



MEMBER UPDATE

ReFresh

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This week...

Mindful Breathing Challenge

Do you feel like you are just hanging in there until Spring Break?

It is no surprise that you could be feeling this way. Your nervous system has been under substantial strain the past two years, never mind the expected stress of returning to session after Winter Break.

Using the **micro habit tips** from the [first ReFresh of 2022](#), challenge yourself to practice mindful breathing to calm your nervous system.

- Set a goal to do mindful breathing for 30 seconds, perhaps one to three times a day
- Link mindful breathing to something you do regularly, e.g. when you return from the bathroom, after a zoom call, or... you decide!

- When you finish the breathing exercise, link the achievement to a positive emotion, e.g. think to yourself, *“That feels better”* or simply *“I have done something positive for myself”*

Mindful breathing, particularly when it is deep with long exhales, stimulates your vagus nerve – the longest nerve in your body. It connects your brain to many important organs throughout the body, including the intestines, stomach, heart, and lungs. Deep breathing has also been shown to reduce anxiety and increase the parasympathetic system.

The vagus nerve is a key part of your parasympathetic ‘rest and digest’ nervous system. It influences your breathing, digestive function, and heart rate, all of which can have a significant impact on your mental health. To learn more about your vagal system and its importance, read this [previous issue of ReCharge](#).

How to stay focused for 30 seconds of breathing

One of the practices of mindfulness is mindful breathing. It is an exercise in keeping your attention purely focused on breathing. Even during a short mindful breathing exercise, your mind may wander: it is important to simply acknowledge that your thoughts have drifted away, and to bring your focus back to the breath. Treat yourself with kindness and compassion, as a wandering mind is normal. The more you bring focus back to your breath – and the more often you practice – ***the easier it will get.***

I find mindfulness easier when I have something specific to focus on in my breathing. If you need a prompt or a visualization technique, consider the ideas below.

Challenge yourself in the next couple weeks before the break, and notice if mindful breathing has made a difference to your nervous system. Ideally, you will enter Spring Break a little calmer to better enjoy your time off!

Mindful Breathing Ideas:

1. **Breathe as if your whole body is breathing.** Breathe in and feel your entire body inflate with air; breathe out and feel your whole body soften.
2. **Breathe into different parts of your body.** Starting at your head and working your way down to your feet, breathe air into each part of your body. Inhale, and feel that part of your body expand – exhale, and let that part of your body soften.
3. **Think words or phrases as you breathe in, then out.** It can be as easy as thinking “Breathing In, In, In” (as you inhale), then “Breathing Out, Out, Out” (as you exhale).

Alternatively, say to yourself, “Centre” as you inhale and “Relax” as you exhale. Play around to find the words or phrases that work for you.

4. **Count your breaths:** Breathe in, breathe out, and count 1. Breathe in, breathe out, and count 2. If you get distracted, simply start again. Count to 5, or 10, and start again.
5. **Where do you feel your breath most:** As you breathe in and out, focus on where you feel the breath most. Is it at the opening of your nostrils? Back of the throat? Expansion of the chest or stomach? Focus on that feeling and sensation.
6. **Rolling breath:** Breathe in and feel your shoulders expand, then ribs, then stomach – breathe out and feel the stomach soften, ribs soften, and then finally your shoulders soften.
7. **Visualized breathing:** Picture something in your mind that flows with your breathing. For example, picture an ocean wave washing onto the beach as you exhale, and watch the wave pull back on the inhale. Or greet the breath as it arrives as you swing back on a swing, and breathe out as you push forward on the swing.
8. **Breath Retention:** Inhale through your nose. Hold for 3 seconds, inhale a bit more, and release out of your mouth. Do this four times, return to normal breathing for 5 breaths and then repeat from the beginning. Over time, you will be able to hold your breath for longer between inhales, and possibly add a third inhale before the big exhale.
9. **Ocean Breathing:** (This is a really good one to stimulate the vagus nerve!) Inhale through your nose, then open your mouth and exhale slowly, making a “HA” sound. Try this a few times, then close your mouth, keeping the back of your throat in the same shape you used to make the “HA,” as you exhale through the nose.

For breathing exercises to calm anxiety – check out this [VeryWellHealth article](#).

Sources

[Calm.com](#)

Yoga Journal | [The Science of Breathing](#)

If you would like to contribute or have ideas about what you would like to see in the ReFresh series, we would love to hear from you: contact rochelle@bcpvpa.bc.ca.