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Chapter **1**

Breathing: The Key to Health, Happiness, and Focus

If you're like most people, you've probably never thought much about how you breathe. You just do it — on autopilot.

But what if I told you that this unconscious act, done more than 20,000 times a day, could be the missing key to your energy, focus, sleep, and even emotional well-being? What if your breathing is actually *holding you back*?

In this chapter, I show you how the simple act of breathing — when done consciously and skillfully — can unlock a cascade of physical, mental, and emotional benefits. You take a deep breath with me and explore why your breath is not just a background process, but the foundation of a healthier, calmer, and more vibrant life.

Appreciating How Breathing Impacts Your Body and Mind

Let's start with a quick experiment right away. Take a nice deep breath in, and really slowly let it out. Did you notice anything? Perhaps your shoulders relaxed a bit. Maybe your mind cleared momentarily. That's just a tiny glimpse of what proper breathing can do for you.

Your breath is the remote control for your nervous system. No joke! When you breathe rapidly, you're essentially pressing the "stress button" on your body, triggering your sympathetic nervous system (the one responsible for the fight-or-flight response). When you breathe slowly and deeply, you're hitting the "calm button," activating your parasympathetic nervous system (the one responsible for the rest-and-digest mode). Pretty neat, right?

Years ago, during my training to become a science teacher, I found myself in front of 35 lively teenagers — and an inspector sitting at the back of the classroom with a clipboard. No pressure, right? My heart started pounding, my palms turned clammy, and I could feel that familiar rush of nerves creeping in. I had just a couple of minutes before the lesson began, and I knew I had to get centered or risk spiraling. I noticed my breath was fast and shallow — the classic stress response.

So, I turned to a technique I'd recently learned: 4:6 breathing. I inhaled slowly to a count of 4 and then exhaled even more slowly to a count of 6. With each other breath, I silently said the word *calm*. Within a minute, I felt more grounded. The nerves didn't disappear entirely, but they softened. I stepped into the classroom with a steady presence, taught the lesson, and passed the inspection. I went on to teach for ten years before shifting into mindfulness and breathwork full time — but I'll never forget how that one simple breathing technique helped me keep my cool when it mattered most.



REMEMBER

Your breathing affects virtually every system in your body. Here's a short list of what happens when you breathe properly:

- » Your blood pressure normalizes.
- » Your heart rate steadies.
- » Your immune system gets a boost.
- » Your digestion improves.
- » Your stress hormones decrease.
- » Your brain receives optimal oxygen.

- » Your mind becomes clearer.
- » Your mood lifts.

On the flip side, poor breathing habits can contribute to anxiety, fatigue, poor concentration, and sleep problems. They can even worsen conditions like asthma and high blood pressure.

One member of my community got in touch with me complaining of feeling anxious and struggling with insomnia. She was a manager who prided herself on “pushing through” challenges. When we had a video coaching call, it was clear to me that she was taking shallow, rapid breaths exclusively in her upper chest. After just two weeks of practicing proper deep breathing (called *diaphragmatic breathing*) for five minutes daily, she reported sleeping better than she had in years and feeling “strangely calm” during meetings. “I just breathe differently now,” she told me, “and everything else follows.”



REMEMBER

Your breath is your secret superpower. You can’t will your heart to slow down or ask your immune system to fight harder. But your breath? It listens. In seconds, you begin to regulate your nervous system, lower your blood pressure, and calm a racing mind. It’s one of the only parts of your body’s automatic system you can consciously steer — anytime, anywhere.

This isn’t just relaxation. It’s rewiring. When you understand how to breathe *on purpose*, you unlock a built-in tool for focus, resilience, energy, and peace. And the best part? You’ve had it with you all along.

Introducing Breathing Exercises

This book is about breath in general and breathing exercises in particular. So, what do I mean by breathing exercises?

Defining breathing exercises

Simply put, *breathing exercises* are specific techniques that help you control how you breathe to positively impact your physical, mental, and emotional state.

Think of breathing exercises as workouts for your respiratory system. Just as you may do bicep curls to strengthen your arms or stretches to improve flexibility, breathing exercises train your breathing muscles and adjust your patterns to work more efficiently.

But breathing exercises go beyond physical training. They're also a form of mental and emotional training that helps you become more aware of and regulate your physiological and psychological states. They're like having a built-in stress management system that you can activate anytime, anywhere.

One afternoon during a particularly chaotic workshop I was leading for a corporate client in London, the fire alarm went off. As 30 stressed executives and I evacuated to the street, I noticed everyone checking their phones and looking anxious. The manager asked if we could do a quick exercise outside. I agreed. "While we wait," I announced with perhaps too much enthusiasm, "let's practice box breathing!" There were some eye rolls, but after a minute of guided practice, the mood noticeably shifted. By the time we returned inside (it was a false alarm), one participant joked, "Can we pull the alarm again when I have my performance review next week?!"



REMEMBER

Conscious breathing is a small thing that can make a big difference in your life.

Identifying the three essential ingredients of all breathing exercises

Most breathing exercises — whether they're ancient pranayama yoga techniques, modern heart rate variability (HRV) biofeedback methods, or anything in between — are constructed from three core components. Think of these as the essential ingredients in a recipe: Adjust one element, and you completely transform the experience and outcome.



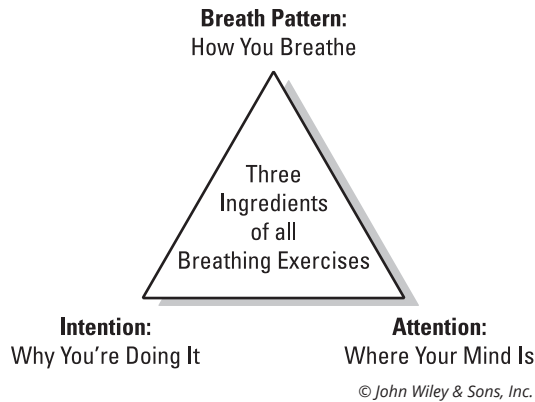
TECHNICAL
STUFF

Heart rate variability is a measure of your overall well-being.

As shown in Figure 1-1, three components work together to create the complete breathing exercise experience:

- » **Breath Pattern (How You Breathe):** This is the mechanical foundation — what you actually do with your inhale, exhale, and any pauses in between. The breath pattern encompasses several key variables:
 - **Pace:** Breathing rapidly can energize you, whereas breathing slowly can help you calm down.
 - **Depth:** Shallow breathing affects different parts of your nervous system than deep, diaphragmatic breathing.

FIGURE 1-1:
The three
components of
the breathing
experience.



- **Ratio:** The mathematical relationship between different phases of breath. For example, a 4-6-2 pattern means inhaling for four counts, exhaling for six counts, and holding for two counts.
- **Breath route:** Whether you breathe through your nose, mouth, or alternate between them significantly impacts the physiological effects.

A classic example of a breathing pattern is box breathing, which follows a precise 4-4-4-4 pattern: Inhale for four counts, hold for four, exhale for four, hold for four. This creates a “box” of equal timing that promotes balance and focus.

» **Intention (Why You're Doing It):** Your intention acts as the compass that guides the entire exercise. It determines not just what technique you choose, but how you approach it. Different intentions require different breathing strategies:

- Calming the nervous system may call for extended exhale breathing, where your out breath is longer than your in breath, activating your parasympathetic nervous system.
- Boosting alertness and energy could involve techniques like *kapalabhati* (skull-shining breath), with its rapid, forceful exhales (see Chapter 12).
- Releasing stress and tension may be best served by cyclic sighing or resonant breathing at your body's optimal frequency (see Chapters 3 and 8).

The intention shapes everything from the pace and depth of your breathing to how long you practice and what you focus on during the exercise.

» **Attention (Where Your Mind Is):** This is what transforms mechanical breathing into mindful breathing — the difference between simply moving air in and out of your lungs and creating a meditative experience. Your attention can focus on various aspects:

- **Physical sensations:** The feeling of cool air entering your nostrils, the expansion of your rib cage, or the gentle rise and fall of your belly
- **Counting or rhythm:** Using numbers to maintain your chosen pattern while keeping your mind anchored
- **Visualization:** Imagining light flowing in with each inhale, or stress leaving with each exhale
- **Present-moment awareness:** Simply observing the breath without trying to change or control it

You can think of these three components like going to a live pop concert. The pattern is the beat — it keeps everything moving in time, just like the steady rhythm of the music. The intention is the vibe — are you here for fun, to feel something deep, to let go? That sets the emotional tone, like the mood of the performance. And attention? That's you in the crowd — not just passively watching, but fully immersed, singing along, lights flashing, heart syncing with the music. You're both audience and participant, shaping the experience with your presence.

When all three elements work in harmony, even the simplest breathing exercise becomes a powerful tool for transformation. Change any one element, and you create an entirely different experience — just as changing the beat, the reason for being there, or your listening focus transforms how you experience the music.

This framework will help you understand and modify any breathing exercise you encounter throughout this book, giving you the tools to customize practices for your specific needs and goals.

Exploring various breathing exercises

The world of breathing exercises is wonderfully diverse. Here's a quick tour of some popular techniques I explore more deeply later in this book:

» **Diaphragmatic breathing (see Chapter 7):** Also known as belly breathing, abdominal breathing, or simply deep breathing, this fundamental technique focuses on using your *diaphragm* (the dome-shaped muscle below your lungs) rather than your chest muscles when breathing. It's the foundation of most other breathing practices.

- » **Box breathing (see Chapter 8):** A simple but powerful technique where you inhale, hold your breath, exhale, and hold again, each for the same count. Navy SEALs famously use this technique to stay calm under pressure. If it works for them during combat, it can probably help you handle your in-laws during the holidays!
- » **4-7-8 breathing (see Chapter 8):** Made popular by Dr. Andrew Weil, this technique involves inhaling for four seconds, holding for seven seconds, and exhaling for eight seconds in a specific way. It's particularly helpful for falling asleep and managing anxiety.
- » **Alternate-nostril breathing (see Chapter 15):** A yogic practice where you inhale and exhale through one nostril at a time. It's like having your own internal balancing system — perfect for when you feel scattered or overwhelmed.
- » **Coherent or resonant breathing (see Chapter 8):** This technique involves breathing at a specific rate (typically, five to six breaths per minute) to maximize HRV and promote focus and calm. Think of it as finding your breathing “sweet spot” where everything in your body hums along harmoniously.
- » **Cyclic sighing (see Chapter 3):** This technique involves a long, slow inhale followed by a second short top-up breath, and then an extended, relaxed sigh out through the mouth. It's like giving your nervous system a gentle nudge to settle down. Research shows that just a few minutes of this kind of sighing can significantly reduce anxiety and shift you into a more relaxed, parasympathetic state.

I cover many more techniques in this book! Each of them has specific benefits and optimal situations for use. The beauty is that you can choose different breathing exercises for different needs — like having a toolbox where each tool serves a specific purpose.

Discovering the connection between breathing exercises and breathwork

You may hear the terms *breathing exercises* and *breathwork* used interchangeably, but there's a subtle difference that's useful to understand.

Breathing exercises, sometimes also called *conscious breathing*, are specific techniques that help you guide your breath for a desired effect — calming your nerves, energizing your body, improving sleep, and more. These are typically short, practical tools you can use anytime, anywhere. They're like the building blocks of breathwork: quick, focused, and often aimed at managing stress or boosting your physical and mental well-being.

Breathwork is the act of doing breathing exercises — for example, “I did some breathwork this morning — box breathing, to be precise.” Breathwork can also refer to a broader practice that includes one or more breathing exercises, often combined in a deliberate sequence. A breathwork session may be a five-minute self-guided routine or a longer experience led by a teacher. Some sessions dive deep — bringing up strong emotions, promoting healing, or creating altered states of consciousness. Others are gentle, quiet, and grounding.

Think of it this way: Breathing exercises are like daily movement (stretching, walking, a quick yoga flow), while breathwork sessions can be anything from a regular workout to a full-body retreat. They’re both part of the same world.

From ancient yogic *pranayama* to modern therapeutic techniques, cultures throughout history have used conscious breathing to shift health, mood, and even awareness.

As one participant in my community shared after a guided session: “I came for stress relief but found parts of myself I didn’t know were lost.”

That’s the power of breath. Start simple, and it may just take you somewhere profound.

Taking the First Step: Being Aware of Your Breath

Before diving into specific techniques, the most important first step is simply becoming aware of your current breathing patterns. This awareness itself can be transformative.



TRY THIS

Right now, without changing anything, notice:

- » Are you breathing through your nose or mouth?
- » Is your breath shallow or deep?
- » Which parts of your body move when you breathe? Your chest? Your belly?
- » What’s the rhythm of your breath? Fast or slow? Even or uneven?
- » How does your breathing change as you pay attention to it?

This simple act of observation is powerful. **Remember:** Awareness precedes change. You can’t improve what you don’t notice.



TRY THIS

One simple exercise to build this awareness is what I call the “Hand on Heart, Hand on Belly” technique:

1. **Place one hand on your chest and the other hand on your abdomen, just below your rib cage.**
2. **Close your eyes and breathe normally for a minute.**
3. **Notice which hand moves more.**

Most people discover they’re shallow, chest breathers rather than deep, diaphragmatic breathers — a pattern associated with stress and anxiety. I show you how to fix this in Chapter 7 on diaphragmatic breathing.

I remember teaching this exercise during a workshop where a skeptical staff member grudgingly participated. After just one minute, he admitted, “I’ve been holding my breath unconsciously, without noticing. No wonder I get headaches by lunchtime every day.” Small awareness, big revelation.

When you’re under stress, your breathing naturally becomes more shallow and rapid — part of your body’s fight-or-flight response. This pattern was useful when our ancestors needed quick bursts of energy to escape predators, but it’s less helpful when you’re stuck in traffic or facing a tight deadline. Being aware of this pattern gives you the opportunity to interrupt it.

Simply becoming aware of your breath doesn’t mean you need to control it immediately. Begin by observing with curiosity rather than harsh self-judgement. Your breath has been with you since your first moment in this world, and it will be with you until your last.



TIP

Befriending your breath is the start of a beautiful relationship. That’s what this book is all about.

THE RICH HISTORY OF BREATHWORK ACROSS AGES AND CULTURES

Breathing exercises aren’t a modern wellness trend — they’re one of humanity’s oldest healing practices. Virtually every major spiritual and healing tradition throughout history has incorporated some form of conscious breathing.

In India, *pranayama* (breath control) has been a core component of yoga for thousands of years. The very word *pranayama* reveals how central breath was to ancient

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understanding: *Prana* means life force, and *ayama* means to extend or draw out. Through controlled breathing, practitioners believed they could extend their life force and vitality.

In ancient China, Taoist practitioners developed breathing techniques as part of their pursuit of longevity and spiritual development. These practices were integrated into movement-based exercises called *qigong* and *tai chi*, which continue to be practiced worldwide today.

Indigenous cultures across continents have used rhythmic breathing in ceremonial and healing contexts. From Native American purification ceremonies to Australian Aboriginal didgeridoo playing (which requires circular breathing), the breath has been recognized as a gateway to healing and altered consciousness.

Interest in breathwork surged in the modern age. Practices like the Buteyko Breathing Method, Oxygen Advantage, Sudarshan Kriya Yoga, the Wim Hof Method, and Holotropic Breathwork emerged, bringing attention to the therapeutic, health, and performance enhancement potential of conscious breathing.

Today, scientific research is catching up with ancient wisdom. Studies are confirming what practitioners have known for centuries: that specific slow breathing patterns can influence HRV, brain activity, immune function, and emotional regulation.

Envisioning Your Breathing Journey

Picture this: You're standing at the edge of a swimming pool for the first time. The water looks inviting, but also a little intimidating. You've heard swimming is great exercise, wonderful for your health, and incredibly relaxing. But right now? You're not entirely convinced you need to get wet.

This may be how you feel about breathing exercises and breathwork. You may have picked up this book because someone told you breathing exercises could change your life, or perhaps you've read about the benefits online. Maybe you're dealing with stress, anxiety, or just feeling like you need something more in your toolkit for handling life's ups and downs. But like standing at that pool's edge, you may be wondering: "Is this really for me?"

The journey from skepticism to mastery of breath follows a similar path to learning how to swim. And just like swimming, when you learn the basics, you'll have a skill that will serve you for life.

Overcoming your initial fears or skepticism

Remember being a child and perhaps feeling nervous about jumping into water? That hesitation is perfectly natural — it's your brain's way of keeping you safe around something new and potentially overwhelming. The same thing happens with breathing exercises.

You may be thinking, "I already know how to breathe — I do it automatically without thinking!" And you're absolutely right. But here's the thing: There's a world of difference between the *automatic* breathing that keeps you alive and the *conscious* breathing that can transform how you feel, think, and live.

Concerns I hear include the following:

- » "Is this all a bunch of mumbo jumbo?"
- » "What if it feels weird or uncomfortable?"
- » "What if I do it wrong?"
- » "What if feeling my breathing makes me more anxious?"

These worries are like being concerned about getting water up your nose when learning to swim — valid concerns that dissolve when you know what you're doing. The beauty of breathing exercises is that, unlike swimming, you can't actually drown! Your body has incredible built-in safety mechanisms that will keep you breathing normally if you ever feel uncomfortable.

I still remember my first experience with conscious breathing. I was in my twenties, feeling overwhelmed with my studies, and somehow I ended up in a local meditation class. When the teacher started talking about breathing meditation, I thought, "This is ridiculous — I could be at home watching TV." But then something unexpected happened. As I followed the guidance and focused on my breath, I experienced a surprising shift. For the first time, I realized I wasn't just my racing thoughts or anxious mind. It was as if I'd been staring at the choppy surface of a lake and suddenly caught a glimpse of the stillness underneath. It shocked me — in the best possible way.



WARNING

Keep well away from water when doing breathing exercises.



TRY THIS

Try this simple exercise right now:

- 1. Place one hand on your chest.**
- 2. Don't change anything — just notice how you're breathing naturally.**

If your breathing happens to change, that's fine, too.

3. Count three natural breaths in and out.

Be conscious of your experience, as best you can.

4. Say to yourself: “I’ve just done a breathing exercise!”

That’s an example of conscious breathing. You’ve already started. Everything that follows simply builds from here.

Deciding to begin your journey

There’s usually a moment when someone decides to learn to swim. Maybe they’re tired of sitting on the sidelines at pool parties, or they want to feel confident around water, or they’ve fallen in accidentally and realized this is a skill they actually need. With breathing, there’s often a similar catalyst moment.

For you, perhaps it’s stress. Modern life has a way of leaving us feeling like we’re constantly struggling to keep our heads above water. Or maybe you come to breathwork after experiencing anxiety, where it feels like your breath has suddenly become your enemy rather than your friend. Some people discover it after a health scare, or when they realize they want to feel more connected to their body and mind.

The decision to begin your breathing journey is really a decision to befriend your breath. Right now, you may barely notice it most of the time — it’s like that reliable friend who’s always there but you take for granted. Learning breathing exercises is like deciding to really get to know this friend, to discover what they’re capable of, and to develop a much deeper relationship.



REMEMBER

You’re never alone. Imagine having a friend always by your side, ready to help you feel better in seconds. That’s the friend your breath can be. This book aims to help you build that meaningful connection.

I’ll never forget the day I truly committed to making breathwork a regular practice. I was dealing with a particularly stressful period — deadlines mounting, relationship challenges, the usual life stuff that can feel overwhelming. I’d been dabbling with breathing exercises for a while, but not really taking them seriously.

Then one evening, I was lying awake at 2 a.m., mind racing, feeling like my breath was shallow and unsatisfying. That’s when I had my “pool edge” moment. I thought, “I’ve read about this stuff. Why am I not using it for myself?” I started doing coherent breathing and, within minutes, fell asleep peacefully. The next morning, I decided that breathing exercises weren’t just going to be something I tried now and then — they were going to be something I lived and shared with everyone who was interested in learning more.

Discovering and practicing the basics

When you first learn to swim, you don't start by attempting the butterfly stroke or diving from the high board. You begin in the shallow end, learning to float, getting comfortable with putting your face in the water, and mastering basic movements. Breathing exercises work the same way.

The fundamentals of breathwork are deceptively simple, just like the basics of swimming. You learn to float before you learn strokes, and in breathing, you learn awareness before you learn techniques. These basics become the foundation for everything else you'll do, no matter how advanced you become.

Think of the following fundamentals as your “water safety” skills — the essential knowledge that keeps you feeling secure and confident.

Breath awareness

Just like learning to float, breath awareness is about noticing what's already happening. You're not forcing anything. You're simply becoming conscious of the natural rhythm that's been there all along.



PLAY THIS

This is your first “lesson in the shallow end” (listen to Track 2):

- 1. Sit comfortably or lie down somewhere you won't be disturbed.**
- 2. Close your eyes or soften your gaze downward.**
- 3. No need to change your breathing — just notice it.**
- 4. Become aware of where you feel the breath most clearly.**
Is it in your nose? Your chest? Your belly?
- 5. Notice the natural pause between inhale and exhale.**
- 6. Count five breaths, starting over if you lose count.**
- 7. Take a moment to notice how you feel.**

This exercise is like learning to float — you're discovering that you can be supported by something that's already there. You don't need to create anything new. You just need to pay attention.

Gentle control

This is like learning your first swimming stroke — you're beginning to guide your breath intentionally, but gently. No forcing, no strain, just conscious direction.



PLAY THIS

Try your first “swimming stroke,” called slow-motion breathing (listen to Track 3):

1. **Start with the breath awareness from the previous section.**
2. **On your next inhale, use your nose and slow it down just slightly — like swimming in slow motion.**
3. **Pause briefly at the top of the inhale.**
4. **Exhale slowly and smoothly using your nose.**
Aim to make your breathing as quiet as you comfortably can.
5. **Pause briefly at the bottom of the exhale as much as feels natural.**
6. **Repeat for five to ten breaths.**
7. **Return to natural breathing and notice any changes.**



REMEMBER

This should feel easy and comfortable. If you feel strain, you’re trying too hard — like someone thrashing in the water instead of gliding smoothly.

Rhythm and pacing

In swimming, you learn to coordinate your movements. In breathing, you learn to create sustainable, comfortable rhythms that you can maintain without effort.



TRY THIS

Discover your natural rhythm:

1. **Sit or lie down somewhere comfortable and quiet.**
2. **Begin by simply watching your breath for a few moments.**
3. **When you’re ready, start to count the length of your natural inhale.**
How many seconds does it take, without effort?
4. **Now count the length of your natural exhale.**
Is it the same? Longer? Shorter? Just notice.
5. **Try this for a few more breaths.**
Let your breath stay as quiet as possible — as if you’re breathing through silk.
6. **After a few minutes, see if you can gently settle into a rhythm that feels natural.**
Perhaps breathe in for four and out for five or six. No need to be precise — this is about feeling your natural flow.

7. Let the rhythm carry you for five to ten more breaths.
8. Return to natural breathing and notice how you feel.

Finding exercises that work best for you

After you've learned basic swimming strokes, you may discover that you love the freestyle but find the backstroke challenging, or that you're naturally gifted at breaststroke but struggle with butterfly. Everyone has their preferences and natural tendencies. The same is true with breathing exercises.

Some people (like me!) fall in love with coherent breathing — that steady, rhythmic practice that creates heart coherence (see Chapter 8). It's like a comfortable, sustainable freestyle stroke that you can do for long periods. Others prefer the energizing effects of breath-holding techniques (see Chapter 9), which are more like powerful sprints that leave you feeling invigorated. Still others find their home in gentle, flowing practices that feel more like a peaceful backstroke through calm waters (see Chapter 8).

The key is experimentation without judgment. Just as a swimming instructor may have you try different strokes to see what feels natural, you'll want to explore various breathing techniques to discover your favorites.

In my workshops, I love watching people discover their “breathing personality.” I remember a busy executive who was convinced she needed energizing breathing techniques to help with her demanding schedule. But when we tried 4–6 breathing, something in her whole system just relaxed. “This feels like coming home,” she said. Meanwhile, her colleague found the same exercise too slow and loved the more dynamic box breathing practices. Neither was right nor wrong — they just had different constitutions and needs.

LETTING GO OF PERFECT BREATHING

If you've ever felt more anxious after reading about breathing techniques, worrying you're “doing it wrong” or not breathing “perfectly,” you're not alone. Many people experience this at first. Ironically, the more you try to control the breath perfectly, the more tension you may create. So let's clear the air: You don't need to be a breathing expert to benefit from conscious breathing.

Think of the different breathing exercises in this book like seeds. You try planting them and see what grows. Some may flourish quickly; others may take time or not take at all.

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Some flowers you'll enjoy more than others. Your life is like your garden, and you get to choose which seeds to sow. Over time, with a bit of patience and care, you'll grow a mix of plants and flowers that feels right for you. And remember, you're free to find your own seeds, too, or even create a new mix that's uniquely yours. Your garden won't look like anyone else's and that's exactly how it should be. Feel free to gently play, experiment, and adapt to find out what sort of breathing exercises work best for you.

Going deeper if you want

When you're comfortable swimming in the shallow end and you've mastered the basic strokes, you may find yourself curious about deeper waters. In swimming, this may mean longer distances, different diving techniques, or perhaps training for more challenging goals. In breathwork, "going deeper" can mean several different things.

Some people are drawn to longer practice sessions — instead of 10 minutes of breathing exercises, they may enjoy 30 minutes or even hour-long sessions. It's like deciding to swim laps for fitness rather than just splashing around for fun. Others are interested in more advanced techniques that work with breath retention, or practices that combine breathing with movement or visualization.

Here are some options for advanced exploration:

- » **Extended practice sessions:** Just as marathon swimmers build up their endurance gradually, you can slowly extend your breathing sessions. Start by adding just five minutes to your regular practice and see how it feels.
- » **Breath retention practices:** These are the "deep end" practices — working with holding your breath for periods, which can be incredibly powerful for building mental resilience and accessing deeper states of consciousness.
- » **Combining breath with movement:** This may involve walking meditation with conscious breathing, or yoga practices that coordinate breath and movement.
- » **Breathwork in daily life:** The ultimate goal is to take your breathing skills out of the "practice pool" and into the "open water" of daily life — using conscious breathing during stressful meetings, while stuck in traffic, or when you need to center yourself quickly.



WARNING

Just as you wouldn't attempt to swim across a lake before you're ready, don't rush into advanced breathing practices. Your breath is powerful, and respect for that power keeps the practice safe and beneficial. If you're interested in more intensive breathwork, consider working with a qualified instructor, just as you might hire a swimming coach for advanced techniques.

In the zone: Finding flow

There's a moment every experienced swimmer knows, when technique melts away and you're simply moving through water like you were born to it. Your stroke becomes effortless, your breathing perfectly synchronized, your mind clear and present. You're not *doing* swimming anymore. Swimming is simply happening *through* you. This is what athletes call *being in the zone* or what psychologists term *flow state*.

The exact same thing happens with breathing practices. After weeks or months of learning techniques, paying attention to counts and rhythms, and consciously directing your breath, something magical shifts. Suddenly, you're not *doing* a breathing exercise — the breath is simply flowing perfectly on its own, and you're along for the ride.

In this state, the breathing breathes you. Your body knows exactly what it needs, your mind settles into profound stillness, and there's a sense of connection to something larger than yourself. Time seems to disappear. The boundary between you and your breath dissolves. It's incredibly peaceful and, paradoxically, incredibly energizing at the same time.

Here's what flow state feels like in breathing practice:

- » Effortless rhythm that seems to sustain itself
- » A deep sense of presence and connection
- » Time distortion (5 minutes feels like 30, or 30 feels like 5)
- » Profound stillness in both mind and body
- » Feeling as if your body is naturally being "breathed" rather than your having to do the "breathing"

I remember the first time this happened to me. I was about six months into regular daily practice, sitting in my garden one morning. I started with my usual coherent breathing routine, expecting to do my normal 20 minutes. But something was different that day. About five minutes in, my breathing seemed to take

on a life of its own. The rhythm became so natural and perfect that I stopped counting, stopped trying, stopped doing anything at all.

When I finally opened my eyes, almost 40 minutes had passed, but it felt like just a few minutes. I wasn't tired or stiff. Instead, I felt like I'd been recharged at the deepest level. The effects lasted the entire day — I moved through challenges with deep calm, my thinking was clearer, and I felt more connected to the people around me. It was like I'd discovered a completely new way of being in the world.



TIP

Over time, I learned a quiet truth: Flow can't be forced. It comes and goes like a breeze — never on demand, but often when least expected. Think of it as a gift that the breath occasionally brings, not a goal to chase. When you cling too tightly to those peak moments, they slip through your fingers, leaving behind frustration instead of freedom. But when you breathe without grasping, joy has a way of sneaking in through the side door.



TRY THIS

The following flow-state practice isn't really a technique — it's more of an invitation to not-technique:

- 1. Begin with any breathing practice in this chapter.**
- 2. After a few minutes, gradually release any effort or control.**
- 3. Let your breath find its own perfect rhythm.**

If your mind tries to "help," gently return to simply receiving whatever the breath wants to do.
- 4. Trust completely in your body's wisdom and stay as long as feels natural.**
- 5. When you're ready to finish, take a moment to appreciate what just happened.**

Appreciating the ripple effect: Beyond the pool

Here's where the swimming metaphor becomes even more beautiful. When you truly learn to swim, the confidence and skills don't stay in the pool. You feel differently around all bodies of water. You're more confident on boats, more relaxed at the beach, and more willing to explore new aquatic adventures. The skills ripple out into a general sense of capability and confidence.

The same thing happens with breathing practices, but the ripple effect is even more profound because your breath is with you every moment of every day. When you develop a deep, friendly relationship with your breathing, it changes how you

handle stress, how you fall asleep, how you wake up, how you approach difficult conversations, and how you experience your own body and emotions.

Students often tell me things like: “I never realized I was holding my breath during difficult phone calls, but now I notice and consciously breathe instead” or “When my child was having a meltdown, instead of getting triggered, I took three conscious breaths and was able to stay calm and helpful” or “I use my breathing to transition between work mode and home mode — it’s like having a reset button.”

Continuing your journey

As you embark on this breathing journey, remember that, like learning to swim, it’s not about perfection — it’s about developing a skill that serves you for life. Some days, your “swimming” will feel effortless and beautiful. Other days, you may feel like you’re just keeping your head above water. Both are perfectly normal and part of the process.

The wonderful thing about breathing exercises is that, unlike swimming, you don’t need a pool, special equipment, or perfect weather conditions. Your breath is always with you, ready to be your friend, your teacher, your refuge, and your pathway to greater well-being.

Start in the shallow end, be patient with yourself, practice regularly but gently, and trust that your body already knows how to do this. Before you know it, you’ll be swimming in the vast, beautiful ocean of your own breath — confident, capable, and deeply at peace.

The water’s perfect. Come on in!

