

Oxygenating your business brain

Your most complex organ, the powerhouse of your nervous system, the brain consumes 20% of the body's oxygen supply. Limit that supply and life quickly becomes unfocused and foggy. Does that describe how you have been feeling during this lockdown? That's perfectly normal in these uncertain times.

When we become anxious or stressed – and who hasn't in these challenging times – the brain sends signals to other parts of the body to prepare to fight or flee. The body's response is to send stress hormones (adrenaline and cortisol) to prepare our body for flight.

Focussed, sharp, clear thinking, creative.

What am I describing?

A successful entrepreneur?

Correct – also the benefits of a well oxygenated

brain.

Our millennia-old brain cannot differentiate between anxiety – an emotional state in response to an anticipated threat, and fear – an emotional state in response to a perceived immediate threat. This means that worrying over when we will eventually be able to launch that new product or service and being aggressed by getting too close to someone in the supermarket queue elicits the same response from the body.

One of the physical impacts of our body's stress response is that our breathing pattern is affected. We tend to take faster, shallower breaths as our body takes on extra oxygen ready to flee but this is not helpful when we are sitting at our desk stuck in an anxiety loop.

Breathing is both voluntary and involuntary and that is why, by voluntarily slowing down our breathing rate, we can bring our body out of fight and flight into rest and digest mode.

Now more than ever we need to find time during the day to carve out moments of calm and to oxygenate our body and brain fully. It's simple to do, can take as little as two minutes and delivers instant results.

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Chest v belly breathing

To counter the faster, shallower upper chest breaths we need to focus on taking deep belly breaths. Named belly breathing because when our diaphragm – our main breathing muscle – contracts it displaces our belly to allow air to reach our lower lungs. Belly breathing, or diaphragmatic breathing, enables our lungs to fully expand and maximise oxygen uptake.

Practising deep breathing

1. Set a timer for two minutes on your phone
2. Sit comfortably in a chair with your feet flat on the ground.
3. Relax your belly area, release any tension from your neck and shoulders, loosen your jaw. Close your eyes if you are comfortable doing that.
4. Breathing in and out through your nose, count in your head, and aim for a 1:2 ratio of in-breaths to out breaths.
5. Everyone is different, so it could be 3 counts in, 6 counts out, or 4:8 etc. Build up slowly to longer exhales.
6. Focus on your belly moving in and out and keep your mind busy counting.
7. When the timer rings, continue to breathe deeply and assess how relaxed and calm you feel.
8. Repeat several times a day so that it becomes second nature to drop into deep belly breathing and find your place of calm.

Apart from breaking the stress loop by using our breath to calm our body, there are many other benefits from practising deep belly breathing on a regular basis. The feeling of calm that pervades our body after just two minutes enhances our mood, connects us to our self and gives us the clarity and focus to resume our work.

Releasing tension build up in the body and learning to relax has been shown to have a positive impact on sleep. A good night's sleep is vital to waking up with an empowered, focussed brain, ready to take on the creative challenges and rewards of another business day.

Bridget Rooth is an entrepreneur, trainer, language buff and lifetime adventurer. She has worked all over the world, including 12-year stints in both France and China. Bridget recently retrained and combined her two loves of business & wellness in her company MindSteadyGo. She now designs and delivers wellness workshops in organisations as well as running stress-busting retreats in the UK and abroad.

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