



DEEP BREATHING

A Guide for Athletes



WHAT IS DEEP BREATHING?

Deep breathing (also called belly breathing or abdominal breathing), is a technique used to help reduce the stress response.

Learning to breathe deeply can help with both the relaxation of the body's physical stress response and the mental and emotional response (i.e., increasing mental focus, mindfulness, and decreasing the intensity of emotions).



BENEFITS?

Regular practice of deep breathing can elicit many health benefits. Some of these health benefits include:

- Lowers heart rate
- Relaxes tension in the body
- Lowers effects of cortisol on your body
- Increases focus
- Helps digestion



TECHNIQUES

DEEP BREATHING REGULAR TECHNIQUE

- Sit, lay or stand straight with your eyes open or closed
- Relax your shoulders and bring them down and away from your ears
- Place one hand on your stomach
- Feel the air moving through your nose for a count of four as you breathe in
- Hold for four to six counts
- Exhale out your mouth for a count of eight (elongate the exhale, slowing the exhale down)
- Feel your stomach rise as you inhale and feel it come toward your spine as you exhale

You can use this breathing technique with stretching.

NUMBERED BREATHING

- Sit, lay or stand straight with your eyes open or closed
- Inhale for four counts
- Hold for four counts
- Exhale out of your mouth until the air is emptied
- Count as ONE breath
- Repeat (two breath, three breath, etc.)

By counting each breath, mental focus increases.

BOX BREATHING

- Sit, lay or stand straight with your eyes open or closed
- Slowly exhale through your mouth, helping to get oxygen out of your lungs
- Inhale as you count slowly to four counts
- Hold for four counts
- Exhale and release for four counts
- Hold breath for four counts
- Repeat
- Imagine you are drawing a square with each exhale, inhale, hold, and exhale

Quick Tip!

As you deep breathe through either technique, combine the breath with helpful imagery. Include a focus word or phrase that can cue relaxation. Introducing imagery or a key word associated with relaxation, may help increase the relaxation response and mental focus.

WHY SHOULD I HAVE A ROUTINE TO PRACTICE DEEP BREATHING?

It is important to have a routine when implementing deep breathing techniques. Developing a deep breathing routine can further support your mental and emotional optimal performing state (the state you need to be in to perform at your best).

There are many possible stressors at competition, which can trigger a stress response. Not all stress is bad, some stress is good! However, when our stress response becomes heightened, it can result in anxiety, which can impact your performance in an unhelpful way. It is important to have a tool kit of calming and refocusing techniques that can help you manage your anxiety. Practicing and rehearsing deep breathing is essential for the brain muscles to know how to respond in times of high stress and to manage anxiety you may be experiencing at competition.

HOW AND WHEN CAN I PRACTICE DEEP BREATHING?

There are many ways to rehearse deep breathing. It is important to train the brain to know how to cope and manage high stress and anxiousness when it arises. Therefore, flexing your brain muscles is very important!

TIPS ON WHEN TO PRACTICE DEEP BREATHING

- First thing in the morning
- Before bed
- In a quiet space

TIPS ON HOW TO USE DEEP BREATHING

AT SPORTING PRACTICE

- On the way to practice (e.g., in the car, bus)
- At practice facility (e.g., in dressing room, quiet room)
- During practice (e.g., before practicing a drill you may feel less confident in or triggers some anxiousness, during water breaks, after a mistake to help reset and refocus, when emotions are heightened, pre-shot routine)

BEFORE COMPETITION

- Quiet space at sporting venue
- In dressing room at sporting venue
- While stretching during warm up
- While changing into sporting equipment
- Moments before stepping into the sporting grounds to perform (e.g., before stepping onto ice, field, track, pool, course/fairway, etc.)
- If traveling for competition (away games), practice before bed in hotel to help with sleep

DURING COMPETITION

- Between shifts, holes, plays, etc.
- Between periods, breaks, timeouts, etc.
- Before executing a certain skill or play you may feel anxious (e.g., pre-shot, right before putting the golf ball on the greens).
- After making a mistake to help reset and refocus
- When emotions are getting high (e.g., frustration, anger, fear)
- When unhelpful thoughts are occurring, incorporate mindfulness by redirecting from thought to breath awareness
- After game during cool down
- When debriefing after a tough loss to manage feelings of possible frustration, anger, embarrassment, etc.

MAKE A PLAN TO REHEARSE

Now it's time to make your specific and attainable plan to help you stay consistent with regular rehearsal of deep breathing. Let's build an awesome habit out of deep breathing.

We encourage you to select a time a sporting practice and a time at home to schedule in progressive muscle relation rehearsals and create two separate plans of what this looks like.

How many days a week?

What time of day?

For how long? It is important to start small and work your way up. E.g., one minute at practice, one minute at home.

When? (before practice, during practice, etc.)

What will help remind me to practice deep breathing at these times? (e.g., phone calendar or reminders, write it in a physical calendar.)

QUESTIONS?

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Are there any distractions that can interfere with my plan? (If so, what will I need to do in case distractions arise? It is important to know what you need to do in case a distraction occurs to help you stay consistent with rehearsing your plan.)

Set a review day. (Have a review day once a week to touch base on how your rehearsal plan of deep breathing is going. If you need to adjust, review what areas you would like to make adjustments in that will best support you. Once you become consistent with your goal, slowly increase the length of time or number of days during the week, etc.)

How can I use deep breathing at practice and at competition to best support my performance state?

