

# Control Breathing, Control Stress: Techniques for Stress Relief



Many people believe stress is all in the mind.

Dealing with stressful situations can have physiological consequences. Many people breathe more shallowly or hold their breath when they're stressed, which causes hyperventilation, reducing blood flow to the brain. The breathing techniques described below can help you combat stress by increasing blood flow to the brain.



Health and Wellness

## Breathing Basics

When practiced regularly, controlled breathing can boost overall health, lower blood pressure and increase feelings of calm and relaxation. *Be sure to consult with your physician or medical doctor before practicing any type of breathing techniques.*

### Sama Vritti: Equal Breathing

- **Level of difficulty:** Beginner
- **How it's done:** To start, inhale for a count of four, and then exhale for a count of four — all through the nose.
- **When it works best:** This technique can be done anytime, anyplace. Experts agree this technique is especially effective before bed, to help those who have trouble sleeping.

### Progressive Relaxation

- **Level of difficulty:** Beginner
- **How it's done:** Close the eyes and focus on tensing and relaxing each muscle group in the body for 2–3 seconds each. Start with the toes and feet, and gradually move up the body. Breathe in through the nose, hold for a count of five while the muscles tense, then exhale through the mouth as you relax.
- **When it works best:** When it is time to relax. If holding the breath ever feels uncomfortable, tone it down to just a few seconds at most.

### Abdominal Breathing Technique

- **Level of difficulty:** Beginner
- **How it's done:** Place one hand on your chest and the other on your abdomen, over the navel. Inhale deeply, then exhale deeply. Repeat. The goal: 6–10 deep, slow breaths per minute for 10 minutes each day.
- **When it works best:** Before any stressful event.

### Nadi Shodhana (“The Sweet Breath”): Alternate Nostril Breathing

- **Level of difficulty:** Intermediate
- **How it's done:** Hold your right hand up and curl your index and middle fingers toward your palm. Place your thumb next to your right nostril and your ring finger and pinky by your left. Close the right nostril by pressing gently against it with your thumb and inhale through the left nostril. The breath should be slow, steady and full. Alternate.
- **When it works best:** Whenever it's time to focus or energize. Experts recommend avoiding this one before bed, as it sometimes makes people feel more awake.

### Guided Visualization

- **Level of difficulty:** Intermediate
- **How it's done:** With a trusted and qualified coach, therapist, or helpful audio recording as your guide, breathe deeply while focusing on positive images to replace any negative feelings or thoughts you may have.
- **When it works best:** When you are feeling burnt out, completely overwhelmed or overly anxious.

### Kapalabhati: Skull Shining Breath

- **Level of difficulty:** Advanced
- **How it's done:** This technique begins with a long, slow inhale, followed by a quick, powerful exhale generated from the abdomen — all through the nose. Once you are comfortable with this type of contraction, quicken the pace of breathing to one inhale — exhale every 1–2 seconds, for a total of 10 breaths.
- **When it works best:** When it's time to wake up or warm the body. This technique is also helpful for boosting positive mood.

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