

Diaphragmatic Breathing: Calming Your Body In Flight

Martin N. Seif, Ph.D., ABPP
MartinNSeif@gmail.com

A healthy mind has an easy breath.

--Author Unknown

Fear is excitement without the breath.

—Fritz Perls

Regular, rhythmic breathing is enormously helpful in coping with your fear of flying. Most people change their breathing pattern when they feel tense. You might hold your breath without being aware of it. Or, you might find yourself breathing rapidly. Shallow breathing, holding your breath, taking big gulps of air, breathing rapidly—all of these non-rhythmic breathing patterns increase your anxiety at a time when you feel most frightened.

Diaphragmatic breathing is the only way to ensure that you continue to breathe regularly and evenly during periods of tension and anxiety. It is for this reason that many people believe that regular, rhythmic, diaphragmatic breathing is the single most effective means of reducing anxiety while you are flying.

There Are Two Ways to Breathe:

There are two distinct ways to get air into our lungs: One method involves using your chest muscles to expand your ribcage; the other uses your diaphragm to expand your belly. We are born breathing with our diaphragms. Take a look at new born babies laying in their crib. Their belly pushes out with each inhalation, and gets smaller with each exhalation. That expansion of the belly is the unmistakable sign of diaphragmatic breathing.

However, as we get older, most of us begin breathing with our chest, primarily because it looks so much more attractive to push out our chest when we inhale, as opposed to pushing out our belly. (Remember that expanding our belly is a requirement for diaphragmatic inhalations.)

When we inhale using our chest, we stretch the intercostal muscles around the ribs, expanding our ribcage, and drawing air into our lungs. As our anxiety increases, this type of breathing becomes more difficult, because tension and anxiety make the muscles around our ribcage become stiff and inflexible. People often claim that their chest feels tight during anxiety attacks, and they sometimes feel pressure around that part of the body. This is one way you feel the tension in these muscles. Expanding the chest during these times feels awkward and self-conscious. Inhalations feel like stretching a tight rubber-band. At the same time you are trying to breathe rhythmically and comfortably, your chest muscles are sending signals of tension, pressure, and pain. Regular, rhythmic breathing becomes an almost impossible task.

Avoiding Hyperventilation:

One of the major issues associated with non-rhythmic breathing is that it sets the stage for hyperventilation to occur. Hyperventilation is a complicated phenomenon; it is characterized by varying levels of carbon dioxide in the blood. Common symptoms of hyperventilation include dizziness; lightheadedness; tingling in the hands, feet, lips, and face; and numbness in these same parts. Sometimes people feel like they cannot take a satisfying breath and thus experience the symptoms of “air hunger.” Many of these symptoms feel like anxiety, and they add to the anxiety symptoms you are already feeling. It is especially easy to hyperventilate on airplane, because the cabin is pressurized to an altitude of around 5800 feet above sea level.

In contrast to this, diaphragmatic breathing allows people to breathe regularly and rhythmically—and therefore avoid the pitfalls of hyperventilation—even during high levels of stress and anxiety. This is because the diaphragm muscle—as opposed to the chest muscles—is relatively insensitive to stress and anxiety. You can breathe comfortably and rhythmically with your diaphragm, even if the rest of your body is stressed and anxious. Diaphragmatic breathing is relatively easy once you learn how to do it, no matter how anxious you feel. Your immediate goal is to be able to breathe diaphragmatically when you feel stress. But your more ambitious goal is to reestablish diaphragmatic breathing as your normal, everyday, moment-to-moment method of breathing. That will make it much easier to utilize diaphragmatic breathing as an anxiety and stress relieving tool.

How to Learn Diaphragmatic Breathing:

Like any skill, learning to breathe with your diaphragm takes practice. The best times to practice are before you go to sleep and just after you wake up, although any time that you have a few minutes and something on which to lay down will work. Each practice should be only a few minutes in length, so it is best to practice several times a day. Wear clothing that won't constrict your waist movements. Lie down on your back.

Start by placing your right hand on your abdomen, so that the palm of your hand is right over your belly button. Place your left hand on your chest. As you breathe in, imagine that the air is bypassing your chest and moving directly into your abdomen, filling your stomach with breath. Your right hand should rise with the inhalation and fall with the exhalation; try to make it so that your left hand hardly moves at all. It is best to breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. When you breathe in, some people are helped with image of turning your belly into a watermelon. If you are having difficulty getting air into your belly, it often helps to place a rolled-up towel under the small of your back.

Make Your Exhalations Longer than Your Inhalations:

You will feel more relaxed if your exhalations are slightly longer than inhalations. There is a physiological reason for this. Inhalations stimulate the sympathetic nervous system, which is the part of your nervous system that speeds things up. Exhaling, on the other

hand, stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system. This is the part of your nervous system that slows things down. So, if you spend more time breathing out than in, you will spend more time slowing your nervous system.

There are two ways to make sure this happens. Some people count their breathing. They might breathe in to a count of “four,” and breathe out to a count of “five.” The specific numbers are less important than making sure that you are exhaling to a higher count than inhaling. Another way is to breathe comfortably, and pause for one or two seconds after you finish breathing out, but before you start to take in your next breath. So, the breathing pattern would be “in...out...pause...in...out...pause....”

Here are two helpful hints: First, be sure to exhale prior to breathing in. Lot’s of people fill up their lungs, then forget to empty them before taking another inhalation. Second, your exhalation will almost take care of itself automatically if you relax and let the weight of your hand on your belly help to push out the air. There is no need to force anything.

It is easiest to breathe diaphragmatically while you are lying on your back. When you are able to breathe this way lying down, gradually—over a period of several weeks—raise yourself into a sitting position. A recliner is perfect here. Otherwise, place more and more pillows under your shoulders and aim for the point where you can breathe diaphragmatically while sitting up straight. Once you are comfortable breathing in this position, it is easy to make the transition to standing and walking.

Do not force the breath. Allow the motion to be gentle and effortless. You are not trying to breathe deeply. Your goal is to find a comfortable, rhythm that feels natural. Once you catch on to the idea of diaphragmatic breathing, you will start to breathe easily, without any effort. Your breathing will help you become more rested and quiet.

When to Use Diaphragmatic Breathing:

The short answer is always. Your goal is to make diaphragmatic breathing your normal, default method of breathing. You would like to breathe using the same set of muscles that you used when you were born.

Diaphragmatic breathing helps you manage your anxiety in three ways: First, it reduces your stress-induced symptoms of hyperventilation; second, it helps your body feel more relaxed; and third, it provides you with a task (rhythmic diaphragmatic breathing) that helps you stay focused on the present.

Additionally, diaphragmatic breathing is especially helpful when you are on an airplane, preparing for a flight, or any other time you are experiencing anxiety and stress. Remember that uneven breathing produces symptoms of hyperventilation that add to your already high level of anxiety. Take a minute or two to monitor your breathing as you wait for your flight to be called, and after you settle into your seat on the plane.