

NAMI Homefront Mental Health Resources

for Military Service Members, Veterans and Their Families

Diaphragmatic Breathing

Most of the time, we breathe without thinking. Breathing keeps us alive. We can control how fast and how deeply we breathe. Slow and deep breaths are calming.

Research shows that breathing techniques like diaphragmatic breathing can help us feel calmer, less stressed and more in charge of difficult situations.

Most breathing techniques involve paying special attention to our breath as it goes in and out. This simple activity helps us gain control over our thoughts and feelings at difficult times. Focusing on breathing really helps when we feel pressured or anxious. Diaphragmatic breathing is also called abdominal breathing or belly breathing.

Why It Works

When we feel frightened or stressed, the natural response of our body is for our heart beat to race and for our breathing to get faster and more shallow. If we slow our breathing and breathe more deeply, our heart rate also slows down and our body begins to relax. Many experts believe that slowing down and relaxing in this way can help block the effects of stress and anxiety.

Scientists do not agree on exactly how slow, deep breathing works to reduce stress. One common idea is that the stretching from the deep breaths affects the part of our nervous system that tells our body to slow down. As our breathing and heart rate slow down, our muscles relax and our body releases fewer stress hormones.

Making It a Habit

It can be helpful to set aside time every day to use a breathing technique. Some people practice diaphragmatic breathing each morning and each night before going to sleep. This helps them prepare for the day and unwind when the day ends.

Instructions

- Make your environment calm
- Get comfortable in a seated position
- Close your eyes
- Start by breathing normally
- Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth
- Put one hand on your chest and one hand on your belly
- Pay attention to whether your hands move as you breathe

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Diaphragmatic Breathing (continued)

- Try to breathe so your belly hand moves and your chest hand does not
- Try exaggerating your breath so your belly hand moves
- Try this for a few deep breaths
- Go back to your regular breathing for a minute or so
- Slowly open your eyes

Keep in Mind

- You can try diaphragmatic breathing standing, sitting up or lying down
- Stay focused on your breath
- If your mind wanders, just gently return your focus to your breath
- When you first try this, you may want to do it for only a few times
- Regular daily practice teaches you how to calm yourself when stressed
- Slow down and be gentle with yourself, especially if you cough or feel lightheaded
- If diaphragmatic breathing makes you feel anxious, stop
- If you have COPD, asthma or other breathing problems, you may want to check with your healthcare provider before practicing on your own