



Breathwork expert and *Let It Go* author Rebecca Dennis shares simple exercises for calm and healing in any situation

We can change our physiology by adjusting our breathing, says Dennis

At times of crisis, we're often told to 'just breathe'. Yet how often do we actually think about the functionality of our breath? 'Oxygen is the most essential natural resource required by our cells,' says breathwork coach Rebecca Dennis. 'We can go without food for up to 40 days and water for three days, yet we get into trouble after just moments of not breathing.'

In short, breath equals life – which is why, according to Dennis, 'learning how to use the full capacity of

our natural breathing system is comparable to giving our body and mind an MOT.' And it seems this type of reset is sorely needed. Dennis continues: 'Research shows that, due to modern lifestyles and pressures, nine out of 10 teenagers and adults are not using their respiratory system to its full capacity – and some are using as little as a third.'

Dennis has been studying and practising holistic therapies for more than 20 years. She came across breathwork 12 years ago, and credits it with changing her life. 'Stimulation, activity and demands are all



around us, and our responsibilities, commitments and worries stop us feeling calm and staying in the moment. However, we can consciously change our physiology and mindset by adjusting the depth, rhythm and rate of our breathing.'

Why breathwork?

Whether you're feeling the pressure from work deadlines or struggling to process the latest news, conscious breathing can help reduce your stress levels in less than five minutes, increasing your focus and concentration and influencing the way you respond to whatever life throws at you. You won't be stuck in the past or future, or caught in a spiral of racing thoughts. It can also boost brainpower, productivity and the immune system, as around 70% of toxins are released from our body through our breath. 'I've seen people experience incredible transformations, from asthma relief to improved symptoms of autoimmune disease,' says Dennis.

'The breath is like an instrument; the more we play with it, the more attuned we become. In the same way as we exercise our bodies to get fit and build muscle, breathwork is a gym workout for the whole respiratory system.'

Here, she shares her favourite breathwork techniques for different scenarios when you might need them most:

When you're angry: Figure-of-8 breathing

When we're furious, there's a tendency for us to hold our breath, contract our muscles or shallow-breathe. Our breath can feel stuck or laboured and it's harder to gather thoughts as our mind goes into a spin.

To bring balance, begin by using your breath to expand the lower abdominals on the inhale and contract on the exhale. Take slow gentle breaths in through and out of the nose. Relax your shoulders and bring your focus to the breath that's moving your belly. As you breathe in and out, visualise a figure of '8' starting from the pelvis, travelling just above your belly button, up to your chest and back around again.

Continue this visualisation while gently following the breath. Inhale through your nose for 4 counts. Exhale through your nose for 4 counts. If this feels too hard or forced, bring it down to three counts. Continue this for 1 to 2 minutes.

When you're facing a big decision: Alternate-nostril breathing

Also known as nadi shodhana, this tried-and-tested yoga technique will help sharpen your focus on what you need. Start by sitting comfortably, either on a chair or cross-legged on the floor. Hold out your right hand and press the tips of your pointer and middle fingers into your palm, leaving your ring finger, little finger and thumb extended.

Bring your hand up in front of your face and press your thumb on the outside of one nostril. Inhale deeply through

your open nostril. At the peak of your inhalation, release your thumb, press your ring finger on the outside of your other nostril, and exhale. Continue this pattern for 1 to 2 minutes before switching sides so you inhale through the nostril that you originally used to exhale, and vice versa. Spend equal amounts of time inhaling and exhaling through both nostrils.

When you're nervous: Deep diaphragmatic activation

This diaphragm release exercise is a quick way to release tension before a big presentation or meeting. Use your second and third fingers to press gently (known as acupressure) on the diaphragm, which is just under the rib cage, as you breathe in, then let go as you breathe out. Practise this for 1 to 2 minutes.

Your solar plexus area is just underneath your sternum and below the rib cage. This can be very tight – especially if we find it hard to let go of control. Again, use gentle acupressure here as you inhale, only letting go on the exhale. Remember to push not on the bone, but just into the space under your rib cage. Breathe deeply into your belly and keep your awareness there. Try this for one minute and repeat the affirmation: 'I let go'.

When you lack energy: Breath of fire

This is a great way to boost your energy levels and digestive system if you're feeling sluggish and fatigued. It's all too easy to reach for a coffee or sweet snack; instead, use this dynamic abdominal breath exercise to wake up your mind.

Begin sitting in an upright position with spine straight and your hands relaxed on your thighs. Take a long, slow inhale through your nose. Then exhale powerfully (also through your nose) while contracting your lower belly.

Your body will naturally inhale again, so focus mainly on your forceful exhalations as you continue this breathing technique. Once you're comfortable with the abdominal contraction, repeat for 15 seconds, then take a long breath and let go with a big sigh, exhaling through your mouth. Repeat for another 15 seconds.

When you're overwhelmed: The 4-7-8 technique

This exercise can help you switch the nervous system to a relaxed state. Begin by sitting or lying down in a comfortable position. Close your eyes. Press the tip of your tongue to the roof of your mouth, slightly open your mouth, then exhale until you reach the bottom of your breath. Close your mouth and quietly inhale through your nose for 4 counts. Then hold your breath for 7 counts. Exhale slowly and gently for a total of 8 counts to return to the bottom of your breath. Repeat for 4 full breaths, working your way up to 8 breaths over time.

Let It Go: Breathe Yourself Calm (Ebury) by Rebecca Dennis is out now