

Breathing Exercises

Deep breathing exercises are taught in all types of meditation and yoga classes as a way of connecting with the mind and body, at the same time helping you to relax and release stress. This practice can also be applied throughout labour – perhaps most effectively during the middle of a contraction.

Rhythmic breathing

Try sitting still for a moment, close your eyes and breathe in steadily. Focus on your breathing and notice how rhythmic it is. You'll start to feel everything around you slow down and you'll become aware of the rhythm and pace of your natural breathing.

Breathe in and then pause slightly before breathing out. Notice that your out-breath matches your in-breath in both length and depth. You pause slightly again before you take your next breath in.

Breathing in gradually and steadily and then out again, using the same rhythmic breathing, will help you stay focused and relaxed. Make sure that the in-breath doesn't become longer than the out-breath. If anything, your out-breath should be longer than your in-breath.

Counted breathing

Another common breathing technique is to manage the pace of your breathing through counting. As you breathe in count slowly to four (or whatever number seems comfortable to you). Count slowly again as you breathe out and release the air from your lungs (aim for a count of 6-8 as you breathe out). You might find that it's more comfortable to count to three on your in-breath and to four on your out-breath. That's fine, you just need to go with what feels most natural to you.

'Relax' breathing

Think of the word "relax". It has two syllables, "re" and "lax". As you breathe in, think "re" to yourself, and as you breathe out, think "lax". Keep your mind focussed on repeating the word "relax" in tune with your breathing.

When you breathe out, try to release any tensions in your body. If it helps you can close your eyes and imagine that each breath that you take is a colour (whichever colour you choose). Imagine this flows around your body and then changes colour as it leaves your body. the first colour represents the oxygen you are taking into your body, the second colour represents any stress and tension as it leaves your body.

Focus on the muscles that you know become tense when you're stressed. Remember, every time you breathe out, "laaaax". The out-breath is the one to focus on, as the in-breath takes care of itself.

'Horse lips' breathing

When we are anxious or stressed we often hold tension in our jaw. Horse lips breathing is a quick and easy breathing technique to help release that tension.

As you breathe out loosely puff your lips and allow them to flap and vibrate as the air is exhaled. Imagine a horse neighing or blowing a raspberry without sticking your tongue out!

This breathing technique also helps the cervix, pelvic floor and perineum relax and open ready for birth.

Breathing Exercises

Mirrored breathing

This is an exercise that you can practise together as a couple. Dad/Birth partner should sit on the floor with their back supported (against a wall/sofa). Mum should then sit between his legs, with her back to him and lean back into him until you are both comfortable. Dad/Birth partner should wrap your arms around Mum and rest your hands on the bump. When you are feeling relaxed and comfortable:

1. Close your eyes. Notice each others breathing. Don't intentionally change your breathing to match your partners (although this may occur naturally). What do you notice? Do you breathe at the same pace? Mums this should feel quite comforting and safe - being close to and supported by your partner. Open your eyes when you're ready.
2. Close your eyes. This time, Mum I would like you to continue to breathe normally, at your usual pace. Dad/Birth partner, I would like you to concentrate on Mums breathing and try and match your breathing to hers. How easy is this? Mums, how does it feel when your partner matches their breathing to yours? It should feel nice and comforting. Open your eyes when you're ready.
3. Close your eyes. I would like you to repeat step 2 until your breathing is synched. Once you are breathing at the same pace, Mum I would like you to imagine that you are experiencing some stress or anxiety (imagine for example a stranger has entered the room and made you feel a little anxious as you don't know who they are). Change the pace of your breathing to reflect this stress (increase the pace to a more 'panicked' breathing). Dad/Birth partner, as soon as you notice this change in Mums breathing I want you to exaggerate your own breathing so it is very deep, long breaths. What do you both notice? Mums it should be very difficult to maintain a state of 'panicked' breathing when your partner exaggerates his breathing. You should find that your breathing naturally calms and matches the slower, more exaggerated breathing of your partner. Open your eyes when you're ready.

This is a great exercise to use in any situation where panic begins to take hold or Mum is finding it difficult to maintain calm and relaxed breathing. The exercise is also really effective when done face-to-face (it's not always possible to sit in this embrace together).

Waves of Relaxation

This breath is for use during contractions. It can really help you to focus and for the contraction to pass seemingly quickly if your attention is elsewhere. This technique uses visualisation as a form of distraction, whilst also giving a meaning to the sensations going on in your body.

I'd like you to close your eyes and imagine that you are standing at the edge of the sea shore, with waves lapping at your feet. Take a nice deep breath in and, as you do, I'd like you to imagine a wave rising, either up over your body (in line with the sensations that you're experiencing with the uterus contracting) or nearby you in the sea. As you breathe out, imagine the wave crashing down.

The association of the waves is powerful, natural and at the same time calming.

This should be a long, deep breath. Practise this a few times and, when you feel confident, get your partner to time you for a minute and see how many breaths you do in that time. It can be a really helpful mental goal to know that it only takes 3/4/5 of those breaths for your contraction to pass.

You can of course adapt this visualisation to suit you.

Breathing Exercises

Counting Down to your Special Place

Think of a place that is special to you in some way or that only has positive associations for you. This could be somewhere from your childhood, a place where you've been on holiday or just somewhere that is familiar and comforting to you such as snuggled up on your sofa or in bed at home. Once you have a place in mind, gently close your eyes and focus on your breathing.

I'd like you to do a series of 10 deep breaths. As you breath out each time I want you to count down, starting at '10' with the first out breath, then '9' and so on until you reach '0'. Once you reach '0' I'd like you to imagine yourself in your 'special place'. You can stay here as long as you like, visualising your surroundings.

Eyes Open Hypnosis

This is a really quick and easy way of helping you get into a light state of hypnosis - a great way to distract and relax you when needed.

With your eyes open, focus on a point in front of you. Keep your eyes relaxed and your focus nice and soft. Now I'd like you to do a series of 5 breaths, keeping your eyes open. As you breathe out count '5', then on the next breathe '4' and so on until you reach '0'. Each time you breathe out, soften your focus slightly.

You can hold this soft focus gaze for as long as you need to.

Fractional Relaxation

This is a method of consciously relaxing your whole body and taking you into a light state of hypnosis. It is easy to do by yourself, or for your birth partner to guide you through. If you do yoga, Shavasana is a form of fractional relaxation which may be familiar to you.

This can be done in any position, just make sure that you are as comfortable as possible then gently close your eyes. Start at the top of your head and then gradually work down your body, making a conscious effort to relax every part of your body as you go down. Relax your forehead, your eyebrows, your eyes, your nose, your mouth, your jaw....and so on, going down your torso, arms and legs until you reach your feet and toes.

You can do this alone, or your birth partner can guide you by listing all the areas of your body to help you focus.