

THE FIVE POSITIVES OF EFFECTIVE BREATHING EXERCISES

1. BREATHING BRINGS OXYGEN TO THE BRAIN SO YOU CAN THINK CLEARLY

During competition, we can have times when we get emotional or overwhelmed. It's actually part of our Acute Stress Response, also known as 'Fight or Flight' response. This can work against the focus, energy, and coordination needed to be successful in competition. Our heart rate increases, muscles become tight or tense, and our thoughts race, often to the worst case scenario. The key, then, in these moments is to turn our focus to our body and breathing is a primary tool to do this. By slowing down our breathing, we can slow our breathing down, bring oxygen to our brain, and think clearly about what our next step must be.

2. BREATHING BRINGS US INTO THE PRESENT MOMENT

In order to be at our best in competition, we need to be in the present. Sports demand that we are fully focused in the moment in order to be successful. If we are too stuck in the successes or failures of the past or too concerned about future outcomes, we cannot fully give the present moment the focus it deserves and demands. Giving attention and awareness to our breathing and genuinely feeling our breath enter through our mouth or nose and fully filling our lungs can bring us back to the moment. And once we are back in the moment, we can fully tackle the task in front of us.

3. WHEN YOU NEED ENERGY, YOU CAN FOCUS ON THE INHALE

While generally we may focus on breathing as a way to bring about calm and focus, that is not always its only purpose or benefit. Sometimes we may be in situations either in training or competition where our energy is low. Low energy may have us feeling sluggish, unfocused, tired, or discouraged. Changing our breathing can help re-ignite our energy to fight through these challenging moments. By focusing on our inhalation and breathing deeply but then quickly expelling the breath, we get our heart pumping more quickly and get blood flow and energy out to our muscles. This can be accomplished quickly and easily.

- **Breath in deeply for 5 seconds and then out quickly (3 Sets)**

4. WHEN YOU NEED TO CALM DOWN, YOU CAN FOCUS ON THE EXHALE

There is a natural element of stress in competition. As the stress hits, both the mind and emotions can speed up and feel overwhelming. There will be times when, as an athlete, you need to slow things down and refocus. And breathing can be a tool to help with calming down both body and mind by slowing the breath down on both the inhale and exhale.



- **Breathe in slowly for 5 seconds and emphasise slowing down the breath on the exhale by breathing out slowly for 6 seconds.**

5. BREATHING IS THE START TO FLOW

On those perfect days when you feel unstoppable athletes report being in a state 'flow', this can simply be explained as the exact moment when both our skills and the challenge of the moment are perfectly in balance. However, the reality is that these flow states are rare and optimising our performance is frequently about compensating and adjusting.

Dialling in to our breathing: being present in the moment, steadying our pulse, and loosening and relaxing our muscles, can help athletes get into a state of high performing.

WHERE TO START?

DIAPHRAGMATIC BREATHING

Diaphragmatic breathing has a host of benefits for the body and mind. Most importantly, it activates our parasympathetic nervous system which is our body's rest and digestive mechanism. It conserves energy, slows the heart rate and generally relaxes us. Diaphragmatic breathing helps us to feel grounded, calm and focused.

HOW TO DO IT:

1. Sit upright in a chair with your back supported or on the floor with your knees bent.
 2. Close your eyes and focus in on your breath, ensuring your shoulders draw away from your ears.
 3. Breathe in deeply through your nose and allow your abdomen to rise like a balloon being filled.
- Repeat for 5-10 minutes.

You can also try it lying on the floor with your feet pushed up against a wall. The more you practise diaphragmatic breathing, the more natural it will become.

BENEFITS:

- Relaxes and restores the body
- Boosts the immune system
- Improves circulation
- Calms the nervous system
- Increases breath capacity

WHEN TO DO IT:

- Before training as part of your warm-up
- Ahead of a big competition, event, match or run
- During times of stress and when you want to feel calmer



- When feeling physical tension in the body

LONG EXHALE BREATHING

When you exhale even a few counts longer than your inhale, the vagus nerve (running from the neck down through the diaphragm) sends a signal to your brain to turn up your parasympathetic nervous system and turn down your sympathetic nervous system.

HOW TO DO IT:

1. Lay on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat.
2. Place one hand on your abdomen and take a few relaxed breaths.
3. Lengthen out the inhalation and exhalation until they're of equal length and progressively increase the length of your exhale until you have a 1:2 ratio.
4. Continue for 5-10 minutes.

BENEFITS:

- Reduces anxiety
- Helps you get better sleep

WHEN TO DO IT:

- When you can't sleep
- Any anxious moments
- The night before a big race or competition

4-7-8 BREATHING.

The 4-7-8 breathing technique is a breathing pattern that is based on an ancient yogic technique called pranayama, which helps practitioners gain control over their breathing. The numbers 4-7-8 refer to the counts when breathing in, holding your breath and exhaling.

HOW TO DO IT:

1. Start by sitting up straight in a comfortable position.
2. Expand your diaphragm and slowly inhale through your nose for a count of 4.
3. Hold your breath for a count of 7.
4. Open your mouth slightly, and exhale for 8 counts.
5. Repeat this cycle 4 times.

WHEN TO DO IT:

This exercise is subtle when you first try it, but gains in power with repetition and practice. Do it at least twice a day. You cannot do it too frequently. Do not do more than four breaths at one time for the first month of practice. Later, if you wish, you can extend it to eight breaths. If you feel a little lightheaded when you first breathe this way, do not be concerned; it will pass.

BENEFITS:

- Calms the nervous system
- Lowers cortisol (stress hormone).
- Helps you to fall asleep
- Calms you down and helps to control irrational thoughts
- Helps regulate blood pressure and heart rate



SIMPLE QUICK TIME LIMITED BREATHING EXERCISES

These simple mini-relaxations are quick stress busters you can use when you are short on time, and need to breath. These quick techniques can ease you into performance situations, enabling you to become relaxed, ready and, present.

1 MIN

1. Breathe in.
2. Pause for a count of three.
3. Breathe out.
4. Pause for a count of three.
5. Continue to breathe deeply for one minute, pausing for a count of three after each inhalation and exhalation.

2 MIN

Count down slowly from 10 to 0. With each number, take one complete breath, inhaling and exhaling. For example, breathe in deeply, saying "10" to yourself. Breathe out slowly. On your next breath, say "nine", and so on. If you feel lightheaded, count down more slowly to space your breaths further apart. When you reach zero, you should feel more relaxed. If not, go through the exercise again.

APPLE WATCH

The Breathe app on the Apple Watch encourages you to set aside a few minutes a day to relax and focus on your breathing.

The Breath app allows you to:

- Set the duration of a breathe session between one and five minutes.
- Change how frequently you get breathe reminders, mute breathe reminders for the day, change your breathe rate, and choose haptics settings.

