

The Ecology of Breathing: Enhancing Your Cuddle Hormone

The benefits of managing stress through mindful breathing.

A WIDER LENS Blog by Dr. Kenneth Silvestri
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We are constantly bombarded with words and images that can perpetuate stress and [fear](#) in addition to the circumstances of everyday life. Political and [media](#) commentators resort to sensational and provocative messages, ignoring the more positive narratives that exist. Even the American Medical Association now officially recognizes that complicated stress is the cause of all chronic diseases. Common sense tells us that it's time to deal with harmful stress.

The Art of Breathing

Breathing is one of the few ways to adjust our Autonomic Nervous System when it is stuck in "fight or flight," fending off negative stimuli. My favorite technique is called [Coherent Breathing](#), developed and extensively researched by Stephen Elliott, which consists of five breaths per minute as compared to our usual average of fifteen. A bonus of this practice, especially when you exhale with thoughts of compassion, is that you stimulate the Vagus Nerve, which covers much of your upper body—from the gut to your brain—and regulates metabolism, heart rate, and general well-being. The Vagus Nerve glows when you focus on an emphatic thought and sustains a healthy Heart Rate Variable for your cardiovascular system. When the Vagus Nerve experiences these caring thoughts during exhaling, it soothes the revved up "fight or flight" sympathetic mode of your nervous system and supports the Parasympathetic calm part to do its [job](#).

It is now believed that when the Vagus Nerve is compromised from learned responses of fear and insecurity, it can be the root of many [health](#) issues. This eventually affects the emotional and complex [somatic](#) parts of your body that determine how we live and function. (For more, see [the Polyvagal Theory](#).)

Mindful Breathing

Here is a simple but profound exercise. It will not only extend your life but allow you to enjoy it to the fullest. Sitting or standing, relax your body from head to toe and rate how you are feeling at that moment. Breathe through your nose, filling up your stomach and gradually move your breath upward toward your chest to the count of six seconds. As you inhale, slowly raise your arms, stretching them sideways and with a circular motion bringing them upwards to above your head. Exhale through your mouth, also to the count of six seconds, while slowly bringing your arms down to your sides and thinking of something that brings you a genuine sense of compassion (raising and lowering arms is optional). Repeat this cycle five to ten times. When you finish, relax your body from head to toe, again assessing how you feel, taking note of any difference. Create a peripheral view of your [environment](#), widening your perspective, to see beyond the confines of your surroundings. Give some thought about what is happening in your life, community, nation and the world. Try this technique as many times as possible throughout the day when resting or doing low activity work.

Benefits of Breathing

Coherent Breathing allows you to be aware of engaging your diaphragm, which we take for granted. It not only pumps blood to your heart and lungs, it provides blood flow to your digestive tract resulting in nutritional benefits. Optimal diaphragmatic breathing creates a biological balance that also supports your nervous system. If it is not functioning properly, it will be compromised and must work overtime, resulting in further havoc to your mind and body.

Research clearly supports that the consequence of using Coherent Breathing improves [anxiety](#), [PTSD](#), IBD, inflammatory and cardiac issues. It helps alleviate mental health patterns of [schizophrenia](#), ADD, [depression](#), and [trauma](#). Most important, Coherent Breathing enhances awareness of your environment.

Here is another important benefit to focusing on Coherent Breathing: It is extraordinarily mind-opening, not only as a segue to balancing yourself, but also allowing you to perceive nature as it is meant to be experienced. We are not meant to be saving our life 24 hours a day, which hinders us from seeing the wider connections and mutual learning opportunities that are within our reach. When we reboot our nervous system, we can better use our senses to explore that “liminal space,” the place of transition to new situations that will also serve our [relationships](#).

Here lie the possibilities of having a “beginners mind” and exploring interdependency through dialogue, poetry and other sharing modalities. This allows us to create new connections with wider contexts of family, work, climate, [education](#), health, [politics](#) etc. (See Nora Bateson [on mutual learning](#).)

Yes, when your body is healthy it will stimulate the release of [Oxytocin](#), the cuddle [hormone](#), something we can all use more of, especially in these times where [stressful](#) situations are abundant. So why not utilize what our body has to offer, something we take for granted—breathing.