



Breathing Techniques for Nervous System Regulation

There are two main branches of the autonomic nervous system – the sympathetic (fight, flight, freeze, fawn) and the parasympathetic (rest and digest). When the activity of these two branches is balanced, a child/young person feels regulated, calm and able to learn. Sometimes, children/young people can have a dominance of sympathetic or parasympathetic nervous system activation. This can be due to a whole host of potential reasons such as your child's particular physiology, diet, experiences of trauma, experiences of stress, sensory hyper- or hypo-sensitivity and many other possibilities.

Breathing practices can support the balance of the nervous system, bringing your child/young person into state of emotional and physical equilibrium. Some ideas are offered below.

Breathing through the Left Nostril

Block off the right nostril and take long, deep breaths through the left nostril in order to promote parasympathetic (rest and digest) stimulation.

Breathing through the Right Nostril

Block off the left nostril and take long, deep breaths through the right nostril in order to promote sympathetic stimulation, thus bringing energy into the body and reducing lethargy.

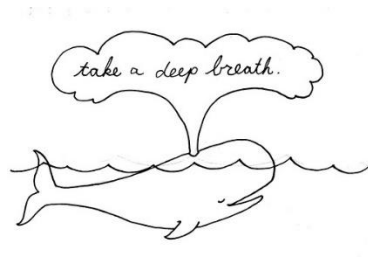
Lengthened Exhalation

Breathe in for the count of three and out for the count of five. This can be increased gradually, i.e. breathing in for the count of six and out for the count of nine. Making the exhalation longer than the inhalation stimulates the parasympathetic (rest and digest) branch of the nervous system.

Lengthened Inhalation

Breathe in for the count of five and out for the count of three. This can be increased gradually, i.e. breathing in for the count of nine and out for the count of six. Making the inhalation longer than the

exhalation stimulates the sympathetic branch of the nervous system, thus bringing energy into the body and reducing lethargy.



Coherent Breathing

Inhale for the count of six, then exhale for the count of six. Repeat this cycle for a few minutes. There are recordings available on iTunes to support you with this, such as the Coherent Breathing track by the Mindful Institute; a chime sounds every six seconds, signalling when to begin the inhalation and when to begin the exhalation.

Alternate Nostril Breathing

This practice involves inhaling and exhaling through alternate nostrils, remembering to breathe in from the same nostril from which one has just exhaled. Bend the first two fingers of the right hand into the palm, using the thumb to control the passage of breath through the right nostril and the ring (third) finger to control the passage of air through the left nostril. As your child/young person becomes more experienced, it is also possible to practise the breath without the use of the fingers, simply blocking off alternate nostrils at will.

Inhale through the left nostril with the right nostril blocked. Block the left nostril, open the right and exhale through the right. Inhale through the right nostril, block the right nostril, open and breathe out through the left. Continue in this way, building up to three minutes initially.



Ocean's Breath (Ujjayi Breathing)

The sound created by this breath is caused by the gentle contraction of the laryngeal muscles and partial closure of the glottis; it is reminiscent of the sound of the sea. This slow breath technique (ideally, two to four breaths per minute) has a balancing effect on the entire cardio-respiratory system, thus aiding the release of anxiety.

Begin by taking an inhalation that is slightly deeper than usual. With the mouth closed, exhale through the nose while constricting, or 'valving', the throat muscles. It can help to support your child/young person to imagine they are steaming up a mirror as though their mouth were open. If done correctly, the breath should indeed sound rather like the waves of the ocean. Once this has been mastered on the exhalation, the same method can be used for the inhalation.



Three-Part Breath

Three-part breathing is like filling the lungs as though filling a glass of water, from the bottom up, and is helpful for bringing one's self into a state of relaxation. Support your child/young person to begin by breathing slowly into the low belly (just below the belly button), then into the low chest (lower part of the rib cage) and finally into the low throat (just above the top of the sternum). The exhalation then begins in the low throat, moves to the low chest and finishes in the low belly. This breath can take a little practise and it might be helpful at first to rest one's hands on the individual positions on the body to feel the breath rising and falling in each place.

Kapalabhati

This is a rapid, rhythmic, and continuous breath which is excellent for lifting mood and energy levels. It is equal on the inhale and exhale with no pause in between, practised solely through the nostrils with the mouth closed. Begin on an exhale, expelling the breath powerfully through the nose by pressing the naval point back towards the spine. To inhale, the upper abdomen muscles relax, the diaphragm extends down and the breath will come in naturally. This breath should ideally contain around 2-3 cycles per second.

Lion's Breath

This is a good breathing technique for releasing tension and bringing energy into the body.

Take a deep inhalation through the nose. Then simultaneously open the mouth wide and stretch the tongue out, curling its tip down toward the chin, open the eyes wide, contract the muscles on the front of the throat, and exhale the breath slowly out through the mouth with a distinct 'ha' sound. The breath should pass over the back of the throat.

It is best to practise these breathing techniques with your child/young person when they are in a calm, regulated state. In this way, these practices will be stored in their procedural (body-based) memory ready for a time when they might need them.