



2. Breathe your way to calm

7/11 Breathing exercise

In his book, 'The Relaxation Response', expert Dr Herbert Benson showed that deep diaphragmatic breathing switches the autonomic nervous system from a state of high alert and stress to a state of calm.

This response **lowers blood pressure and heart rate, relaxes the muscular system and increases blood flow** to the brain's prefrontal cortex, giving us greater access to logical thought and decision-making capabilities. It is a simple and effective tool for **maintaining your composure during difficult conversations/situations**, and is one that is now being used by a number of GPs, for example, who are teaching it to patients with COPD, and also nurses in helping patients calm down prior to taking blood pressure readings.

Called **7/11 breathing**, this simple, easy technique works well in calming the mind and body. There are a few key elements to this breathing technique, which include:

TOP TIPS

- 1) Ensure that you are breathing from your diaphragm rather than your chest (your stomach should be rising and falling as you're doing the exercise).
- 2) Breathing out for longer than you're breathing in for – this helps calm the sympathetic nervous system and, therefore, the mind and body. The technique is called 7/11 (*7 seconds breathing in & 11 seconds breathing out*); however, you need to find the count that is right for you. For example, this may be 3/5 or 5/7; whatever works best for you. (You might want to increase the numbers over time)
- 3) Counting mentally whilst you're breathing helps to calm the emotional brain (Amygdala response) whilst connecting with the rational brain (Cortex). Counting in your mind helps distract you from any unhelpful thoughts.

HOW TO DO IT

- Before you start, it can be useful to rate your levels of stress/anxiety on a scale of 1-10.
- Now, settle yourself comfortably with your hands either in your lap or on your stomach. Close your eyes and let the muscles around them relax.
- Concentrate on becoming aware of your feet on the floor, your arms and legs where they are resting, and your back straight.
- Let your shoulders relax and take in a really deep breath, noticing your stomach expanding, and then breathe out – for longer than your "in" breath – noticing your stomach retract.
- Continue doing this, knowing that you will relax more with each breath.
- Concentrate on the counting – if your mind wanders, bring it gently back and feel the calm flowing into you.
- Continue with this for 5 or 10 breaths.
- After the exercise, rate your levels of stress/anxiety again on a scale of 1-10 and notice the difference.

The aim is to do this as often as possible to build a resilience 'reserve' and become more conscious of your breathing during the day; in particular, during times of challenge, ensuring that you're breathing correctly can be really helpful. This exercise can be very useful for people with asthma or breathing issues as well as children, although most likely counting along the lines of 3/5.

