

Jon Dillow Counseling

Counseling, Coaching, and Seminars

“Belly Breathing” to Reduce Anxiety

We generally breath in two different fashions. Chest breathing (thoracic breathing) or belly breathing (abdominal breathing).

You can distinguish between the two by observing your breath. In chest breathing, you’ll notice your shoulders going up and down and your chest expanding as you inhale. Chest breathing tends to involve more shallow and quick breaths. With belly breathing, you’re chest and shoulders will be stationary and you’ll feel your belly go in and out with each breath. Belly breathing involves slow and deep breaths.

These two breath patterns also correspond to different states of physiological arousal. In chest breathing, the short and more rapid breaths can create an imbalance between the carbon dioxide and oxygen in your lungs, leaving your blood improperly oxygenated. This in turn can trigger your sympathetic nervous system, the one responsible for your fight/flight/freeze response. The deep and slower breaths in belly breathing trigger your parasympathetic nervous system, the one responsible for a calm and relaxed state.

When we are anxious, afraid, or feel threatened we’ll naturally tend towards chest breathing. By becoming aware of this breathing pattern we can consciously shift to belly breathing, thereby triggering our body to relax.

How to practice Belly Breathing:

1. Place your hand on your stomach
2. Take a slow deep breath, expanding your stomach outward while keeping your shoulders stationary.
3. Pause for a moment at the end of the inhale
4. Slowly exhale feeling your belly contract inward.
5. Count each inhalation, shooting for at least 10 breaths

When to practice Belly Breathing:

1. As part of your daily routine. Belly breathing is how we should ideally be breathing the majority of the time. As you practice belly breathing daily it will become your natural breath pattern. This will help you remain in a calm state throughout the day.
2. When you are feeling anxious. As you notice anxiety start to build, simply shifting your breathing to belly breathing can trigger your body to return to a calm state.