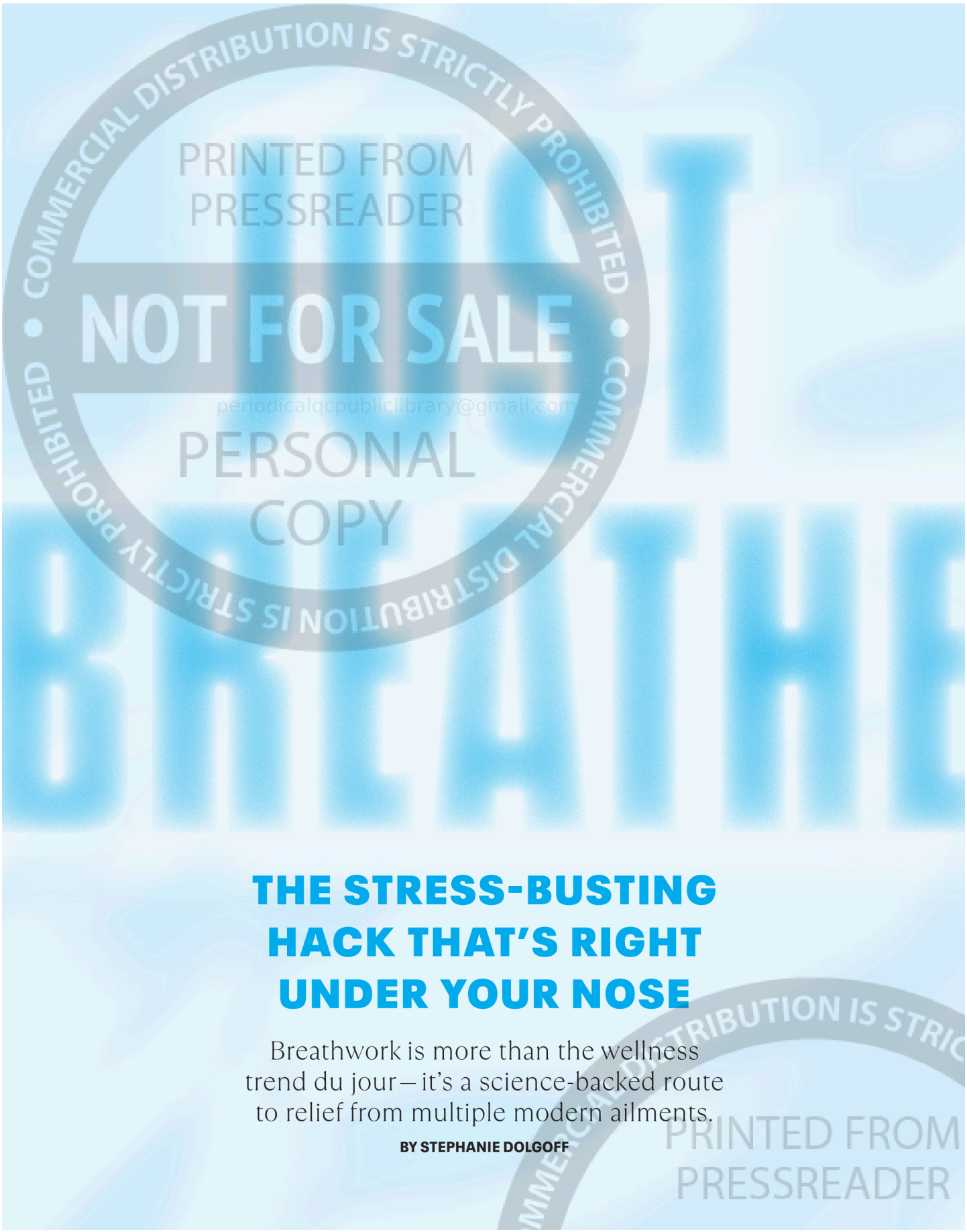
- Respiration



THE STRESS-BUSTING HACK THAT'S RIGHT UNDER YOUR NOSE

Breathwork is more than the wellness trend du jour—it's a science-backed route to relief from multiple modern ailments.

BY STEPHANIE DOLGOFF

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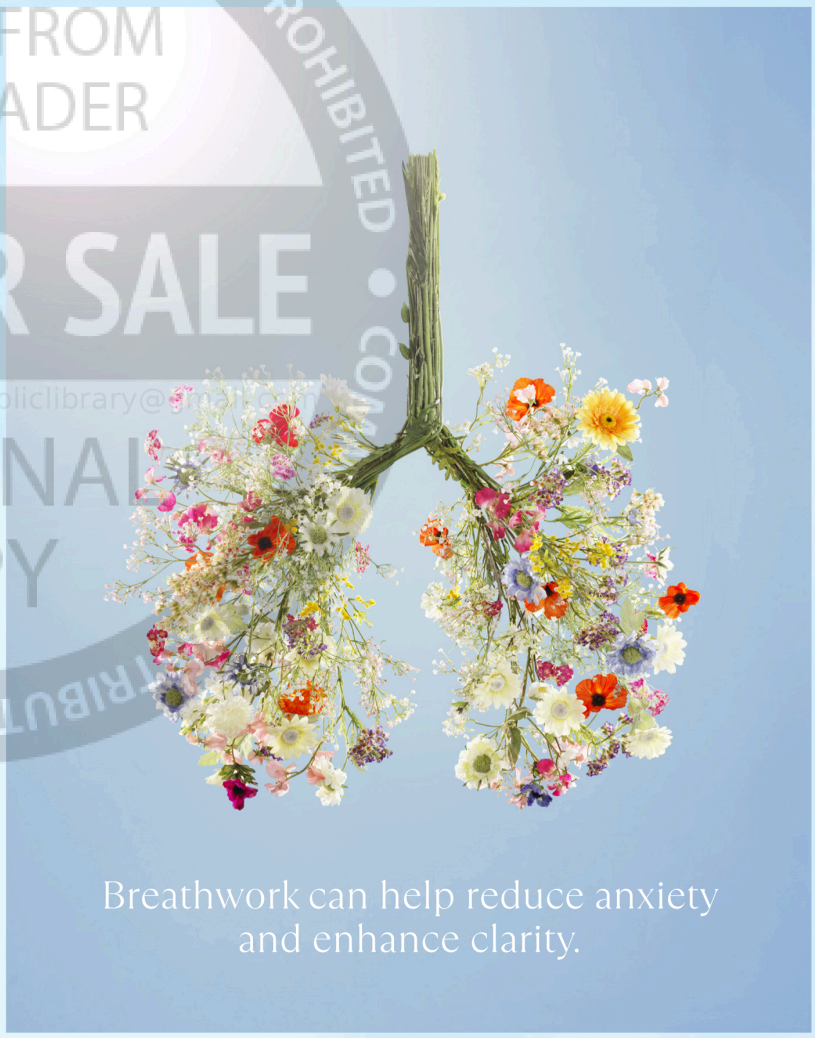
"OK, OK, just take a breath." If that's what a friend advises after you panic-share about a major-anxiety-inducing situation—your teen taking his maiden solo voyage behind the wheel, work instability, another high-stakes world crisis dinging your phone every few minutes—it's probably because they hate seeing you so on edge. But also, your friend is offering an effective means of slowing your spin. "The way you breathe affects anxiety, and anxiety affects how you breathe," says James Nestor, author of *Breath: The New Science of a Lost Art*. "It's a two-way street, and while anxiety isn't a conscious choice, our breathing is."

The idea that breathing consciously can help you calm down and make you feel better may not be breaking news (any yogi on the street thousands of years ago would have told you the same thing), but it's something we all need to be reminded of, especially these days. And, of course, for Western scientists to take it seriously, it needed to be proven. "[The yogis] were right, and there are modern studies that suggest that this is true," says Savitha Elam-Kootil, M.D., an internist at Kaiser Permanente in Atlanta and an adviser to MyYogaTeacher, an online yoga subscription service.

Indeed, as a review published last year in the journal *Scientific Reports* found, slow-paced breathing has all sorts of whole-body stress- and anxiety-reducing benefits: It can lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol; help you better modulate your autonomic nervous system (ANS), which controls involuntary reactions such as increased heart rate and sweating as well as digestion and breathing; and increase heart rate variability, an overall marker of good health.

To be clear, stress and anxiety are not the same thing. The former happens when you are under emotional and physical strain because life is demanding a lot of you (your offspring are at war in the back seat, or the drive-through guy dumps a soda in your lap and your partner advises you to "just relax"), whereas anxiety is a sense of unease or worry about something uncertain (e.g., AI taking your job). But stress and anxiety are very close companions and have similar effects on the body: In excess, both can impair optimum functioning of the ANS and lower heart rate variability. Slowing down your breathing, research shows, changes the neurological signals you're sending to your brain, which influence your emotions, thoughts and behaviors.

Learning this skill can be especially important when breaking-news alerts are breaking your brain. "We are not wired to have that much exposure to trauma at our fingertips, and it creates an overload in our bodies and minds," says Jasmine Marie,



Breathwork can help reduce anxiety and enhance clarity.

Flower lungs: Getty Images.

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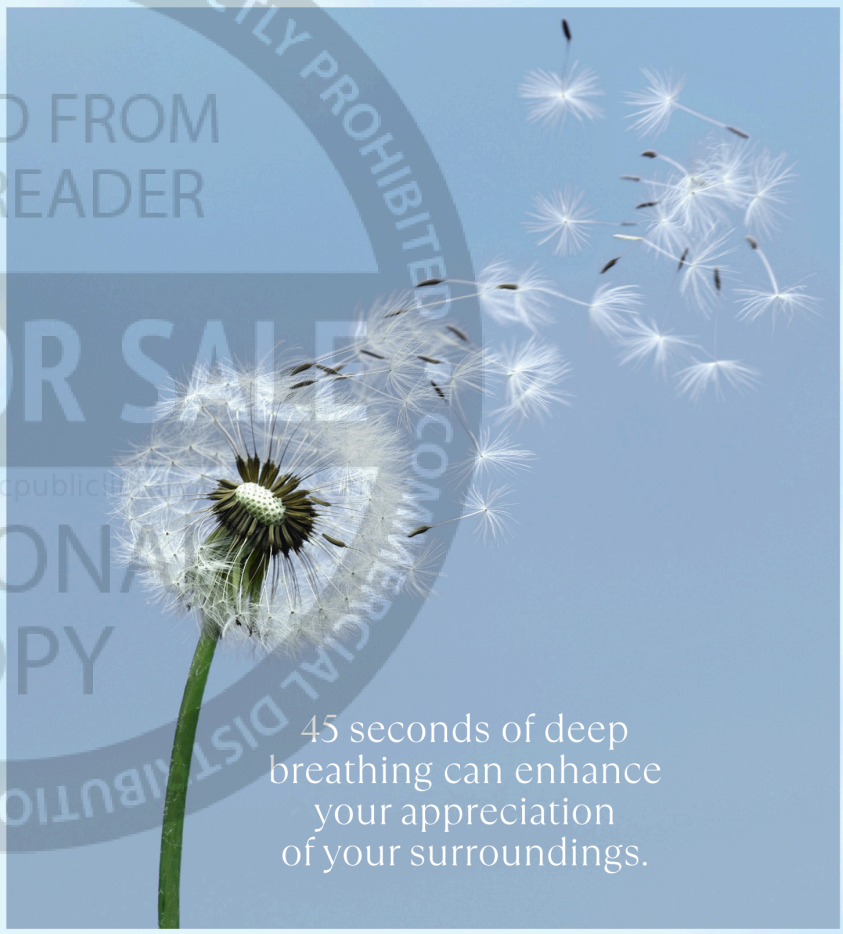
a breathwork facilitator and CEO and founder of Black Girls Breathing (her book by that name will be released in December). Anxiety is when our brains fret and calculate and go to worst-case scenarios because that's how we're wired to survive. "As humans, we hate uncertainty, and we like to know how to protect our bodies and our minds," she says.

NO EQUIPMENT REQUIRED

This is where breathwork can come in handy. Breathing to dial down stress and anxiety is available to anyone, and it costs nothing, says Marie. "You can practice different techniques wherever you are, walking or even at home in bed," she adds.

How does intentional, controlled breathing help? Think of how it is when you're scared: Your fight-or-flight response kicks in, "and the sympathetic nervous system is triggered, releasing adrenaline—which causes the heart rate to speed up, breathing to become faster and an increase in oxygen delivery" as well as sweating and other physical reactions, says Dr. Elam-Kootil. To your body, anxiety and stress can feel like fear. Certain breathing techniques shift the balance to prioritize the parasympathetic nervous system, the one responsible for resting and digesting. "It does the opposite of what adrenaline does—it slows down the heart rate and breathing and reduces the release of stress hormones," says Dr. Elam-Kootil. "It also lets the thinking brain take back control from the primitive, emotional brain."



45 seconds of deep breathing can enhance your appreciation of your surroundings.

Dandelion and leaves shadow: Getty Images.

Can Stress Increase Breast Cancer Risk?

Chronic stress can do a number on your health: It can contribute to high blood pressure, heart disease, sleep problems and weight gain. But is it a proven risk factor for breast cancer? "The evidence is very mixed, and **research hasn't shown a straight line between stress and breast cancer risk**," says Julienne Bower, Ph.D., a professor of psychology and psychiatry at UCLA and an investigator for the Breast Cancer Research Foundation. Still, there is an indirect connection between what stress does to your body and cancer risk. "We know that stress influences the immune system and activates inflammatory activity, which is associated with breast cancer progression," she says. "But we also know that behavioral interventions that target stress, like mindful meditation, can reduce inflammation and increase well-being. We can't avoid stress in our lives, but we can manage how we cope with it."

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THE PERFECT PAUSE

Breathwork is not a cure for anxiety and stress, but it can de-escalate your body's reaction to them. "It's not magic, like, *By doing this I will be just fine in two minutes*," says Roberto Benzo, M.D., a pulmonologist and the director of Mayo Clinic's Mindful Breathing Laboratory in Rochester, MN. But when you stop to breathe and interrupt the stress and anxiety cycle, he says, you're teaching yourself that you can handle what comes at you. Becoming more aware of how your anxiety feels as you breathe through it, says Dr. Benzo, is critical to learning how to tolerate it without reacting to it or racing to fix it. "The breath is like a pacemaker for how you want to respond to the environment," he says.

Dr. Benzo is making a distinction between *reacting* and *responding*. If you've ever screamed at your cable company's automated-response system (raised-hand emoji!), you know that reacting isn't positive or helpful.

Good decision-making happens when your brain is properly online. When you're very anxious, the limbic system (the primitive, emotional brain) takes over for the prefrontal cortex, the more evolved part that makes decisions, says Dr. Elam-Kootil. But when you stop to breathe, says Dr. Benzo, you give yourself a valuable opportunity: Slowing down and being conscious of your breathing "allows you to come to a different space, driven by your intention to respond to the moment appropriately," he explains.

GETTING STARTED

When you're beginning a breathwork practice, simply notice how your body feels when you breathe, building up to a few minutes at a time, Dr. Benzo advises. When you're anxious or stressed, is your chest tight? Your shoulders? Are you breathing shallowly? Maybe your head is buzzing. Simply notice this, and try not to judge whether you're doing it "right," Dr. Benzo says. "Be kind to yourself—perhaps a minute is too much to start with. If that's the case, just start with 30 seconds."

No one technique suits everyone, so if a certain style of breathing doesn't work for you, try another, says author Nestor. "In very general terms, most people will benefit from first learning to become aware of when anxiety is coming on," he says. "Once you are conscious that your stress levels are rising, you can take conscious control of your state—this is when breathing becomes such a powerful tool."

Take care if you have health conditions, such as uncontrolled high blood pressure, with which holding your breath for too long isn't wise, says Dr. Elam-Kootil. Ideally, a breathwork instructor or guide can direct you. Start your breathwork practice with one of these techniques:

BREATHE WITH AWARENESS. Bring mindfulness into challenging moments with one of Dr. Benzo's favorite

> "Becoming more aware of how it feels to breathe through anxiety is critical to learning how to tolerate it without reacting or racing to fix it."

BREATHE EASY

There are lots of ways into the practice via apps and YouTube videos as well as instructor-guided sessions. Try these resources to get started:



FREE WORKSHOPS
Soul Dimension (souldimension.org) runs a free pranayama-based virtual workshop on Wednesdays.



FREE APP
Breathwrk offers user-friendly, mood-matching breathing exercises.



GREAT BOOK
***Breath: The New Science of a Lost Art* by James Nestor explores the research on breath and tells you how to reap the greatest benefits.**



COOL DEVICE
Moonbird (moonbird.life) is a vibrating handheld gizmo that combines breathing exercises with app-based biofeedback to help grow the mind-body connection.

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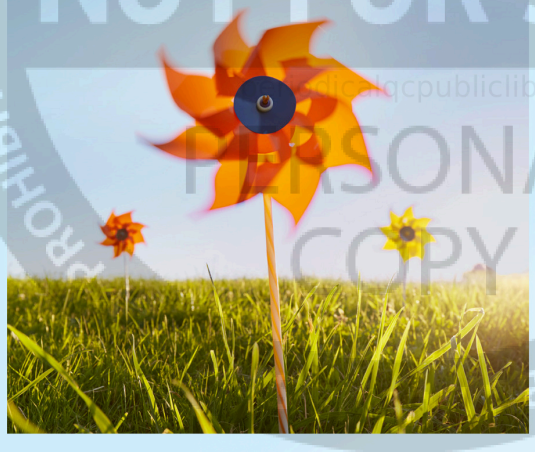
Start your practice with slow-paced breathing exercises.



> "Breathing to dial down stress and anxiety is free and available to anyone."

exercises, from Russ Harris in *The Happiness Trap*. First acknowledge your thoughts and feelings. Then, begin to connect with your breath and your body—notice your inhale and exhale and wiggle your toes as you breathe in and out. Now start engaging in the world around you again; notice what's happening, tapping into your senses. Bring awareness to how you want to respond to the present challenge versus simply reacting to it.

HEAVE A BIG SIGH.
Take a deepish breath through your nose, then exhale through your mouth with an audible sigh. "You might envision releasing something from your body through the mouth with a sigh," says Marie. "I like this one because it's connecting with more than one sense." Repeat the sigh three times or as many times as feels right. "I tell people to just start. Then listen to yourself: Do you want to be done now? That's fine," Marie says.

TAKE A THREE-PART BREATH.
Inhale through your mouth, focusing on your stomach/diaphragm area; inhale further through your mouth, focusing on your chest area. Finally, fully exhale through your mouth. "The goal of the three-part breath is, *How am I beginning to recognize the way my body feels?*" says Marie.

TRY COHERENT BREATHING.
Nestor favors this one when you are feeling mounting anxiety. Slowly and softly, through your nose, repeatedly inhale and exhale for about five or six seconds each. "If this feels like too long, shorten the cycle to where you feel comfortable," he says. "Breathing this way synchronizes our respiratory rate with our heart rate, allowing the cardiovascular system, nervous system and brain to function more efficiently."

DO BAHYA PRANAYAMA.
This yoga breathing technique starts with sitting upright in a quiet place and inhaling deeply through your nose, if possible; then exhale forcefully and hold your breath. Focus on the sensation of breath-holding. "This puts a pause on the circuit of anxious thoughts and breaks the cycle, even if only for a while," says Dr. Elam-Kootil. Repeat a few times until you feel calmer.

If you have a health condition such as uncontrolled high blood pressure in which holding your breath for too long isn't wise, you can instead do alternate-nostril breathing, otherwise known as anulom vilom pranayama, says Dr. Elam-Kootil.

GIVE BOX BREATHING A GO.
It's also called 4-4-4 breathing: Breathe in through your nose for a count of four, hold your breath for a count of four, exhale for a count of four and remain empty of breath for a count of four. Repeat until you feel centered.

Counting isn't for everyone. Some people can distract themselves from their thoughts by focusing on the counting, but others get more into their heads. "People have different lung capacities and may think, *This doesn't feel right; I'm not doing it right*," Marie says. "I try to help people limit their thought processes so they can tap into their bodies and connect with their breath."

For more easy ways to de-stress and lower anxiety, turn the page. ⟶

Pinwheels: Getty Images.



11 Easy Natural Stress Busters

Breathwork is just one way to find your zen. Here, more science-backed options for taming tension.

1. GO FOR A WALK.

Research shows that just **a 10-minute brisk stroll can lower anxiety levels**. That makes sense considering the fact that any sort of exercise boosts mood-regulating brain chemicals—such as serotonin, which helps induce a feeling of calmness, and dopamine, which activates the brain's reward system. Grab your girls, because working out with friends is also a proven stress buster that elevates quality of life.

2. TAKE IT OUTSIDE.

Exposure to nature has been linked with **improved attention span, lower stress levels, better mood**, reduced risk of psychiatric disorders and even increases in empathy and cooperation, according to research.

3. BE THANKFUL.

It doesn't just make others feel good! Numerous studies have shown that practicing gratitude can help you too by **relieving stress and anxiety and helping to put things in perspective**.

4. LOOK FOR BIRDS.

Recent research indicates that **hearing or even seeing birds can make people feel calmer**. See if you can ID local birds at different times of year; if you pay attention to their melodies as well, soon you may even be able to recognize them by their songs.

5. MAKE ART.

You don't have to be "good" at it. A large-scale study review found that **drawing, working with clay and doing other artistic activities could significantly reduce anxiety**.

6. *STREEEETCH* YOUR BODY.

It loosens up your muscles, of course, but there's also evidence that stretching can relax the mind—when your body is tense, your mind also gets, well, tight. In one study, people who stretched for just **10 minutes a day for three months reported feeling less anxious** and exhausted and felt more vitality.

7. TUNE OUT WITH TUNES.

What better group than stressed-out pharmacy students to try this on? Listening to or making music helped lower their stress levels before tests, one study found. Other research suggested that **dance significantly decreases symptoms of depression and increases feelings of well-being**.

8. FIND COLD COMFORT.

Dunk your face in ice-cold water for 15 to 20 seconds. Weird but true: There's some evidence that this **engages the body's relaxation system to counteract its stress response**. Or, take a cold shower or hold an ice cube or a chilled drink to your face.

9. CANCEL SOMETHING—ANYTHING.

Take a look at your calendar and see what you can postpone or even nix altogether. **Allowing yourself the time and brain space to recharge is key to good mental health**, particularly given the fact that so much in life is mandatory.

10. PET YOUR FUR BABY (OR SOMEONE ELSE'S!).

A great deal of research shows that petting dogs and cats both **improves mood and relieves stress**, as well as lowers cortisol levels. If you don't have a pet and want consistent fur therapy, consider volunteering at a local animal shelter.

11. SNIFF SOME LAVENDER.

Numerous studies **support the calming power of lavender**. Research suggests that it is effective in helping ease anxiety, in increasing relaxation and in improving subjects' ability to sustain attention. Put a couple of drops of lavender essential oil in an aromatherapy diffuser or simply on a piece of cloth, then close your eyes and inhale.

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