



## Exercise: Four-Stage Breathing

When under stress, we tend to engage in more shallow, rapid breathing. This can amplify the intensity of any unpleasant or negative emotions we are experiencing by sending a signal to the brain that we may be at some sort of imminent physical risk. Shallow breathing can make us feel physically unwell and in fact can release hormones and chemicals into our system that over time can lead to illness.

When we are thrown into stressful situations, as can happen at work, we often have little immediate control over the situation. We can, however, work actively on our thoughts and physical reactions in an attempt to control our reactions to the stressors, and reduce the length of time we experience an unpleasant emotional reaction.

One of the most effective, immediate strategies for regulating your mood in the moment is to work actively on slowing down your breathing. Most people are unaware of this, but when we are sitting or standing (and not under any physical exertion) the average person tends to only need about five to six full breaths (inhale/exhale) per minute. This translates into one full breath on average every ten seconds.

### Practice slowing down your breathing by doing the following:

- Sit in a relaxed position (uncross arms and legs and sit back comfortably in a chair)
- Inhale through your nose, and exhale through your mouth
- Think about four distinct (yet connected) stages of each breath, each separated by a slight pause:
  - o One inhale to fill up most of your lungs (mini-pause)
  - o A second, smaller inhale to fully 'top up' your lungs (mini-pause)
  - o One exhale to release most of the air from your lungs (mini-pause)
  - o A second, second, smaller exhale to fully 'push out' the rest of the air from your lungs (mini-pause)

**Look at a clock or a watch with a second hand, and try to slow your breathing so that a full breath takes no less than ten seconds. Try this for five minutes. Notice how you feel.**

Now, throughout the rest of your work day, practice four-stage breathing for at least one minute every hour. You may want to remind yourself to do this every hour on the hour. Over time, start to be aware of (and slow down) your breathing when you are in situations that create a sudden increase in stress for you. You may find that this is a simple but powerful first step toward managing negative emotions in the workplace.