

Save your breath

By Mandy Oaklander

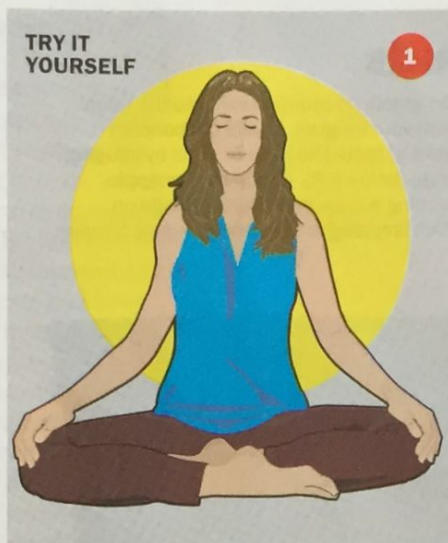
RESEARCH IS MOUNTING that a natural, potent source of stress relief is right in front of your nose. New science is showing that slowing down and deepening your breathing can have profound effects on well-being. “Many researchers can’t imagine how something so simple could actually have effects on physiology,” says Dr. Andrew Weil, a physician and founder of the Arizona Center for Integrative Medicine at the University of Arizona. Breathing exercises—a staple of mindfulness and yoga practices—have been shown to help control blood pressure, improve heart rate, make arteries more flexible and activate the parasympathetic nervous system, which tamps down the body’s fight-or-flight response to stress. Weil and other experts now believe deep breathing has a place in a clinical setting.

“It’s enough to warrant applications in several areas of medicine,” says Dr. Luciano Bernardi, an internal-medicine professor whose research shows that slow-breathing exercises improve exercise capacity in patients with chronic heart failure. “We’ve shown that this simple thing has a fantastic series of effects.” □

VERBATIM

‘I think breath is the only function through which you can influence the involuntary nervous system.’

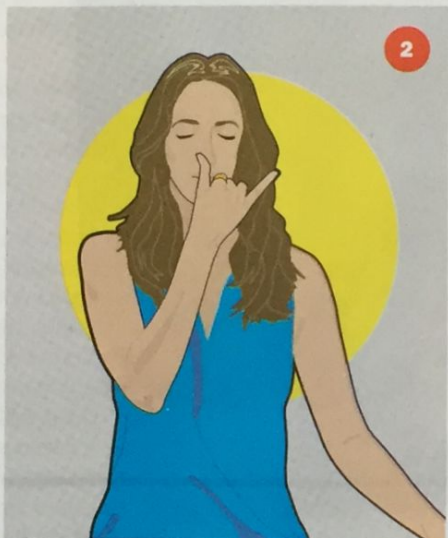
—DR. ANDREW WEIL



TRY IT YOURSELF

1

Sit in a position that is comfortable enough to sustain for a few minutes of alternate-nostril breathing. (Sitting in a chair is just fine.) This is one of many breathing exercises shown to have some health benefits (see right).



2

Make a “hang 10” sign with your right hand. Hold your right thumb over your right nostril to plug it closed. Inhale slowly through the left nostril until your lungs are full. Hold for four seconds.



3

Release the right nostril and plug the left with a pinkie. Slowly exhale. Once you’ve exhaled fully, inhale through the right nostril to repeat on the other side. Do about four rounds on each side—or more if you have time.

THE BENEFITS OF BREATHING EXERCISES

Slow breathing activates areas in the brain connected with **antidepressive** activities, says Dr. Luciano Bernardi of the University of Pavia in Italy.

When people with insomnia practiced slow, even breathing for 20 minutes before going to sleep, they **woke up fewer times** during the night.

Studies have shown that people who practiced alternate-nostril breathing for 10 minutes **significantly reduced their blood pressure**.

Breathing slowly helps you **take in more oxygen**. In one study, brief breathing exercises done several times each day increased oxygen consumption by 37%.

In a 2015 randomized controlled trial, healthy women who did eight weeks of twice-weekly yoga with breathing exercises significantly **reduced anxiety** (but not the control group.)

In one small recent study, slow-breathing sessions for 30 minutes a day **reduced blood pressure** in people with hypertension—and the effect persisted a month later.

SOURCES: PSYCHOPHYSIOLOGY; MEDICAL SCIENCE MONITOR; INDIAN JOURNAL OF PHYSIOLOGY AND PHARMACOLOGY; JOURNAL OF ALTERNATIVE AND COMPLEMENTARY MEDICINE; CLINICAL AUTONOMIC RESEARCH; DR. PATRICIA GERBARG