

Breathing for Life Balance & Peak Performance

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Background: Breathing is the most efficient and effective strategy for managing the changing demands of life and the pressures of competition in and out of sports. There are two basic types of breathing patterns (stress and relaxation) that are hard-wired into our nervous systems and therefore automatic. **Stress breathing** is activated by adversity or pressure and is rapid, shallow, and noisy with air moving in and out through the mouth. In addition, it involves the use of extra (accessory) throat, neck and chest muscles and keys on getting air in. **Relaxation breathing** is also automatic (but less natural) and is slow, quiet, smooth and deep with air typically going in through the nose and out through the mouth. It involves the use of the diaphragm (automatic breathing muscle below the lungs) and keys on getting air out with tension & emotional release. Both are necessary, but many coaches and athletes allow stress breathing to dominate. Below are a set of steps to master relaxation breathing and use it for balanced living (unwinding or falling asleep), emotional/thought control or as part of pre-pitching/hitting/fielding routines or mental repetitions (visualizations).

Relaxation Breathing Exercises (practice 3-5 times daily away from the field-i.e. driving, before sleep)

(1) Patterned Breath (4, 7, 8): Start this exercise with a strong, full exhalation so that all the air is pushed and then squeezed out (using the chest and core muscles) until a small tight knot is felt in the center two inches above the navel. Next let the air flow in through the nose to a four-count using the diaphragm to smoothly fill from the navel up to the level of the clavicles (collarbones) while letting the belly move out. Once the lungs are filled, hold for a count of seven. Just as the hold is ending, prepare to breathe out smoothly and confidently for a count of eight. Repeat this pattern for a total of four or eight breath cycles (one & two minutes respectively). Once finished the set, shift to easy breathing (nose-nose or mouth-mouth-even in and out). For each breath cycle you can think/say: In, 2,3,4, Hold, 2,3,4,5,6,7 and Out, 2,3,4,5,6,7,8 (or ...4,5,6,7, 1 - 8) to keep count of each cycle until you get to four/eight).

(2) Nasal/Oral Hyperventilation (to reset, add energy or if you have too much thinking, activation, or tension)

For nasal/oral start by breathing in through the nose fully to a six count and breath out faster through the mouth to a four count until all the air is cleared. Do this five times finishing the fifth with a long slow exhale through pursed lips for 10-12 counts. Finish with one more slow breath in through the nose to a four count and out through the mouth to a 10-12 count.

For nasal start by moving air rapidly in and out through the nose using only the diaphragm. Focus more on getting the air out and less on getting the air in. Build the depth and speed of breathing with good rhythm for about twenty seconds feeling the diaphragm move up and down in the belly. Finish with a strong in-breath and long clearing-breath out through the mouth against tightened lips for twelve or more counts. Go to easy breathing for about twenty seconds and then repeat once or twice more if needed to quiet the mind and release excess tension.

Breathing Patterns for Stress Control (to be used before stretching, running, lifting, cardio, yoga, etc or to wake up or whenever nervous or restless)

(1) Triple Clear: After clearing the air out strongly as above, breathe in through the nose for four counts using the diaphragm and then out through the mouth for four, then in four and out six and then finally in four and out eight. (the in breath should come just to the level of the collarbone).

(2) Nasal Hyperventilation with total body tightening (one set while standing): As above breathe in and out rapidly through the nose with increasing intensity for about twenty seconds while progressively tightening the muscles of the entire body (can be done while tightening fists, arching the back, or spreading the fingers). This is finished with a long breath in and smooth clear out through tightened lips releasing all excess muscle tension.

Practice/Game Day Breathing Patterns (to be integrated into all daily routines)

(1) Single Clear: After clearing the air out strongly through the mouth, breathe in through the nose evenly to a four count and then out smoothly but strongly through lightly tightened lips (about eight counts). Syncronize this breath for maximal effect as follows: while breathing in-stand or sit still, arch the back and open arms out with the palms forward and the fingers spread. Then clear the breath strongly and smoothly strongly to reset with a focus on balance and core with arms dropped slowly to gravity.

If still tense or unfocused then breathe in through the nose smoothly then out slowly and smoothly while focusing on a narrow visual point (to about a five count) then break and shift the attention back to the core (the center of breath).

Reference: "Sports Psychiatry: Strategies for Life Balance & Peak Performance" by D. McDuff (2017)