

ABDOMINAL BREATHING

For Relaxation and Anxiety Management

Complete the following exercises twice daily (morning and evening) in order to build a solid relaxation and anxiety management practice. This will help support you in times of stress, anxiety, overwhelm and even pain and discomfort.

Sit up straight: slouching reduces the amount of oxygen you can inhale. Place both hands on your stomach allowing the two middle fingers to gently touch at the naval. When you take a deep inhalation the fingers should part slightly and when you exhale, both fingers should gently meet again at your naval.

Shallow breathing switches on the sympathetic nervous system which activates the release of adrenaline and cortisol. These are both stress hormones that increase the heart rate and activates the fight or flight responses which make us feel breathless and out of control. Changes occur in the pre-frontal cortex which purposefully stops us from thinking rationally and clearly, so that our body may ready itself for threat instead. The body does not discern between a worrying thought or an actual predator. It will react in the same way whether we are about to be attacked by a lion or whether we are walking into an exam or a job interview, or even just watching a scary movie.

Alternatively, **abdominal breathing** activates the parasympathetic nervous system which allows our heart rate to slow down and switches off the adrenaline and cortisol. In other words, we start to feel calmer and more in control. So when we shallow breathe, we are in *fight or flight* mode and when we breathe deeply, we shift into *rest and digest* mode; a place from which we can think clearly, make coherent decisions and digest food easily. When in fight or flight mode, none of these functions happen.

To practice, begin by inhaling for a count of four and exhaling for another count of 4. Continue for a couple of minutes. When ready, hold your breath at the top of the inhalation for a few seconds, then lengthen and deepen the exhalation by an extra count or two. This will help you feel physically calmer and psychologically more in control. Continue for a couple of minutes. Don't force your breath here. Take your time and create the pace that works best for you.

Focus inwardly and check what thought, feeling or physical sensation stands out for you in this moment. Decide what you'd rather focus on instead. Repeat these words again and again on each inhale and exhale. An example might look like this:

CALM IN – STRESS OUT (you generate calmness on each inhalation (as you breathe oxygen in) whilst telling the stress to leave your body on each exhalation (as you breathe carbon dioxide out). Other examples might include:

PEACE IN - ANGER OUT

ACCEPTANCE IN – CONTROL OUT

GOOD ENOUGH IN – FAILURE OUT

CALM IN – FEAR OUT

Think of what words or mantra might apply to you and your personal situation today and repeat it over and over again. This not only reduces your distress level, it will improve all your physical and mental functions needed that day, whilst helping you create the mind-set you want over time...