



## The power of mindful breathing

We all have at some point in our lives felt anxious, stressed and disheartened. These feelings are intrinsic of the human condition and can be the source of personal growth and great learning, provided we don't linger on them and let negative-thinking patterns jeopardise our well-being.

Over the past year, due to the pandemic, “the rug has been pulled from under our feet” and we have been unable to do the things that help us overcome stress and anxiety and bring us joy: seeing family and friends, playing sports, travelling, being in contact with nature, attending live cultural performances and more. We have experienced loss, fear and sadness at an unprecedented scale.

These global circumstances are still testing our resilience, ability to find strength and keep a positive outlook, so it is not surprising that we are facing a mental health crisis.

Mindfulness has been identified by many organisations and institutions, including the National Healthcare Service, as one of the main practices to restore and nurture our physical and emotional well-being.

Having practised mindfulness for two decades, I can only praise its many benefits. Mindfulness helps to calm and focus the mind and to become aware, accept and control our emotions and feelings. That

said, I know how hard it might be to break the ice and begin to practice, especially when distressed.

So here you are, listening to a soothing voice while your mind races at the speed of light and you are getting more and more frustrated because you can't calm down. I have been there many, many times because, I always say to my students, training the mind is much harder than training the body. It is easier to hold plank for three minutes than to focus the mind for 30 seconds.

So, what to do? Where to start? I always start with mindful breathing. Zen poet and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh wrote in *Peace Is Every Breath*: “The practice of mindful breathing may be very simple, but the effect can be great. Focusing on our in breath, we release the past, we release the future, we release our projects. We ride on that breath with all our being. Our mind comes back to our body and we are truly there, alive, in the present moment.”

By connecting to our breath, we help our mind and body to be in the present

moment, becoming aware of what's going on inside us and around us, gaining a greater perspective and finding equanimity in the midst of challenges.

I consider mindful breathing the most powerful self-care practice we have. There are no limits: we can practise it everywhere, anytime and in any circumstances because breath is always with us. The breath accompanies us throughout life – when we are born the first thing we do is to inhale, when we die the last thing with do is to exhale.

Each breath cycle contains the miracle of life and that's why in the yoga tradition the word breath translates as prana, vital energy.

In yoga, the inhale has a rising energy that is responsible for growth, expansion and renewal. The exhale has a grounding and rooting energy which allows us to release and let go of what does not serve us anymore. A healthy life corresponds to a healthy way of breathing where the inhale and exhale balance each other.

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Sama Vritti Pranayama “Equal breath length” is a simple and soothing practice (kids enjoy it) that helps to restore calmness in the nervous system.

1. Get into a comfortable position
2. Close your eyes and begin to breathe, noticing your natural breath for one minute
3. Begin to slowly count to four as you inhale. Pause at the top of your inhalation to feel the lungs full of air
4. Count to four as you exhale. Take a moment at the end of the inhalation to feel empty.
5. Inhale again to another count of four. Continue this pattern. The exercise is to match the lengths of your inhales and exhales
6. Continue breathing this way for at least five minutes
7. You may experiment with changing the number you count to, just make sure your inhalation and exhalation are the same lengths.

Western science tends to agree with the yoga tradition, as we know the exhale activates the parasympathetic nervous system, responsible for the rest and digest response in our body.

The slower and longer we exhale, the calmer and more relaxed we will feel.

The breath is indeed the barometer of our emotions, it tells us how we feel: it is short and shallow when we are stressed; it's deeper and longer when we are relaxed.

I'm continually amazed how, by changing and regulating the way we breathe, we can change and control our emotions and feelings – rapidly transitioning from a state of confusion and distress to a calmer one.

Becoming aware of our breath is the first step towards mindful breathing. Observing, listening and accepting its natural flow is the beginning of the powerful journey to transform how we feel, think, perceive and respond to life.

This practice is based on the observation of the breath and helps to develop breath awareness.

1. Get into a comfortable position (standing, seating or lying down)
2. Start to breathe and to observe the natural flow of the breath, following each inhale and each exhale
3. Become the observer of your breath rather than the breather
4. Notice the qualities of your breath. Is it smooth and natural? Is it soft? Is it deep? Is it long? Is it light?
5. Notice the flow of the breath. Is the breath easily and equally flowing in and out? Is the length of the inhale the same of the exhale?
6. Is it easier to inhale or exhale?
7. How are you feeling? Is your body relaxed or do you feel tense?
8. Are you breathing in and out through the nose? Are you breathing in through the nose and out through the mouth? Are you breathing in and out through the mouth?

Please, don't judge yourself, there is no right or wrong. Each of us has a unique way of breathing that reflects how we feel and who we are.

As the breath naturally deepens and softens with mindful breathing, the nervous system rebalances, the heart rate drops, the blood pressure lowers and whole body and mind calm.

We tend to look outside, but the most powerful tool to find emotional balance and restore our well-being is within us – it's our breath.

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**Grazia Piras** is an experienced yoga and mindfulness teacher and author. She leads classes, corporate events and seminars across Europe and the US.

Find out more at  
[www.graziapiras yoga.com](http://www.graziapiras yoga.com).