MindfulnessUK
Teacher Training Centre

Practice: Abdominal Breathing

Key learning:

To become aware of the breath.

Through awareness, change spontaneously arises

Overview

If you imagine a little baby lying in their cot fast asleep, you'll see the gentle rise and fall of the abdomen as it breathes in and out. Somewhere along the line many of us have left this relaxed pattern of breath behind. There may be several reasons for this which may include:

poor posture, rounding the shoulders and collapsing the front of the body

increasing stress in people's lives and a corresponding rise in associated hormones

sedentary lifestyles, weakening muscles used in effective breathing techniques

emphasis on tightening the stomach muscles

a history of asthma

tight and restrictive clothing

Clearly, without this oxygen and movement we become susceptible to illness and disease. We have an increase in circulating stress hormones which, in turn, promote upper chest breathing and the cycle is perpetuated.

What is abdominal breathing?

Abdominal breathing is also known as diaphragmatic breathing. The diaphragm is the large muscle located between the chest and the abdomen. When it contracts the dome is forced downwards, displacing the abdominal organs and causing the abdomen to expand. This causes a negative pressure within the chest forcing air into the lungs quite naturally. The negative pressure also pulls blood into the chest improving the venous return to the heart. To breathe out, the diaphragm domes upwards, creating more space in the abdomen for the organs to return to their original position, flattening the belly and air is pushed out of the lungs.

Interesting facts about breathing

One nostril works at breathing while the other rests and clears out debris. They change over in a regular cycle, with alternate nostrils blocked. If we sleep on our side, the lower nostril gets blocked and the body turns at intervals to alternate the nostrils. Irregular breathing patterns can cause too much or too little turning in bed.

Exercise helps vibrate the sinus cavities and keep them clear, when the heel strikes the ground in running or brisk walking and through greater blood circulation.

In a healthy person the breath will alternate between nostrils about every two hours. Because most of us are not in optimum health, this time period varies considerably between people and can reduce our vitality. According to the yogis, when the breath continues to flow in one nostril for more than two hours, as it does with most of us, it will have an adverse effect on our health.

Scientists have discovered that the nasal cycle corresponds with brain function. The electrical activity of the brain was found to be greater on the side opposite the less congested nostril. The right side of the brain controls creative activity, while the left side controls logical verbal activity. The research showed that when the left nostril was less obstructed, the right side of the brain was predominant. Test subjects were indeed found to do better on creative tests. Similarly when the right nostril was less obstructed the left side of the brain was predominant. Test subjects did better on verbal skills.

Resources:

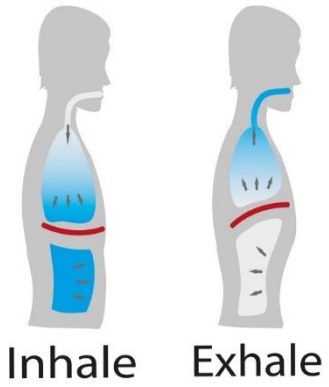
Mats/ chairs, bolsters, blankets, cushions, clock, bells / singing bell, handout for client, recording for client to have for home practice.

Benefits:	**Potential Difficulties Arising:**
To experience the habitual pattern of breathing Allow the space for breathing to change optimally Anchoring in the present moment Switching on the parasympathetic nervous system	Hyperventilation causes loss of carbon dioxide which results in the blood becoming more alkaline, adversely affecting the transport of various important elements in the blood and may result in: cerebral vasoconstriction – mental fuzziness, memory lapses, headaches, poor sleep, bad dreams cerebral glucose deficit coronary vasoconstriction – chest wall tightness or pain, palpitations

	cardiac arrhythmias too little oxygen in the cells results in lowered cellular energy production bronchial constriction – exacerbation of asthma gut smooth muscle constriction – exacerbation of IBS platelets clump together more - increased risk of blood clots calcium imbalance magnesium deficiency muscle fatigue, spasm and pain loss of CO2 directly stimulates neuronal activity, with increased sensory and motor discharges – muscle tension and spasm, heightened perceptions higher incidence of allergies due to histamine excess – sweaty palms and flushed face. It is very common – figures suggest that 40% of people attending their GP are hyperventilating. Light-headedness can be experienced during this practice. Nausea Increased anxiety
Guidance:	
Abdominal Breathing Exercise Ensure you are sitting comfortably in a position which you think you can happily maintain for 10 minutes or so. Use blocks, blankets or sit on a chair or against a wall to ensure your comfort if necessary Ideally, keep your back elevated and front of the body open. Relax the shoulders and belly Start by closing the eyes and focusing in on your breath	

Place right hand on your chest and the left on your stomach just below the ribcage

As you inhale through your nose, feel if your stomach expands into your hand. As you exhale, you may feel the belly contract a little and the air leave the body.



Pay attention to the movement of the left hand, then the right, then the relationship between the two hands.

Move the hand that is moving the least down to your lap and leave the hand that is moving the most on the body.

After a couple of minutes, allow both hands to rest on the lap. Now how do you feel?

Repeat at your own pace of breathing, we're all different, for a few minutes

Then sit quietly in reflection as you feel your breathing's own, natural rhythm.

Inquiry

Ask about the participants' experience of the practice and acknowledge and explore any benefits and potential difficulties which come up.

Examples of useful questions to start the inquiry process with the client:

During or after the practice ask them to notice:

Did your breathing change?

What was your experience?

Did you notice what happened to your thoughts?

How do you feel now?

Is this a useful exercise for daily life?