THE LITTLE BREATHING GUIDE

Understand your breath.
Explore gently.

40 PAGES · WORKBOOK

GRIT S. BÖTTCHER

Small experiments, no performance test

You breathe everywhere. That does not make every place suitable for a breathing exercise. Choose a quiet seat or a secure lying position. Keep your eyes open whenever closing them feels unsafe or unsettling.

Let each breath remain comfortable. Do not pull in the largest possible inhalation or force the lungs empty. If a count makes you gasp, strain or take a large recovery breath, drop the count.

THREE RULES

1. Begin with ordinary breathing and notice what is already happening.
2. Change only one element: attention, pace or the softness of the exhale.
3. Stop after a few rounds and observe how breathing continues by itself.

“Uncomfortable,” “nothing changed” and “not today” are useful results. Stop for dizziness, tingling, chest pressure or pain, racing heart, visual disturbance, marked headache, air hunger or growing fear. Sit or lie safely, breathe normally and seek medical help if symptoms are strong or persist.

The rhythm that arrives without an order

While you read this sentence, your ribs may move. Your abdomen may shift. You did not have to schedule the next breath. It arrived while your attention was elsewhere.

“You are being breathed” names that experience. Networks in the brainstem generate and shape respiratory rhythm. Sensors continually report changes related to carbon dioxide, acidity, oxygen and stretch. Respiratory muscles turn those signals into movement. [1]

The passive phrase can sound as though an outside agent must be acting. Biology does not require one. Many feedback loops belong to your own organism even when you do not experience them as a conscious decision.

You can still intervene. Speaking, singing, sighing, blowing and briefly pausing the breath all recruit voluntary influence over a system that is already running. Automatic and conscious breathing are two routes into the same process.

NOTICE

Observe the moment you become aware of one breath. Did awareness itself change it?

A twenty-second practice

Sit or lie somewhere secure. Let your eyes soften, or close them only if that feels safe.

1. Notice three breaths at one place: nostrils, chest, lower ribs or abdomen.
2. Give the breath no instruction. Shallow, irregular or barely noticeable still counts as an observation.
3. Open your gaze and name three things in the room.
4. The practice is complete.

THE SHORTER VERSION

Feel one exhalation. Then direct your attention outward again.

Attention can alter breathing by itself. This brief practice makes that visible without turning breathing into a task. If inward attention increases anxiety, stay with colours, sounds and contact with the chair or floor.

Stop for dizziness, air hunger, increasing fear or the feeling that you must control every breath. Look around the room and let breathing continue normally.

Slightly longer, never forced

Choose a rhythm in which you could still speak a short sentence.

1. Take two or three ordinary breaths.
2. Inhale gently, perhaps counting to three.
3. Exhale comfortably through the nose or softly parted lips, perhaps counting to four.
4. Repeat for four rounds, then drop the count.

If three-to-four does not suit you, try two-to-three or use no numbers. The ratio matters less than comfort. You should not gasp or need a large recovery breath.

ONE-BREATH VERSION

One ordinary inhalation. One soft exhalation that lasts a moment longer. Then breathe normally.

This is not treatment for acute breathlessness of unknown cause. If you have a respiratory condition, follow the techniques and emergency plan agreed with your clinician.

Stop immediately for dizziness, tingling, pressure, air hunger or increasing distress.

Let the day become smaller

This practice is for ordinary settling, not unexplained night-time breathlessness.

1. Choose a comfortable position with head and chest supported as needed.
2. Notice three ordinary exhalations.
3. Let one exhale become slightly softer or longer, without pulling in a bigger breath first.
4. Name one place where the bed supports you.
5. Stop counting and allow breathing to continue by itself.

You do not have to “breathe yourself to sleep.” If sleep does not arrive, the exercise has not failed. The task was only to meet a few breaths without effort.

Do not use this guide to manage new night-time breathing difficulty, chest pain, blue lips, confusion or severe wheezing. Sit upright if that is more comfortable and seek urgent medical help according to local guidance.

MY PERSONAL BREATHING CARD

One page for real life

The practice that usually feels comfortable:

_____

The situation where I use it:

_____

Maximum duration or number of rounds:

_____

My first stop sign:

_____

What I do when I stop:

_____

The practice I avoid:

_____

Medical guidance relevant to me:

_____

Local emergency number:

_____

MY PLAIN-LANGUAGE REMINDER

I do not need to win against my breath. I can notice it, influence it gently, or leave it alone. Strong sensations are not proof that an exercise is working. Comfort, context and safety matter more than a number.

Date reviewed: _____
Next review: _____

Physiology, breath-holding and safety

[1] Del Negro CA, Funk GD, Feldman JL. Breathing matters. Nature Reviews Neuroscience. 2018;19:351–367. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41583-018-0003-6

[2] Parkes MJ. Breath-holding and its breakpoint. Experimental Physiology. 2006;91(1):1–15. https://doi.org/10.1113/expphysiol.2005.031625

[3] US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Drowning prevention and the danger of breath-holding after hyperventilation. https://www.cdc.gov/drowning/

[4] Zaccaro A et al. How breath-control can change your life: a systematic review on psychophysiological correlates of slow breathing. Frontiers in Human Neuroscience. 2018;12:353. https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2018.00353

Sources are provided so claims can be checked. A citation describes the scope of a study; it does not turn a general workbook into individual medical advice.