

## **Breathing: Use your breath to relax, energize, focus and de-stress**

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There are many benefits to strengthening your breathing skills and to learn how to use them to relax, get energized, help you to focus, and to de-stress. Holding one's breath is a necessary aspect of artistic swimming, but we often overlook that the way we use our breath outside of sport can also influence our performance. Better sleep, reduced pain, energy boosts, relaxed muscles, decreased anxiety and depression, and improved coping are some of the ways that implementing breathing can help.

Take a minute to think back to the last time you intentionally focused on your breath. Now is the time to try it out if you aren't already using this resource. I encourage folks to try different types of breathing to know what style would work, and to practice when different types of breathing exercises could be ideal. Similar to physical skills, we practice them during low stress moments at first before we expect to perform them well during high stress competition. We can't expect ourselves to effectively use breathing skills during a high stress time unless we have already practiced these skills and have them in our mental toolkit.

One of the most basic breathing skills that I love is what is called a *Circle Breath*. This simple breathing technique makes you slow down your pace of breathing by having you apply deliberate effort in each breath. You can practice it at any time, but it's important to practice it before you need it. Practice using this breath four or five times a day when you begin in order to correctly learn the breathing pattern.

Try it:

- Relax your neck and shoulders, sit up straight with feet uncrossed and on the floor.
- Keep your mouth closed, inhale slowly through your nose for two counts.
- Exhale slowly by blowing air out your mouth for four counts.
- Exhale should be twice as long as inhale (you can do without pursing lips, and can also add in a hold between inhale and exhale).

The next technique to try is the *Breath-focus* breathing. This breathing technique uses focus words and phrases. You can choose a focus word that relaxes you, helps you focus, or that is simply neutral to think about. Examples include "breathe," "toe point," "let go," or "relax," but it can be any word that helps, repeat it through your practice. You can start with a 5 minute session and can gradually increase the duration to 20 minutes. Just notice when your thoughts wander, and without judgment, bring your focus back to your word or phrase.

Try it:

- Sit or lie down in a comfortable place, close your eyes or gaze gently on the wall.
- Notice your breath without trying to change how you're breathing.
- Begin the practice of breath focus by combining breathing with your focus word.
- Imagine that the air you inhale brings waves of peace and calm.
- Imagine that the air you exhale washes away tension and anxiety.

This breathing technique is called *Equal Breathing* and focuses on making your inhales and exhales the same length. You should find a breath length that is smooth and steady, and easy

to maintain throughout the practice. Usually, this is between three and five counts. Once you get used to equal breathing while seated you can do it during other activities.

Try it:

- Choose a comfortable seated position.
- Breathe in and out through your nose.
- Count during each inhale and exhale to keep them equal in duration.
- You can add a slight pause between breathing if you prefer.
- Practice up to five minutes.

This final technique is *Deep Breathing*. Try these exercises when you're already feeling relaxed and rested. The goal is to try to get your breath lower and fuller in your diaphragm. Practice for 5 to 10 minutes multiple times per day if possible.

Try it:

- Lie on your back with your head on a pillow if available.
- Bend your knees slightly or place a pillow under for support.
- Place your left hand on your heart and your right hand on your low stomach.
- Slowly inhale through your nose, feeling your stomach pressing into your hand.

There are different ways to incorporate each of these techniques depending on the need. *Circle breathing* is the foundational breathing skill I always recommend starting with. It can be used in conjunction with performance, or also helping to manage daily life. Using the *breath-focus* can help you to focus in on a technical aspect in your performance, or to help you ignore distractions and focus in on your breath. *Equal breathing* can be particularly helpful during times of heightened anxiety or when you notice shortness of breath or other physiological signs of anxiety attacks. Finally, *deep breathing* can be helpful as a daily or regular practice for general well being and improved mental health.

I hope you'll try these techniques to see how they might help you manage stress, improve your mood and overall well being. Breathing is one of my favorite tools because once we master it we have it available to us at all times, no matter where we are! Like anything new, it takes practice for mental training techniques to become natural and easy to implement when needed. If you have questions or want support in developing your own mental training skills, please contact me via email at [dr.teganadams@gmail.com](mailto:dr.teganadams@gmail.com).