

The Relaxing Breath

The most effective and time-efficient method I have found is the yoga-driven Relaxing Breath. This breathing exercise produces a pleasant altered state, which feels better and better with regular practice.

1. Sit or lie comfortable with your back straight, and place your tongue in what's called the yogic position: Touch the tip of your tongue to the back of your upper front teeth and slide it up until it rests on the ridge of tissue between your teeth and palate. Keep your tongue there for the duration of the exercise.
2. Exhale completely through the mouth, making an audible *whoosh* sound.
3. Close your mouth lightly. Inhale through your nose quietly to the count of 4.
4. Hold your breath for the count of 7.
5. Exhale audibly through your mouth to the count of 8. If you have difficulty exhaling with your tongue in place, try pursing your lips.
6. Repeat steps 3 through 5 three more times, for a total of four cycles. Breathe normally and observe how your body feels.

The key to doing this exercise is keeping to the ratio of 4-7-8, ensuring that your exhalation is twice as long as your inhalation. It doesn't matter how fast or slow you count; your pace will be determined by how long you can comfortably hold your breath. Practice this exercise at least twice a day, preferable when you first wake and before you go to sleep, or just before meditating. After a month of practice, you can increase the number of breath cycles to eight. This exercise can help in falling asleep. Experiment with using it in situations where you are angry, anxious, or upset or when you're experiencing physical discomfort or pain.

The Stimulating Breath

For times that call for a quick pick-me-up—when you grow drowsy on the highway, say, or feel that mid-afternoon slump at your desk—here’s a yogic exercise that works faster than a cup of coffee. Commonly known as the bellows breath, it is also called the Stimulating Breath.

1. Sit with your back straight and put your tongue in the yogic position, as described in the Relaxing Breath. Hold it there for the duration of the exercise.
2. Breathe in and out very rapidly through your nose, keeping your mouth lightly closed. Your inhalations and exhalations should be of equal length and as short as possible (as many as three cycles per second, if you can do that comfortably). You should feel muscular effort at the base of your neck just above the collarbones and diaphragm (try putting your hands on these spots to get a sense of movement). The action of your chest should be rapid and mechanical, like a bellows pumping air.

The first time you try this exercise, keep it up for no longer than 15 seconds, then breathe normally. Each time you do it, increase the duration by 5 seconds, if you can, until you work up to a full minute.

I recommend practicing every morning when you first get up. This is a real exercise, and you can expect to feel some fatigue in the muscles you are using at first. At the same time, you should feel a sense of greater alertness and less mental fatigue, an effect that will increase with practice.