

# FOOD & MOOD

## COACHING

### DIAPHRAGMATIC BREATHING

#### THE 'WHY' AND 'HOW'

#### WHY?

When we take a deep inhalation from the nose through to the navel, the diaphragm (a large muscle that traverses the torso at the base of the lungs) contracts and moves downwards, creating expansion within the abdominal cavity. This allows the lungs room to fully expand and fill with nourishing and revitalising air.

As we exhale from the navel all the way through the nose, the diaphragm relaxes, moves upwards and helps move the breath fully out of the lungs.

Diaphragmatic breathing, also known as yogic breathing or belly breathing, fully engages the stomach, intercostal and abdominal muscles, and diaphragm when breathing. It is a generally a very conscious breathing technique, meaning we intentionally and actively inhale deeply to engage the diaphragm.

We breath unconsciously all day, every day in our own natural/normal rhythm. For many of us, our natural breathing rhythm is shallower than diaphragmatic breathing and does not engage much of the diaphragm. In particular, during shallow breaths or 'chest' breaths, the diaphragm is not engaged at all.

Unlike deep breathing, shallow breathing does not facilitate a full inhale-exhale and involves the shoulder and neck muscles more than the abdomen and diaphragm. It is also known to have less than positive effects on our health, such as increasing blood pressure and over stimulation of our stress response.

When we breathe deeply, activating the diaphragm, a myriad of benefits arise, which are largely due to the effect deep breathing has on the vagus nerve.

#### The vagus nerve

This cranial nerve has been referred to as the superhighway to health as it innervates and affects many different parts of the body. It travels from the brain down the spine and branches out connecting with tissues, glands and organs along the way including the brain, heart, lungs, liver, stomach. Anatomically, the vagus nerve is the physical bridge that connects the brain and the gut.

When the vagus nerve is stimulated through diaphragmatic breathing, this parasympathetic part of the autonomic nervous system is activated and induces stimulating parasympathetic responses within the body such as rest, relaxation, digestion, de-stressing.



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### HOW?

1. Sit with spine erect, but relaxed (sit on a block or a cushion to assist this posture) OR  
If you are very new to breathing exercises you may find it much more comfortable to lie down on your back. Use a pillow or cushion(s) to support your head and lower back (placing one under your head and another under the back of your thighs, just above the knee crease).
2. Place one hand on your chest and the other on the stomach, just beneath the rib cage but above the diaphragm. We recommend you close the eyes to tune inward to your breath.
3. Gently close your lips and inhale through the nose.
4. Draw the air down past your chest and into your belly.
5. As you inhale, you should first feel your stomach expand and push up against the hand. Your chest will remain still as the belly fills.
6. Once the belly is full keep inhaling until your then your ribcage expands slightly up and outwards before, lastly your chest will rise as to completely your full breath.
7. Exhale through the nose, releasing the firstly air from the chest, then rib cage and then belly. As the belly empties, gently encourage the air out by actively contracting your abdominal muscles, drawing them downward towards the spine, and let the stomach fall downward while exhaling through pursed lips. Again, the chest should remain still.

### Important notes

1. Once comfortable practicing this exercise laying down, progress to a seated posture.
2. Keep head neck and shoulders relaxed, whether seated or laying down.
3. Practice for a few breaths through to a few minutes of breaths - 3-5 minutes is a great starting point.
4. Take note of how you feel before engaging in this practice and afterwards. Simply observe.

