

# TRAINING 101

## Just Breathe

Taking in a bit of fresh air isn't as easy as you think.

By Garry Cosnett

“Just take a deep breath.” That’s the well-intentioned advice a nervous presenter commonly receives from a supportive colleague. When done properly, a deep breath does wonderful things: It relaxes the neck, shoulders, and internal organs humans use to make sounds; it also supports the voice and focuses the mind.

But most presenters given that suggestion simply take in a big gulp of air—just as they would do when sitting on the doctor’s examining table.

That just makes matters worse.

The problem is with the breath itself. Think of your last medical checkup. The doctor moved the stethoscope over your back and asked you to take deep breath after deep breath. You responded by sucking in your gut and expanding your upper chest. After a few of those breaths, you were winded and a little lightheaded.

When consciously taking a deep breath, we tend to do it in the doctor’s-office style. Paradoxically, it’s not a deep

breath. Your lungs, which are almost pear-shaped, have the most capacity in the lower regions. When taking a doctor's-office breath, you expand the top part of the lungs while compressing the lower part. That produces a shallow breath, with limited oxygen flow to the blood.

Adding to the paradox, there's a muscle in your abdomen just below your ribcage—the diaphragm—that's there to help you breathe properly, and you're probably using it incorrectly. It's designed to expand when you inhale, drawing air deep into the lungs. When you exhale, it should compress, driving air out. But doctor's-office breathers have it backwards: They draw the diaphragm in as they inhale (compressing the bottom of the lungs) and expand it as they exhale. Such breathing is upside-down breathing.

So you can see why a nervous presenter finds no relief from a doctor's-office breath. What's a presenter to do? Shallow breathing can be a habit that's tough to break, but not impossible. It begins with breathing awareness.

**Step 1: Identify your breathing pattern.** Stand before a mirror and take a deep breath. With proper breathing, you should see little movement in the chest and shoulders. The breathing activity should be centered lower between the navel and the sternum, where the diaphragm lies. If you're one of the rare individuals who has already mastered deep breathing, you'll see that area rise as you inhale and fall as you exhale. Opera singers, accomplished swimmers, and graduates of Lamaze classes know how to breathe from the diaphragm. (If you're a deep, diaphragmatic breather, skip to step 3.)

Most of us, however, will do just the opposite: upside-down breathing. Your shoulders rise, your upper chest puffs out like a cartoon songbird's, and your abdomen pulls inward. That motion means you're compressing your lungs at

## Breathing Tips

- Practice deep, diaphragmatic breathing daily. Try practicing when you stop at a traffic signal to reinforce your skills and eliminate the stress of waiting for the green light.
- Before you're introduced to present, concentrate only on your breathing.
- Do steps 2 and 3 as you stand to speak. With practice, you'll be able to do the exercise in less than a minute.

the same time you're trying to fill them with air. You need step 2.

**Step 2: Correct upside-down breathing.** This exercise helps you move your breathing deep into your lungs, where it should be.

- Stand up, feet shoulder-width apart. (Again, a mirror helps.)
- Place your fingers just under your ribcage, locating the diaphragm.
- Inhale deeply, making an exaggerated yawning action. The diaphragm should move down and outward. It may help to picture your abdomen as a beach ball. As you draw air in, it expands.
- Now exhale, slowly. Your abdomen should contract.

Do several repetitions until you get it right. It will take practice and patience. If you're not seeing results while standing, try lying on your back. In that position, people tend to fall into a proper breathing pattern almost automatically; just watch a sleeping baby.

**Step 3: Breathe for deep relaxation.** After

you've put your upside-down breathing right-side up, you're ready for the next exercise. This movement maximizes your oxygen intake and relaxes muscles, leading to a relaxation response.

- Breathe deeply with the diaphragm, using the exaggerated yawning action. After establishing a natural rhythm, take a deep breath in and hold it. (Fill that beach ball!)
- Now, *slowly* release the breath through your mouth, using a count of eight to pace yourself.
- Return to your natural breathing rhythm for a minute or so.
- Repeat the exercise.

The slow, controlled release of air from the lower lungs triggers the full relaxation response. If you do the exercise properly, the muscles in your neck and shoulders will release their tension immediately. You can watch this happen by standing before a mirror. Your shoulders will drop one-half to three-fourths of an inch when you hit the relaxation point.

You're now in the ideal physical and mental state to face your audience: relaxed, focused, and energized.

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