

Practices that Retrain the ANS and Relieve Stress and Anxiety

Our brain/body's reaction to stress (Fight/Flight) is to do 2 things: shift to shallow, rapid breathing and tense certain muscles. However, the brain and body have a 2-way communication system so if we breathe slowly and deeply and relax certain muscles, the message goes to the brain that we're safe and it can shift to Rest/Repair where we can feel calm. These next 2 practices address this.

Diaphragmatic Breathing: Take a few relaxing breaths. Now place your hands on your lower abdomen. As you take the next inhale, bring the breath all the way down to your belly. Feel your belly push against your hands as it expands on the inhale and feel it contract on the exhale. Inhale, belly expands... exhale, belly contracts. On the next inhale, deepen it a bit and feel your belly expand and your rib cage widen. Then, on the exhale, the rib cage narrows and belly contracts. See if you can deepen the inhalation and the exhalation (about 5 seconds each). Continue to breathe this way for 10 breaths.

Quick Relaxer: Let your breath settle into a natural rhythm, close your eyes, and use auto-suggestion to invite key areas of your body that hold tension to relax and release the tension. Gently say to yourself the following suggestions:

Soften the eyes...
Loosen the jaw and mouth...
Drop the shoulders...
Soften the belly...
Let the hands go limp...

Keep repeating the suggestions until you feel the releasing of tension in those areas.

Thanks to the new neuroscience, we now know how to get our brains out of the amygdala and into the prefrontal cortex (where we can choose to respond, not react). We do this through "Focused Awareness Practices" that activate the prefrontal cortex and calm the amygdala. (Dan Siegel, MD's book *Mindsight*)

Focused Breath Awareness: Focus your attention on your breath. Notice the breath as it flows in and as it flows out... in and out. Don't try to change or control the breath, just notice the natural rhythm of your own breath. As you inhale and exhale you may want to focus on the sensation of the breath as it touches your nostrils, the rising and falling of your chest, or the expanding and contracting of your belly. Or you can say to yourself "inhale" on the inhalation and "exhale" on the exhalation. Whatever feels right for you. Continue to focus your awareness on the breath. When you notice your mind has wandered from the breath, gently bring your attention back to the breath. Continue to do this for 10 minutes.