.



Sandbag Breathing increases our awareness of the diaphragm and strengthens the muscle. It is a good exercise for people whose diaphragm muscle has become weak through disuse.

Strengthening the diaphragm makes it easier to sustain abdominal breathing in stressful situations.

As you experiment with various breathing exercises you will develop an ability to become more aware of tension as it begins building up and more skilled at releasing it. Your neck and shoulders may get the first real holiday they have had in years; as they will no longer be contracting with every breath you take! This can make a big difference for many people suffering from neck pain and headaches.

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Diaphragmatic Breathing

Purpose:

- To relax the mind and calm thoughts and feelings
- Relax neck, shoulder and jaw muscles
- Relase spine and nerve compression in the neck
- To improve digestion and immune health

Lie on your back with one hand on your belly and the other hand on your chest. When you breathe in, notice which hand moves.

Ideally, the breath should start by filling out your belly, then toward the last 1/3 or so of the breath, the chest hand should start moving. When the hand on your chest starts moving, stop inhaling and slowly exhale, allowing

the air to leave your chest and belly. You should notice your belly relaxing back toward your spine.

Breathe in this way for a minute, gradually working up to 3 – 5 minutes at a session.

If you can't breathe into the abdomen, just relax. It can be harder than you think!

One way to wake up the abdomen is to exhale fully. Push all the air out of your lungs as you exhale. You can do this by tensing up your abdominal muscles as you exhale. Then let them relax as you begin to breathe in. You will usually notice that the first part of the in-breath begins in the abdomen at this point.

Take your time. Slowly work on increasing the amount of the breath that fills the abdomen. This is time well spent, as it relaxes your nervous system, increases circulation to your abdominal organs and unloads your neck muscles!

Breathe In – Belly Out



Breathe Out – Belly In



Day	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Breathing: am/pm?														
Changes in Symptoms?														

Your next appointment is _____ at _____

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Pranayama Breathing

Purpose:

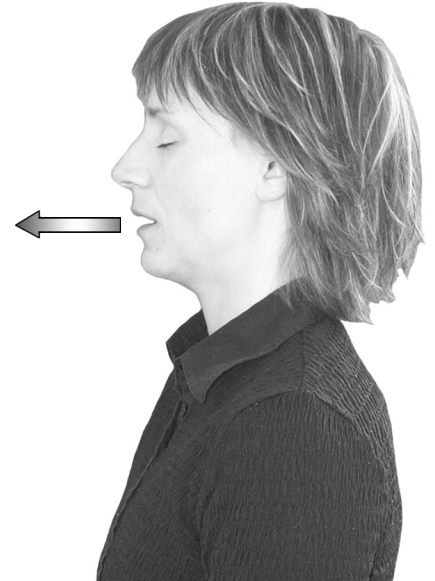
- To calm the mind and clear your thoughts
- To reduce blood pressure and stress responses
- To improve immune system function
- To develop a calmer sense of self

Pranayama breathing focuses mostly on the exhalation. **Exhale fully and slowly, through relaxed slightly open lips.** Imagine you are blowing so slowly that a candle 6 inches in front of you wouldn't be blown out. **At the end of the exhale, allow inhalation to happen through the nose, without any effort.**

Pause for a moment and then exhale slowly again, followed by another inhalation. Follow this cycle for at least 10 breaths, or up to 5 minutes, if you are really enjoying it or need the relaxing effect. You should notice that the exhalation becomes progressively longer and slower. You may count the duration of the breath, "One thousand one, one thousand two, etc . . ." The inhalation should be timed so that it takes roughly half as much time as the exhalation.

Allow your mind to become fully absorbed by the sensations of the breathing and the changes in relaxation that accompany it. This exercise can be combined very effectively with diaphragmatic breathing as described in another handout.

Exhale softly through the mouth



When should you practice?

- Every hour when you are experiencing a lot of stress
- On awakening in the morning
- At night, just before sleep

Day	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Pranayama breathing														
1, 2, 3 times or am/pm														
Changes in Symptoms?														

Your next appointment is _____ at _____

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Sandbag Breathing

Purpose:

- To become more aware of the diaphragm
- To strengthen the diaphragm
- To make diaphragmatic breathing natural and easy during stressful situations

Lie on your back with a pillow under your head and one under your knees.

Place a sand bag, bag of rice or soft exercise weight on your belly.

The center of the sand bag should be halfway between your belly button and the lower margin of your ribcage.

Breathe in with a soft belly that supports and slowly lifts the sand bag. Don't strain; just allow the breath to gradually lift the sandbag upward toward the ceiling. Donna Fahri in *The Breathing Book* calls this "having a conversation" with the sandbag rather than trying to push it forcefully. At the end of breathing in, let yourself relax and the air to escape your lips passively. You may even feel that the sandbag is gently assisting you in breathing out. Once again, breathe in slowly, raising the sandbag up toward the ceiling. Allow the breath to leave your body as the sandbag sinks toward your spine again.

Repeat the cycle for 10 weighted In- and Out-breaths. Then slide the sandbag off your belly for 10 relaxed, normal breaths. Perform this cycle 3 times in total each morning and at night before bed.



As you get stronger, slowly increase the weight of the sandbag.

Do this slowly, because the diaphragm—like any muscle—can become sore from exercise!

Day	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Sandbag breathing am + pm														
Changes in Symptoms?														

Your next appointment is _____ at _____