

B E T S Y P O L A T I N



HUMANUAL[®]

(A Manual for Being Human)

Calming Breathing Explorations
for times of stress and uncertainty



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CALMNESS

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1. HUMANUAL BREATHING VIDEO



Watch the video once through

These days of shelter at home and physical (social) distancing can cause anxiety and fear. Both emotions and their physical manifestations emerge from our present situation and from our past biographical history. Constrictive responses to these emotions can limit our free-flowing breath. Paying attention to breathing has the capacity to change some of these emotional holding patterns.

2. BREATHING CONCEPTS

After you watch the video, let's clarify and fill out some of the concepts.

“We breathe and move in response to our inner and outer environment.”

Our breath adjusts to what we are thinking, doing, and feeling. Breathing is not an activity, but a response to activity. This idea gets lost in our modern world. We tend to want to control our responses, rather than listen to inner impulses. We have a whole world of activity inside, our inner environment, and we have a whole world of activity outside, our outer environment. As we shall see, there is ongoing communication available between the two, related to our breath.

“Our environments have changed. Many of us are in the house and feeling the anxiety that is in our world.”

In a flash, we have gone from freedom to roam, travel, and mingle with friends, to being confined to our homes. This is producing anxiety which, of course, changes and constricts our breath. On top of that, we have this looming unknown. Not knowing what this virus is, who will get it, and when this will end.

“Do it where-ever you are. No need for a particular posture.”

So often when we are asked to prepare for an exercise we are asked to make an effort to be in another position or posture. This implies that we are not okay where we are. Sometimes paying attention from right where we are is beneficial.

“Notice your breathing.”

As soon as we notice our breathing, we bring our attention to include what is happening inside. With that, perhaps we stop racing ahead with body and/or mind.

“Notice that you can breathe.”

Breath is truly a gift. I think we appreciate this more now as we are faced with a virus that often attacks the respiratory system.

“Be careful not to force a breath.”

We often think bigger or more is better: a bigger inhale or a longer exhale. These enhanced actions may be desirable, but how we produce them matters. We do not want to force, push, or pull the breath in this exploration. We want to allow.

“Forcing the breath is alpha, ego strong.”

No need for any more of that right now. There are plenty of opportunities in life to be strong and forge ahead. This time is not one of them. This time we are asked to stay home and perhaps reflect a bit more than usual. This invites the non-doing, or doing less. Not forcing, but allowing.

“Observable presence noticing.”

The witness mind can give us a different view; we take a step back, out of ourselves, and make a bit of distance so that we can watch ourselves. In that moment we are less caught up in what is the “doing” of things, and we are more curious and observing.

“You don’t need to make inhale or exhale bigger.”

“A bit softer?”

Can you notice that there are fewer hard edges to your breath? Maybe a bit more flow. This may bring up some emotion for you that got buried in the recent or distant past. We often use breath to control and/or hold down our breath, as we read about in *Humanual*.

“Notice the movement.”

Where in you moves as you breathe? Your breath might change as you pay attention, but that is not the same as you forcing either inhale or exhale.

“Inner and outer movement.”

Tingling, stretching, filling, expanding, are all possible here. Your mind and body communicating with each other.

“Notice where there is movement and where there is no movement.”

As I mentioned, we restrict breath going to certain places because we do not want to feel specific sensations or feelings like anxiety and fear. But ignoring them does not make them go away.

“We are one unit, encased in an elastic suit called fascia.”

“When one part moves everything moves.”

“Not something we normally feel, but we could choose to become aware of it.”

This concept is explored extensively in *Humanual*.

“Back to your breath out and in. Noticing the movement.”

We lose connection so easily.

“Look around the room. How is it to have the movement and see your world.”

You may notice more vivid colors or the different shapes. Perhaps you notice something you had not seen before.

“I feel more movable, expandable, flexible.”

“A little less, ‘Yikes,’ what is going to happen?”

Notice the reaction in your body when I said “Yikes.” This thought will come back given the situation. But we want to recognize that we have a choice....and that we can go back and forth between the “Yikes” and....

“Back to breath – movable and breathable, allowing.”

3. STRENGTHEN THE DIAPHRAGM

When we are in an anxious or fearful state for an extended period of time, our lack of deeper breathing forces the diaphragm to become weakened, limiting its movement.

Most people have an excursion, the up and down traveling distance of their diaphragm, that is less than optimal. This means that their diaphragm is not as strong as it could be and they don't fully expel carbon dioxide from their lungs.

The maximum motion of the diaphragm is almost five inches, but most people have less than one and a half inches of motion, using only a third of their capacity. This shows that the diaphragm is in a weakened state.

Paying attention to your breathing can help to strengthen your diaphragm, which in turn can help to calm your nervous system.

A. SILENT LA LA LA

You strengthen your diaphragm as it lowers on the inhale and rises on the exhale. A strengthened diaphragm will help in easing the natural flow of your breath out and in.

Preparation: This exercise can be done sitting, standing, walking, or lying down.

- 1. Do a few cycles of breathing, paying attention to your exhale. Is it cut short? Is it forced?*
- 2. Now say “la la la” silently as you breathe out. To do this your tongue moves from behind your top teeth to behind your bottom teeth. It does not involve your jaw. Do not move your jaw up and down while doing the silent “la la la.” Continue the “la la la” for the entire exhale.*

The silent “la la la” tricks the glottis into staying open longer and extends the exhale without pressure. By extending the exhale as far as possible, it triggers a reflex inhale. This way you do not “take” a breath, but the breath springs in without excess muscular effort. Constant, undemanding use of the diaphragm—which has become a weakened muscle in most people due to mis/under/improper use—enables the diaphragm to develop.

B. EXERCISE TO EXPLORE BREATH AND SOUND

As you practice, the silent la la la will begin to strengthen your diaphragm.

The next thing you want to add to continue to strengthen and redevelop your diaphragm is sound. When you are just breathing there is space between the vocal folds. The vocal folds produce sound when they touch and vibrate together.

Adding the resistance of the vocal folds as you breathe out strengthens the diaphragm, as it has more to push against. This is like a weight lifter adding weights to build strength.

As your exhale grows organically (not in a forced way) your system is invited into a calmer state. The exhale is the activity that requires more attention than the inhale. As you lengthen and widen your torso for a complete exhale, you are able to get the reflex inhale, which creates more space in your torso, inviting a calmer, more settled state.

Please note this is not a breathing exercise where you count and hold your breath for a certain length of time. We are using the numbers just as words with different syllables. You can choose other words if you like.

EXERCISE TO EXPLORE BREATH AND SOUND

Preparation: Lie on your back, with your knees bent and feet flat, or let your legs straighten with a cushion under your knees. Put a small folded towel under your head, so it is not falling backward. Let yourself settle into the floor or mat, and let whatever is under you support you.

- 1. Do one exhale of silent la la la's, so the inhale comes as a reflex.*
- 2. Say the numbers 1-2-3-4-5 out loud on the exhale. Then do silent la la la to finish whatever breath you have to complete the exhale.*
- 3. Inhale again, this time counting 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10 on the exhale. Do silent la la la to finish the exhale.*
- 4. Inhale, counting 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10-1-2-3-4-5 on the exhale. Do silent la la la to finish the exhale.*
- 5. Keep increasing the count by 5's, but never count beyond the number 10. Remember to lengthen and widen your back while you exhale.*
- 6. As you repeat more sets of one-to-ten counts, try saying them in a sing-songy manner, using different pitches, so that the diaphragm is still rising and moving smoothly. If you say the numbers in a staccato fashion, the diaphragm will be moving in a jerky fashion.*
- 7. Only grow the count as high as you can go without tensing your belly and without pulling your shoulders together to squeeze the exhale out. Allow your shoulders to widen as your torso is lengthening.*
- 8. Stop if you feel yourself overly tensing and start the process again, from the last number set you felt completely at ease with (i.e. four sets of tens). Don't push yourself to go farther than you're comfortable with. But as you practice this exercise, you will find yourself being able to count more and more sets of ten.*

I hope these simple breathing explorations have allowed you to connect in a deeper way with yourself to find calmness.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



BETSY POLATIN is a breathing and movement specialist with four decades of experience in body-mind education and performance training. She has worked with many performing artists in theater, film, and music, including such luminaries as Rashida Jones, Ginnifer Goodwin, Andre Gregory, and John Denver.

Her work recognizes the disconnection that exists between ourselves, each other, and our environment. Her unique and intuitive perspectives are greatly influenced by the study of movement, breath, and trauma, as well as the teachings of Spiritual and Meditation Masters.

A certified Breathing Coordination instructor and a Somatic Experiencing practitioner, she holds a BA in dance and an MFA in theater education. She continues to teach her work extensively, both privately and in master classes in the United States and abroad.

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