

Top 4 Reasons to Take Deep Breaths

If I had a nickel for every time I've been told to take a deep breath, I'd be able to buy for each of you your very own air purifier. From my P.E. teachers in elementary school to my CrossFit coaches today, I've always heard the simple phrase "Take a few deep breaths" whenever a pesky cramp plagues my activity or a wave of frustration crashes into me mid-workout.

When I'm enjoying a deep tissue massage or foam rolling after lifting weights, I'm instructed to breathe deeply ... *in through the nose, out through the mouth*. When I'm riled up or stressed out and can't catch my breath, guess what I'm encouraged to do by friends and family? That's right: *Breathe through it*. And after 17 years, I can honestly say that taking a few moments to take a few deep breaths has never been a waste of time ... or air!

We read in Genesis that God breathed life into the nostrils of the first man, Adam. The Book of Job affirms that we all have been created by God's Spirit, and that the "*breath of the Almighty gives [us] life*" (Job 33:4, emphasis mine). Indeed, there is power in the breath.

The word *ruach* occurs in the Old Testament nearly 400 times. Its root meaning is "moving air," whether through a breath, a breeze or stormy winds. In Hebrew, the Holy Spirit is *Ruach HaKodesh*, which means "the breath of God" or "the holy breath."

Before Jesus ascended into heaven after His resurrection, He appeared to His disciples, breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:22). As you can see, breathing has had life-giving and rejuvenating effects on mankind since the beginning.

Of course, we cannot exhale into a pile of dust and expect it to turn into an animate object, such as was the case with the creation of Adam. Neither can a single breath of ours, no matter how minty fresh, inspire and motivate, as Jesus' did over His disciples.

However, we are made in God's image, made to speak and breathe life, just as He does. The Lord designed our bodies to respond favorably to positive words and purposeful breaths. When we pay attention to the words we say and the breaths we take, we begin to feel better—freed of worry, filled with peace and restored with hope.

Here are four reasons you should breathe deep daily:

1. Your stress will be relieved. Getting more oxygen through deep breaths can facilitate healing from a surprising number of serious conditions, including chronic pain, immune and digestive disorders, depression, atrial fibrillation, asthma, and a wide range of stress-related illnesses. Newborns naturally breathe deeply, but stress alters that healthy pattern as we age. By adulthood we're taking 15 to 20 breaths per minute on average—three to four times faster than is optimal.

Breathing exercises can be used as a method to train the body's reaction to stressful situations and dampen the production of harmful stress hormones. Esther Sternberg is a physician, author of several books on stress and healing and researcher at the National Institute of Mental Health. She says rapid breathing is controlled by the sympathetic nervous system; it's part of the "fight or flight" response. In contrast, slow, deep breathing actually stimulates the opposing parasympathetic reaction—the one that calms us down.

"The relaxation response is controlled by another set of nerves—the main nerve being the Vagus nerve," she says. "Think of a car throttling down the highway at 120 miles an hour.

That's the stress response, and the Vagus nerve is the brake. When you are stressed, you have your foot on the gas, pedal to the floor. When you take slow, deep breaths, that is what is engaging the brake."

2. Your pain will diminish. In 2006, researchers at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, conducted a small pain management study in which they compared the value of using deep-breathing relaxation exercises together with pain-relieving drugs versus using drugs alone.

Forty patients were divided into two groups: one for relaxation; one for pain relief. Members of the relaxation group were taught a deep-breathing technique that consisted of inhaling slowly through the nose and exhaling slowly through pursed lips. Subjects either closed their eyes or focused on an object in the room. Each participant practiced the technique for 5 minutes before health care workers removed the chest tube dressing and sutures. During the actual chest tube removal, subjects held their breath. After the procedure, researchers encouraged patients to continue the deep breathing as long as they liked.

Members of the pain-relief-only group followed the standard procedure with no supplementary coaching on how to relax. Before, during and after the procedure, scientists measured participants' pain levels.

Both groups experienced high levels of pain both before and during the procedure. However, members of the deep-breathing group reported significantly lower pain ratings during the 15-minute period after the procedure.

Doctors theorize that slow, deep breathing reduces pain by directly impacting the sympathetic nervous system, which comprises the central nervous system which helps control blood flow and skin temperature. Studies have proven that dampening down the sympathetic nervous system can block pain.

3. Your blood pressure will stabilize. Deep abdominal breathing promotes full oxygen exchange—that is, the beneficial trade of incoming oxygen for outgoing carbon dioxide. This type of breathing slows the heartbeat and can lower or stabilize blood pressure.

Stress triggers your body's "fight or flight" response. The brain then releases adrenaline, which causes blood to thicken and the heart to pump faster, causing strain on weakened arteries. Cardiologist John Kennedy, author of *The 15 Minute Heart Cure*, says "You can teach your body how to slow down, how to be present, how to relax. And what this does is it helps you concentrate and protect your heart all at the same time."

Mladen Golubic, a physician in the Cleveland Clinic's Center for Integrative Medicine, says that breathing can have a profound impact on our physiology and our health.

According to Golubic, "You can influence asthma; you can influence chronic obstructive pulmonary disease; you can influence heart failure. There are studies that show that people who practice breathing exercises and have those conditions—they benefit."

Ready to breathe deep? The first thing you have to do, according to Harvard Medical School, is to find a comfy, quiet place to sit or lie down. (Sounds great so far, right? I might recommend lighting a candle and putting on some soothing classical or worship music.) The following breathing steps are taken directly from a health report for Harvard Health Publications:

1. Start by observing your breath. First take a normal breath.
2. Now try taking a slow, deep breath. The air coming in through your nose should move downward into your lower belly. Let your abdomen expand fully.

3. Now breathe out through your mouth (or your nose, if that feels more natural).

4. Alternate normal and deep breaths several times. Pay attention to how you feel when you inhale and exhale normally and when you breathe deeply. Shallow breathing often feels tense and constricted, while deep breathing produces relaxation.

5. Now practice this breathing for several minutes. Put one hand on your abdomen, just below your belly button. Feel your hand rise about an inch each time you inhale and fall about an inch each time you exhale. Your chest will rise slightly, too, in concert with your abdomen. Remember to relax your belly so that each inhalation expands it fully.

4. Your appreciation for life will grow. When I slip into a still, quiet space and take in slow, deep breaths I cannot help but think on verses such as Psalm 39:5 which tells us that all mankind is a “mere breath,” or James 4:14 that compares life to a vapor.

How sacred life is! How precious and fragile! Composed of 60 chemical elements that make up muscles, bones and fat, our temporary tents of dust can only endure a few weeks without food, a few days without water and only *minutes* without breath. I think this fact offers significant spiritual application as we think on the power of God’s own *ruach*, the eternal force that propelled the first words of creation through the void of darkness, breathed life into the first Adam, and was given up unto death by the second Adam with the words, “It is finished.” Without the *Ruach HaKodesh*, the Holy Spirit, continuously energizing, leading and strengthening us, we are without hope, without power, without the fruit that produces an abundant life; He is the heavenly oxygen our souls thirst for.

“I pray that God, the source of hope, will fill you completely

with joy and peace because you trust in him. Then you will overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 15:13, NLT).

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