

BREATHING EXERCISES

Rationale: Science tells us we all have a stress response. We often see this response not just in our emotions but often in our bodies. When we encounter stressful moments, emotions that bubble up might feel like anger, anxiety, or sadness. Our reaction to stress may also show up in our bodies, manifesting itself into a head or stomach ache, fatigue or even our heart rate speeding up or slowing down. By connecting back to our breath and managing how stress shows up in our body, we can more easily navigate our response to stress emotionally and physically.

STRAW BREATH FOR ANXIETY

Time: 5 minutes

Group Size: Any

Buy-In: Low

Overview: This regulated breathing technique is designed to lower the heart rate and create calm by controlling and elongating the exhale. Straw Breath is particularly helpful in reducing stress or anxiety.

Explain the exercise: “We are going to practice straw breathing which can be useful if you are feeling anxiety bubble up. We’ll take a deep inhale in through our noses filling up our bellies with air, pause slightly and as we breathe out through our mouths, imagine we are gently blowing the air out through a straw. Practice pursing your lips now, feel free to look at me as an example or while we practice together if that is helpful.”

Directions:

1. Provide framework for deep breathing: “First, think about how you inhale. We want to take deep breaths in through our nose that fills our belly, not our chest. Practice breathing into your belly now, bring awareness to your belly to notice how it moves up and down as you breathe in and out through your nose.”
2. Have the participants sit straight up with hands on their knees and invite them to close their eyes if they feel comfortable: “Let’s get started. Uncross yourself - your feet, legs, arms - whatever is crossed, uncross it to create openness and space. Sit comfortably upright, nice and tall. Notice where your shoulders are in relation to your ears, give space there. Tip your chin down and forward. You can close your eyes if you’d like. If you’d rather not

close your eyes, just find a comfortable place to focus your gaze.”

3. Decide how many cycles you want to do keeping in mind the group and time constraints before you lead the group through the exercise: “Don’t worry about the pace, I will let you know when to inhale, pause and exhale. We’ll do this 3-5 times total. Take a normal breath and pause for one second before we begin.”
 - a. “Inhale fully through your nose...”
 - b. “Pause and before you exhale, pucker your lips or pretend as though you are exhaling through a straw...”
 - c. “Exhale fully, gently and slowly through your imaginary straw...” Using metaphors can be helpful for some audiences, here are some examples to consider:
 - i. Imagine blowing bubbles into your favorite drink...
 - ii. Imagine blowing out the candles on a birthday cake...
 - iii. Imagine blowing on a dandelion...
 - d. “Let’s pause here for one... two... and back to inhaling through your nose...” Continue until you have repeated the exercise for 3-5 cycles depending on the group and time constraints.
4. Invite participants back into the group: “Wiggle your toes, flutter your eyes open, come back to the group.”

Application:

You might offer some “real-life” examples for folks. “This technique can help when you’re feeling worried, nervous, or anxious. You might use it before a test, or a presentation, or a basketball game. Taking a moment to connect with your breath can help you focus and move through anxiety.”

3-9-6 BREATH FOR ANGER

Time: 5-10 minutes

Group Size: Any

Buy-In: Medium

Overview: This regulated breathing technique is designed to lower the heart rate while easing the mind by retaining and maintaining oxygen and focus. 3-9-6 is an excellent tool for reducing anger or frustration and creating calm.

Directions

1. Provide framework for deep breathing: "First, think about how you inhale. We want to take deep breaths in through our nose that fills our belly, not our chest. Practice breathing into your belly now, bring awareness to your belly to notice how it moves up and down as you breathe in and out through your nose."
2. Explain the exercise: "In this exercise, we'll breathe in through our nose for 3 counts, hold our breath for 9 and exhale through our mouth for 6 counts."
3. Invite a conversation: Ask participants, "Which part do you think will be most difficult?" Pause for answers... "Many folks guess that it will be tough to hold your breath for 9, but actually exhaling for a full 6 counts can be challenging. You will feel like you are really pushing out all of the air in your belly by the end of the 6 counts."
4. Invite the participants to sit straight up with hands on their knees and invite them to close their eyes if they feel comfortable: "Let's get started. Uncross yourself - your feet, legs, arms - whatever is crossed, uncross it. Sit comfortably upright. Feel free to gaze somewhere in the room, look at me, but maybe not directly at someone else because that can be creepy! You can also gaze gently downward or close your eyes if you are comfortable."
5. Lead the group through the exercise: "Don't worry about counting, I will count us in and out. We'll do this 3-5 (decide how many cycles you want to do keeping in mind the group and time constraints) times total. Take a normal breath and pause for one second before we begin."
 - a. "Let's breathe in... three... two... one..."
 - b. "Let's hold for nine... eight... seven... six... five... four... three... two... one... "
 - c. "And breathe out for six... five... four... three... two... one..."
 - d. "Let's do that all again. Breathe in..." and return to step A. Continue until you have repeated the exercise for 3-5 cycles depending on the group and time constraints.
6. Invite participants back into the group. "Wiggle your toes, flutter your eyes open, come back to the group."

Application:

You might offer some "real-life" examples for folks. "This technique can help when you're feeling angry or frustrated. When we hold for nine counts and exhale

for six, not only does it help to lower the heart rate and regulate the breathing, but it's also a little complicated to follow along with all of those numbers! That's intentional! When you're focusing on those instructions and your breathing, your thoughts are occupied with the directions, rather than on 're less focused on what was making you feel angry or frustrated in the first place."

WING BREATH/ARMPIT BREATH

Time: 5 minutes

Group Size: Any

Buy-In: Medium

Overview: This regulated breathing technique is designed to increase the heart rate and energize the body. Wing breath is a wonderful tool for stimulating the body and mind when we are experiencing sadness or depression.

Directions

1. Provide framework for deep breathing: "First, think about how you inhale. We want to take deep breaths in through our nose that fills our belly, not our chest. Practice breathing into your belly now, bring awareness to your belly to notice how it moves up and down as you breathe in and out through your nose."
2. Explain the exercise: "We are going to practice chicken wing breath. We'll place our palms flat on our chests, matching our breathing with some movement. We'll inhale through the nose while lifting our elbows up and back towards the sky, and lowering the elbows back down as we exhale through our mouth, making a "hah" sound as we move."
3. Have the participants sit straight up with hands on their knees: "Let's get started. Uncross yourself - your feet, legs, arms - whatever is crossed, uncross it. Sit comfortably upright. Feel free to gaze somewhere in the room, look at me, but maybe not directly at someone else because that can be creepy! You can also gaze gently downward."
4. Decide how many cycles you want to do keeping in mind the group and time constraints before you lead the group through the exercise: "I will instruct when to inhale, pause and exhale. We'll do this 3-5 times total. Take a normal breath and pause for one second before we begin."
5. "Place your palms on top/either side of the chest..."

6. "Keeping the palms on the chest, inhale through the nose while extending the elbows up and backward..."
7. "Keeping the palms on the chest, exhale through an open mouth with a "hah" breath out, while lowering the elbows back down..."
8. "Let's do that all again. Breathe in..." and return to step A. Continue until you have repeated the exercise for 3-5 cycles depending on the group and time constraints
9. Invite participants back into the group: "Wiggle your toes, flutter your eyes open, come back to the group."

Adaptation:

We like to also call this exercise chicken wing breath. Why? You can invite participants to use their best barnyard animal sound for the final exhale! Let your chicken wings take it away - cluck cluck!

Application:

You might offer some "real-life" examples for folks. "This technique can help when you're feeling low-energy, down, or sad. It's meant to energize and uplift you. Maybe you need a way to make sure you wake up on the right side of the bed before a big day, or use it as a brain break while you work through your homework after school."