

3 simple breathing techniques to de-stress your workday

Most of us take breathing for granted. As long as we're alive, it must be working, right? But *how* we breathe can make a big difference in how we feel and perform during our day.



Common work stressors — back-to-back meetings, an overwhelming to-do list, a tough conversation — can trigger poor breathing habits that can make us even *more* tense or anxious. And we might not even notice. Studies have shown that simply checking email can cause “screen apnea” — the unconscious holding of our breath or breathing shallowly as we tackle our inboxes.

The good news is that just as emotions can affect our breathing, our breathing can affect our emotions. That means that we can flip the script. Instead of letting bad breathing habits reinforce our negative emotions, we can breathe better to bring on *positive* emotions. A team of [researchers from Yale, Harvard, and the University of Michigan](#) found that changing how we breathe can change how we feel.

To improve your workdays, try integrating one or more of these breathing techniques into your routine:

1. Consistently breathe through your nose — not your mouth.

Your nose, unlike your mouth, filters and humidifies air, widens your blood vessels for better blood flow, and stimulates the parts of your brain that control basic emotions like fear and pleasure. [Some studies suggest](#) that nasal breathing makes you more responsive and more likely to retain information. To train yourself to breathe through your nose more:

- **Post a reminder to notice how you're breathing.** Sometimes mouth-breathing is a mindless habit that creeps in when you're staring at a screen all day. Place a sticky note on your computer to prompt you to pay attention to whether you shift to mouth-breathing as you check email or engage in deep screen time. Other times, stress may trigger mouth-breathing. If you feel anxious or are anticipating a stressful situation, take a moment to notice your breathing. Simply becoming aware of how you're breathing can help you refocus on breathing through your nose.
- **Try a few minutes of alternate-nostril breathing.** Adding this to your daily routine can help you become more conscious of how you breathe and reinforce a nose-breathing habit. Start by closing your right nostril with your right thumb. Breathe in through your left nostril. Before exhaling, close your left nostril with your right forefinger and release your thumb from your right nostril. Exhale through your right nostril. Then inhale, also through your right nostril. Close it again with your thumb, then exhale and inhale through your left nostril. Repeat this pattern for two to five minutes. You should feel more relaxed afterward — [according to Harvard Medical School](#), alternate-nostril breathing decreases blood pressure. Try it when you want to reset between meetings or when you find yourself focused on negative self-talk or unproductive rumination.

Note: Many people mouth-breathe at night. If you tend to snore, wake up frequently, or wake up with a dry mouth, you might want to seek medical advice.

2. Practice deeper abdominal breathing.

During a typical fast-paced workday, you probably tend to breathe shallowly, into your chest rather than into your belly. In contrast, when you breathe abdominally, you engage your diaphragm, a muscle just beneath the lungs that helps move air into and out of your lungs more efficiently. Abdominal breathing slows down your body, puts it into a more relaxed state, has been linked to emotions such as joy and gratitude, and helps increase lung capacity, which [studies indicate may lead to a longer life](#).

Try a few minutes of conscious abdominal breathing when you want to reestablish a sense of calm, when you're taking a break, or at the end of the workday. But how do you know you're engaging your diaphragm? With each inhale you should feel a stretching sensation in your stomach and see and feel your stomach rise and fall. Put one hand on the lower part of your belly beneath your ribcage and the other on your chest. As you inhale, you should be able to feel your belly expand first, then your chest.

3. Increase the length of your exhalations.

Your pulse speeds up when you inhale and slows down when you exhale, so increasing your exhale time is a good way to calm your heart rate. Exhaling slowly also engages your parasympathetic nervous system, which is responsible for rest and digestion.

The “4-7-8 technique,” based on yogic breath regulation exercises, is an easy way to slow down your overall breathing — and your exhales in particular. Simply breathe in (through your nose and from your abdomen!) for a mental count of four seconds, hold your breath for seven seconds — to allow the oxygen you've taken in to fully enter your bloodstream — and exhale for eight seconds (if the times seem too long, count more quickly, but keep the overall proportion of the times intact). Do this process four times in a row.

Some people find it helpful to do this technique before or after anxiety-inducing events or before meals and snacks. Others use it as a sleep aid.

For more on how to be healthier and more effective at work, see [6 tips to turn off your work brain and get better sleep](#) and [4 ways to manage the emotions holding you back at work](#).