

NOT ALL BREATHS ARE CREATED EQUAL!

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FROM MINDBODYBREATHE.COM

A Simple Breathing Exercise to Calm Your Mind & Body

Yes, it seems obvious, but not all breaths are created equal. A great, simple breathing exercise for calming both the nervous system and the overworked mind is a timed breath where the exhale is longer than the inhale. **When your exhale is even a few counts longer than your inhale**, the vagus nerve (running from the neck down through the diaphragm) sends a signal to your brain to turn up your parasympathetic nervous system and turn down your sympathetic nervous system.

The sympathetics command your fight or flight response, and when they fire, your heart rate and your breathing speed up, and **stress hormones** like **cortisol** start pumping through your bloodstream, preparing your body to face a threat. If the threat is, "A lion is chasing me and I need to run away," this is helpful. If the threat is, "I am late to work" or, "I'm so upset with my mom," this is not particularly helpful, and in fact it can be damaging – when cortisol is elevated for too long or too frequently it disturbs all the hormonal systems of the body.

The parasympathetics, on the other hand, control your rest, relax, and digest response. When the parasympathetic system is dominant, your breathing slows, your heart rate drops, your blood pressure lowers as the blood vessels relax, and your body is put into a state of calm and **healing**.

Putting your body in a parasympathetic state is easy. Pick a count for your inhale and a count for your exhale that is a little longer. I like starting with 2 counts in, and 4 counts out, with a one count pause at the top of the inhale and a one count pause at the bottom of the exhale.

Step by step instructions:

To begin, sit still and tall somewhere comfortable. Close your eyes and begin breathing through your nose.

Then, inhale for a count of two... hold the breath in for a count of one... exhale gently, counting out for four... and finish by holding the breath out for a count of one. Keep your breathing even and smooth.

If the 2-4 count feels too short try increasing the breath lengths to 4 in and 6 out, or 6 in and 8 out, and so on. But if longer breaths create any anxiety there is no need to push yourself. The most important thing is that the exhale is longer than the inhale, not the absolute length of the breath.

Set a timer and breathe this way for at least five minutes! You will see a difference in your mood.