



WORKING WELL

Just Breathe, Counselor

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A great way to destress from the pressures of the law profession is to practice breathing exercises. Not only can breathing exercises help manage stress, but they may also improve one's overall health, reduce muscle tension, pain, and symptoms of anxiety and depression.



Indeed, studies have shown a neurological link between respiration and focus, and that the daily practice of breathing techniques produces optimal levels of noradrenaline in the brain and heightened ability to focus. Further, depending on the type of breathing technique used, different exercises may increase a person's energy or provide relaxation. Breathing techniques can also serve as a part of a meditation practice, help to ground the mind,

and allow for growth in areas of creativity, expression, and learning.

For thousands of years, martial artists, yogis and certain cultures and religions have practiced breathing techniques for the strength of both body and mind. Breathing is the energy behind our movement, posture, strength, balance, and control—that if properly used can enhance multiple aspects of a person's life.

You can practice these exercises just about anywhere—including in the office, the courthouse, home, park, on transportation or even in a parked car between stressful appointments! Anchoring a breathing exercise to a well-established habit can help make it part of a person's everyday routine. For example, you can attach a breathing routine to a morning or evening ritual (e.g. after each time you shower, include a five-minute breathing routine).

There are several techniques available; just a few favorites are explained below. If you enjoy these and find them beneficial, start exploring more extensive breathing work with an instructor and learn to combine them with daily stretching and meditation. (Be sure to check with your doctor before starting any new exercise routine or breathing technique.)

Keep in mind that deep breathing provides more oxygen and greater lung capacity as opposed to being trapped in shallow breathing. There is chest breathing, which we use typically during exertion, stressful moments and exercise; and diaphragmatic breathing (also known as belly breathing) which is more effective for relaxation and repair.

Belly Breathing

Belly breathing is excellent for inducing relaxation. This is focused abdominal breathing that allows for deeper and productive breathing. Simply inhale deeply and allow your belly to expand, then exhale and allow your belly to deflate.

The best way to understand what you are doing is to lie down on your back on the floor and place one hand on your chest, the other on your belly. Inhale deeply and consciously choose to push the hand on your belly up and down with each breath, rather than the hand on your chest. Adjust as necessary to ensure the correct hand (the one on your belly) is rising and falling so that you are using your diaphragm to breathe most deeply.

Once you understand these mechanics, you can belly breathe from a seated or even standing position. This type of breathing not only reduces stress and enhances calmness, but it increases

the oxygen supply to your brain, decreases heart rate and muscle tension, stimulates the nervous system, and strengthens the supporting ligaments of your diaphragm.

Simple Counting Breaths

There are numerous ways you can use the practice of counting breaths to help with stress or increase energy. As lawyers, our minds are very likely to wander to work, so providing a count to each breath helps counteract that by providing a focus to what we are doing. For instance, you may choose to do a simple 10 count—inhaling on the odd numbers, exhaling on the even numbers. Try to repeat that sequence 10 times, or you may set a timer.

Do not worry about the length of breath or anything other than staying still and breathing deeply and consistently, like a clock to a count. Another option is to count up to 10, then reverse the count from 10 back to one. After a few times of this, you should feel refreshed and ready to be more present, productive and focused.

Box Breathing

Box breathing is helpful to quickly relax during a particularly stressful moment. It is also a type of counting deep breathing exercise that calms the nervous system by slowing down the heart and allowing the CO₂ to build up in the blood and produce a feeling of calm.

Here's how to do it: Inhale slowly for four seconds, hold in the breath for four seconds, exhale slowly for four seconds, hold for four seconds, and repeat the process—creating a box of sorts.

You may do this same sequence with five or six seconds as well should you have the capacity to. Just be sure to keep the number the same for all four parts of the sequence. 4-4-4-4 or 5-5-5-5, etc.

One-to-Two Ratio Breathing

Another good option is the one-to-two ratio of counting breaths. With this technique, exhale for twice as long as you inhale. Try inhaling for four to five seconds, and then exhale slowly for 8 to 10 seconds. Select the number your body is comfortable with but feel the most benefit from. It is so important to fully empty the lungs before replenishing it with each next breath.

This form of counting and regulating your breaths is a form of pranayama, used in yoga. It helps reduce anxiety and provide calmness; it's a great thing to do right before sleep.

Pursed Lip Breathing

The American Lung Association supports the pursed lip breathing technique for improved heart function and to help make one's lungs more efficacious. It is especially good during times of shortness of breath, as it is designed to rid the lungs of

accumulated stale air, increase oxygen levels and help the diaphragm to more efficient breathing. It is particularly good for people suffering from asthma and other chronic lung conditions.

The pursed lip technique reduces the number of breaths one takes and keeps the airways open longer so that more air can flow in and out of the lungs. Similar to ratio breathing, with this technique breathe in through your nose and breathe out at least twice as long through your mouth—but do so with pursed (or puckered) lips. The pursed lips help one to extend the length of the exhalation.

Alternate Nostril Breathing

This form of breathing can increase your energy as well as calm you. Also known as Nadi Shodhana, this practice involves alternating the breath entering your body from each nostril. With this method, sit up tall and with good posture. First, place your finger over your right nostril and inhale through the left nostril. Second, close the left nostril with a finger and exhale through the right nostril. Then inhale through the right nostril, close it with your finger and exhale through the left nostril. Continue doing this switch of nostrils for each inhale and exhale. Be sure to fully inflate and expand the lungs during each breath.

The reasoning in yoga behind this method is to balance the right and left sides of the brain and produce a more stable, pure state of mind.

Bellows Breath

Another breathing technique to promote increased energy is known as bellows breath. Also known as the “breath of fire” in yoga, it is one of the more challenging breathing exercises. This form of breathing stimulates the diaphragm, clarifies the mind, and energizes the body. Breathing masters describe it as the way to “clear away the clouds.” From a seated position, with a long, tall spine—this technique requires one to take quick, short breaths inhaling and exhaling vigorously for 10–15 seconds. Then one would take a 15–30 second break while breathing normally. This would be repeated several times.

Because this technique helps with energy, it is recommended to practice this one first thing in the morning.

Breathe In...Breathe Out...

Our breath is something that carries us through every moment of every day; we inhale between approximately 10–20 times a minute and 15,000–30,000 a day! Why not take an opportunity to use your breath for greater health, productivity, and focus? With the high stresses of the legal profession, it is paramount attorneys find ways to manage their well-being. Next time you are faced with a difficult situation or stressful work environment, perhaps it's time to pause and take a breath...■