

Blowing Off Steam: The Art and Science of Effective Breathing

By Kerry McCarthy, LPC

Over the past few years, we have seen increasing levels of stress and burnout throughout the country and within the legal profession. Frequent changes and uncertainty have brought their fair share of concerns both personally and professionally. While the pandemic brought higher rates of stress and burnout¹, stress is not a new concept. Our body's stress response is hardwired into our system and is key to tackling the difficult things in life.

Think of activating your stress response like turning on a light switch. It can activate within milliseconds, creating a domino effect throughout the body to respond to alarming or threatening situations by increasing your heart rate, dilating your pupils, and releasing stored energy.² This cascade of events occurs when we are faced with both physical stressors such as when we are sick, cold, or in physical danger, and psychological stressors like an upcoming hearing, dealing with a difficult client or opposing counsel, or engaging in a challenging conversation with a loved one.

Imagine you are in that stressful state, you're running late for court, and you realize you have left your files at home. In this moment, you may begin to experience a flushed face, dry mouth, increased sweating, and rapid heartbeat. You may notice yourself taking fewer and shallower breaths, and that your thoughts have become narrowed. At this point your focus is fixated on where your briefcase is, how you might get it between now and your hearing, or whether you can proceed without it. You attempt to make sense of the situation in a rushed and hurried fashion, tuning out those around you. You may feel an impulse to act: to rush home, call a loved one to bring the briefcase to you, or even request a continuance. While our stress response is activated, we are less able to problem solve effectively and integrate facts, logic, and data into the situation at hand.

Inhale, Exhale, Repeat

When we tune in and recognize we are stressed, we can employ a breathing technique that can induce a physiological state of calm by slowing our heart rate. With a calmed body and brain, we can evaluate situations with a clearer mind and make wise decisions. Breathing techniques typically go unnoticed by others, allowing us to reduce our stress without drawing much, if any, attention to ourselves. This can be particularly helpful in workplace settings. Because there are physiological and psychological changes associated with these breathing techniques, it is encouraged that you consult your healthcare provider if you are unsure if it is a suitable practice for you.³

¹ Black, N. (2021, August 5). *ABA Survey: Lawyers Are Stressed Out*. Above the Law. Retrieved May 10, 2022, from <https://abovethelaw.com/2021/08/aba-survey-lawyers-are-stressed-out/>

² American Psychological Association. (2018, November 1). *Stress effects on the body*. American Psychological Association. Retrieved May 25, 2022, from <https://www.apa.org/topics/stress/body>

³ Huberman Lab Podcast. (2021). *Tools for Managing Stress & Anxiety*. YouTube. Retrieved May 6, 2022, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ntfcfJ28eiU>.

Physiological Sigh

As we take shallower and more frequent breaths during stress, carbon dioxide builds up in the body. The excess carbon dioxide contributes to our feelings of agitation, telling our brain and body to remain in a fight or flight response. Offloading the excess carbon dioxide will leave you feeling quickly relaxed.^{4 5}

Step 1: Take two inhale breaths (about one to two seconds each), one after another with no exhale in between.

Step 2: Exhale slowly for four to six seconds

Step 3: Repeat the first two steps one to two times

If the double inhale is uncomfortable for you, you can adjust this technique by simply exhaling longer than you inhale at a rate that is comfortable for you.

Step 1: Inhale for two to four seconds

Step 2: Exhale for four to six seconds

Step 3: Repeat until you feel calmer.

The longer exhale offloads carbon dioxide and sends signals to your heart, telling it to slow down.^{6 7}

Box Breathing

Box breathing is a technique employed by the United States Navy SEALs and widely accepted by those in high stress careers. It comes from the yogic practice of pranayama, or the focus on one's breath.

Step 1: Breathe in for four seconds

Step 2: Hold your breath for four seconds

Step 3: Breathe out for four seconds

Step 4: Repeat three to four times

Regulating your breath in this fashion calms the mind, decreases your heart rate, and reduces stress.⁸

⁴ MacCormick, H. (2020, October 7). *How stress affects your brain and how to reverse it*. Scope. Retrieved May 10, 2022, from <https://scopeblog.stanford.edu/2020/10/07/how-stress-affects-your-brain-and-how-to-reverse-it/>

⁵ Huberman Lab Podcast. (2021). *Tools for Managing Stress & Anxiety*. YouTube. Retrieved May 6, 2022, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ntfcfj28eiU>.

⁶ Cleveland Clinic. (2021, August 16). *Box breathing benefits and techniques*. Cleveland Clinic. Retrieved May 31, 2022, from <https://health.clevelandclinic.org/box-breathing-benefits/>

⁷ Russo, M. A., Santarelli, D. M., & O'Rourke, D. (2017). The physiological effects of slow breathing in the healthy human. *Breathe*, 13(4), 298–309. <https://doi.org/10.1183/20734735.009817>

⁸ Cleveland Clinic. (2021, August 17). *Box breathing benefits and techniques*. Cleveland Clinic. Retrieved May 31, 2022, from <https://health.clevelandclinic.org/box-breathing-benefits/>

These techniques do not require daily practice and can be used immediately during moments of stress. Remember, you know what works the best for you, so use the exercise that feels most comfortable and adapt or adjust these skills as needed to get the most benefit. Regardless of the technique you use, focusing on slowing and deepening your breathing will lessen the stress response in the body.

For more well-being related strategies visit the Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program (COLAP) website at www.coloradolap.org or contact us at info@coloradolap.org or (303) 986-3345 to request a confidential, free well-being consultation.