

# Change Your Breathing, Change Your Life

Focusing on your own breathing can have a significant impact on your well-being and stress levels, awakening your mind and body while also lowering blood pressure and reducing anxiety. Here are seven big health reasons to stop and exhale.

1

## STIMULATE BRAIN GROWTH

When controlled breathing is used during meditation, it can actually increase the size of the brain. Meditation that involves focusing one's attention on the breath has the capacity to increase cortical thickness, according to a 2005 Harvard study.

2

## IMPROVE HEART RATE VARIABILITY

Low heart rate variability (the interval of time between heartbeats) has been associated with a greater risk of heart attacks. A 2012 study found that non-yogic deep breathing practices can improve heart rate variability in healthy test subjects.

3

## LOWER STRESS LEVELS

If your breathing is shallow, your body is probably in "fight-or-flight" mode reacting to stress, says Ardito. Taking a minute or two to sit quietly and focus on your breathing helps your body achieve a state of calm, shifting from functioning out of the sympathetic nervous system (characterized by drive, flight and ambition) to the parasympathetic nervous system, which puts the body in a state of "relax and receive."

4

## ALLEVIATE ANXIETY & NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

Many of us have felt short of breath during times of panic or stress. This is the body's natural reaction to a perceived threat, says Ardito. Focusing on breathing can help to alleviate anxiety, symptoms of depression, and other negative emotions. Last year, Australian researchers found that deep breathing 30 minutes before a performance effectively reduced musicians' performance anxiety.

5

## REDUCE TESTING ANXIETY

A 2007 study published in the journal *Teaching and Learning in Medicine* found that students who practiced deep-breathing meditation before an exam reported perceiving less anxiety, self-doubt and concentration loss than the students who did not practice deep breathing.

6

## LOWER BLOOD PRESSURE

Taking slow, deep breaths for just a few minutes a day could help to lower your blood pressure, according to Dr. David Anderson of the National Institutes of Health. While researchers have observed that slow, deep breaths can help to relax and temporarily dilate blood vessels, they don't yet know precisely why deep breathing has the capacity to cause a lasting drop in blood pressure, Anderson tells NBC News.

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## ALTER GENE EXPRESSION

A recent study found that mind-body practices like yoga, meditation and deep breathing exercises can trigger the body's "relaxation response," a physiological state of deep relaxation that alters the way it responds to stress. This state can counter the negative effects of stress for people with health conditions like anxiety and hypertension, by actually altering the expression of genes in the immune system.

