

Breathing Techniques To Resolve Patient Issues

When a patient of mine who has practiced yoga for nearly 30 years, told me that she was experiencing panic attacks, I was surprised. "After so many years of training, can't you turn them off?" I asked. "I do turn them off, but only temporarily," she replied. This patient is in excellent physical shape, but when I inadvertently caused her some pain when I was searching for acupuncture points and she tried to use her breathing skills to relieve the pain, her problem became clear to me. There was a disconnect between my patient's breathing and the discomfort she was trying to control.

It's ironic: You may practice certain breathing techniques daily, but they may not help you in a real-life situation that you find emotionally upsetting. Imagine, for example, that you have to do some public speaking, but when you're at the podium, stage fright takes over, and you cannot speak. So you start breathing—and for a moment you do feel better, but when you stop focusing on your breath and try to concentrate on what you are saying, your stage fright comes back.

If you've ever encountered a problem like this despite having practiced breathing techniques for years, you may be confused. Why don't those techniques help you in that real-life situation? To understand the reason, let's look at how you do your breath training:



Every day, you dedicate a certain period of time to your exercises. But when you set a definite time for training, you train your mind to treat the breathing technique that you are working on as a separate event. Then, when you're not training and an unwanted emotion suddenly occupies your mind, you try to get rid of that feeling by using your breathing technique. The technique, however, is only partially or temporarily successful because the unwanted feeling and your effort to shut it down are competing for your attention.

Granted, the better your breathing skills are, the more successful you will be at pushing an unwanted emotion away. But when you stop applying your effort, the emotion will come back. This occurs because, to your mind, your unwanted emotion and your breathing technique are two independent processes, and you may have great difficulty connecting them. There are quite a few ways to solve this problem, but one of the easiest and most effective approaches is to directly intervene in the very breathing that activates your bothersome emotion.

Connecting Breathing And Emotions

Imagine two children watching a horror movie on TV. They are enthralled by what is happening on screen. They seem to be calm, but then something scary suddenly occurs—and you can hear the kids gasp. Why do they gasp?

Try watching a horror movie yourself, and observe what is going on with your breathing in relation to the emotions you are experiencing. Whenever something scary happens, you feel a sudden, powerful urge to inhale deeper, and you feel your fright appearing almost simultaneously with that gasp. If the difference between the emotional state that you were in just before your fright appeared and the frightened state that replaces it is great enough, you will hear yourself gasp. If your gasp is not audible, however, it does not mean that it does not occur. Any change in your emotional state always starts with an inhalation.

Place yourself mentally back at that imaginary podium where you experienced stage fright. As soon as you see all those people in the audience—which happens in a fraction of a second—your emotional state immediately changes. But, observe carefully how this change occurs, paying attention to the shift in your breathing. You'll notice that a specific inhalation triggers your emotional change. By zeroing in on that inhalation, you'll be able to disrupt the unwanted emotion's formation.

Disrupting An Emotion

Try watching a horror movie, again, but this time, when you see something scary, inhale more than you feel the need to during the very inhalation that initializes your fright. Do you feel scared? Your fear should diminish if it does not entirely disappear. Repeat this exaggerated inhalation a few more times during the movie whenever something frightening happens. If when you do this again you still feel some fear, inhale even more the next time. If you over-inhale deeply enough, you will turn off your fear completely. Yes, completely.

Because an inhalation triggers every feeling, you can use this technique to undo the inhalation's function, thus turning off any unwanted emotion. The only difficulty lies in catching the very inhalation that turns on a feeling.

Catching The Activating Inhalation

It may seem impossible catch and interfere with the inhalation that activates a feeling, but try imagining the following scenario. Your boss has asked you to explain something work-related to him, and as you repeat your explanation twice and then three times, you realize that he doesn't understand what you are saying, and that irritates you. You feel how this situation triggers your anger, and you instinctively suppress it with a deep inhalation. Assuming that something like this has happened to you, it shows that you can intervene in a feeling's formation despite how quickly it happens.

If you ever have successfully repressed an emotion, however, you may have noticed that you felt stressed later on. That's because you intervened in the emotion's formation at a later stage—after the activating inhalation. First, you felt that you were getting angry, and only then did you repress the anger. But if you intervene in the feeling's formation during the initial inhalation, you don't just suppress it—you disrupt it. And you won't feel stress afterward. To make such interventions your second nature, your mind will need some training.

Practicing The Technique

Practice on situations from your memory and imagination first, until you can disrupt most emotions that you can remember or imagine. Eventually, your mind will recognize the inhalation that turns on an emotion, and you will inhale more than you feel the need to, habitually disrupting the formation of the emotions that you've trained your mind to recognize as unwanted. In real-life situations, you'll still need to put some effort into disrupting unwanted feelings, but you'll no longer be trying to push them out of your consciousness. Instead, you'll be manipulating breathing, which is one of the primary tools that your mind and body use to create those emotions.

If my panic-attack-prone patient were to use this method intentionally inhaling more than she needs to during the inhalation that activates her panic attacks—she would need to apply only a little effort to effectively pacify her emotional state, significantly reducing the stress that comes from fighting off bothersome feelings. More importantly, however, after she successfully shuts down a panic attack, she will not have to do so again if a similar attack threatens, because her

mind will automatically do it for her.

Getting to the point where you can successfully turn off a panic attack by using this technique may, admittedly, take several months of practice. By their nature, panic attacks dull your ability to control your emotional state, and shutting them down requires significant practice on similarly intense emotions from memory and imagination. In the long run, however, the good results make practicing this technique well worth the effort.

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