

# Breathing Exercises: Coping with Stress

UVA Department of Student Health and Wellness (SHW)

Paying attention to how we breathe can often be overlooked because it's a completely natural process. However, becoming aware of and integrating breathing exercises into our daily routine has many benefits, including promoting calmness, increasing focus, and coping with stress.

## Abdominal Breathing / Belly Breathing

Abdominal Breathing can help create a feeling of calm, renewed energy, and focus. You can do this exercise in any position, but it is helpful to do this exercise while lying down when first learning belly breathing.

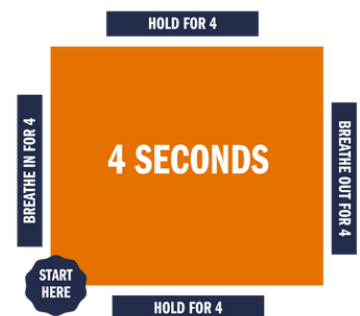


- Lie comfortably on your back, with a pillow under your head, your knees bent and your back flat. You can stretch your legs out if that's more comfortable.
- Place one hand on your belly and one hand on your upper chest.
- Inhale slowly and expand your belly as you breathe so that your lower hand moves with your belly. The hand on your chest should remain as still as possible.
- Slowly exhale, focusing on the movement of your belly and lower hand as it returns to its original position
- Repeat steps 3 & 4 for several minutes, always focusing on the movement of the belly as you breathe. If your mind wanders, gently bring your attention back to your breathing.

## Box Breathing

Box Breathing can help you to re-center yourself and improve your focus when dealing with stressful situations. Thirty seconds of deep breathing can help you to feel more relaxed and in control.

- Breathe in, counting to four slowly. Feel the air enter your lungs
- Hold your breath for 4 seconds. Try to avoid inhaling or exhaling for 4 seconds
- Slowly exhale through your mouth for 4 seconds
- Repeat steps 1 to 3 until you feel re-centered.



If any part of the breathing exercise feels uncomfortable, start with simply noticing your breaths. If holding your breath feels uncomfortable, reduce it down to just a few seconds. Please consult your healthcare provider if you are struggling with a medical condition and would like guidance about the appropriate breathing exercise for you.



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## Breath-Counting Exercise

Breath counting focuses on the use of counting with the rhythm of the breath. Start with a short period of time and gradually increase the time. Set a timer so that you do not have to worry about when to stop.

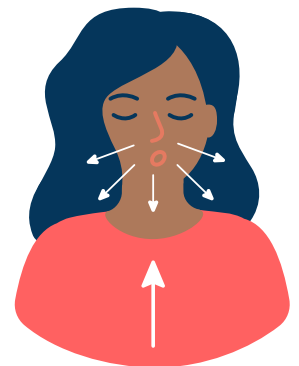


- Find a comfortable position. Take several deep breaths and settle into yourself. You may either close your eyes or keep them open, depending on your own comfort. If you keep them open, fix them on an object or a spot on the floor about four feet in front of you. Your eyes may be either focused or unfocused
- Take deep, comfortable breaths. Notice your inhalation. As you inhale, count, “one...” As you exhale, count, “two...” Inhale, “three...” Exhale, “four...” Continue until you reach 10 then start over
  - If you lose count, simply begin with “one” on your next inhalation.
  - If you notice your mind has wandered, gently notice this, and return your focus back to counting your breath.
  - If you notice any body sensations catching your attention, focus on that sensation until it fades. Then return your attention back to counting your breaths.

## Paced Breathing

Paced Breathing is a technique that can help to activate your parasympathetic nervous system to reduce stress and feel calmer. The idea of paced breathing is that we pace our breathing in a particular way, we can decrease our emotional intensity and feel more relaxed.

- Inhale for a count of 2-4 seconds and exhale for a count of 4-6 seconds.
- Find the combination that works for you, making sure to exhale longer than you inhale.
- Make sure to breathe from your belly.



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