

Diaphragmatic Breathing

A Therapy Worksheet for Muslim Clients

How to breathe in a way that calms the body, steadies the heart, and supports presence in worship.

أَلَّا بِذِكْرِ اللَّهِ تَطْمَئِنُّ الْقُلُوبُ

Ala bi-dhikr-illahi tatma'innu al-quloob

"Verily, in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find rest."

Surah Ar-Ra'd (13:28)

Why This Skill Matters

Diaphragmatic breathing, also called belly breathing or deep breathing, is one of the most evidence-based and immediately accessible self-regulation skills in mental health care. It works by directly activating the parasympathetic nervous system, the body's calming branch, through stimulation of the vagus nerve.

When you breathe shallowly into the chest, the body interprets this as a stress signal: oxygen exchange is reduced, the heart rate stays elevated, and the brain remains in a state of vigilance. When you breathe slowly and deeply into the belly, the diaphragm moves down, the lungs fill more completely, and the body receives the signal that it is safe to settle.

Research has consistently shown that slow diaphragmatic breathing reduces cortisol, lowers heart rate, improves heart rate variability, and decreases symptoms of anxiety, panic, and stress (Ma et al., 2017; Yasuma & Hayano, 2004; Brown & Gerbarg, 2005).

The Islamic Context

In the Islamic tradition, the breath is described as a gift from Allah, an *amanah* given to every soul. The Prophet (peace be upon him) is reported to have engaged in unhurried, measured breathing during salah, particularly in sujud and ruku. The deliberate slowness of *khushu* in prayer aligns naturally with diaphragmatic breathing.

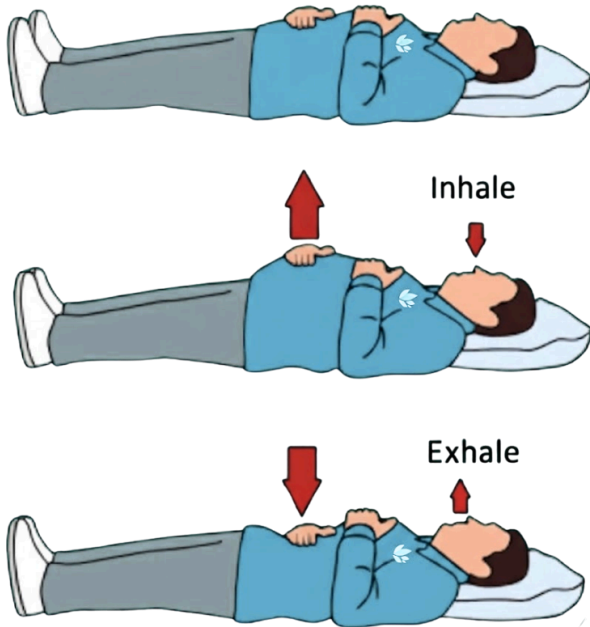
Furthermore, the Qur'an describes the heart finding rest through the remembrance of Allah. Slow, deep breathing creates the physiological conditions of stillness in which dhikr and contemplation can deepen. This worksheet teaches a skill that supports both psychological wellbeing and spiritual presence.

How this links to worship

- Breath awareness can be combined with dhikr (such as *SubhanAllah* on the inhale, *Alhamdulillah* on the exhale).
- The slow, intentional breathing supports *khushu* in *salah*.
- *Wudu* itself is a moment of calming the body. Slow breathing during wudu deepens this effect.

Part 1: Are You Chest Breathing or Belly Breathing?

Most adults in busy urban and city life have developed a habit of shallow chest breathing without realising it. The diagram below shows the difference. Take a moment to notice your own breathing right now: which moves, your chest or your belly?



What you may notice

If your shoulders rise when you breathe, your chest is doing the work. This shallow breathing keeps the body slightly activated, which is fine for short bursts of effort but contributes to chronic tension when sustained. Belly breathing engages the diaphragm and produces a deeper, calmer breath.

Quick check

Place one hand on your chest and one hand on your belly.

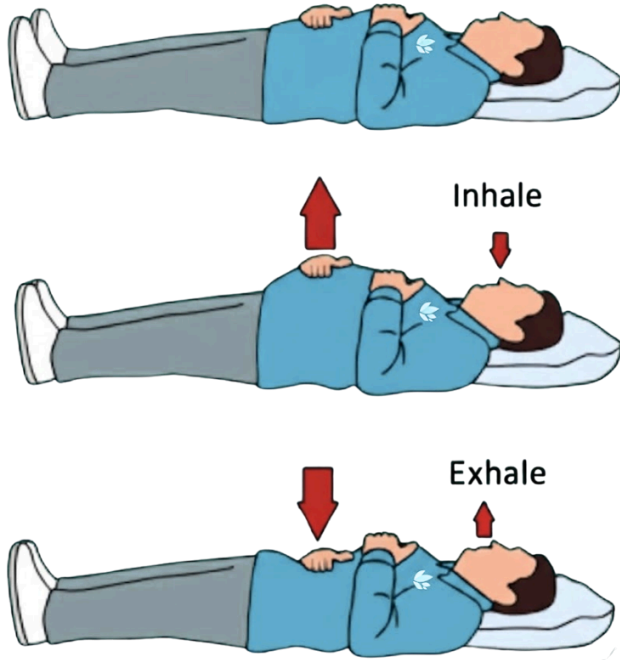
Take a normal breath. Which hand moves more?

If the top hand moves more, you are chest breathing.

If the bottom hand moves more, you are already belly breathing well.

Part 2: The Hand Placement Method

The simplest way to learn or check diaphragmatic breathing is to use your hands as a biofeedback tool. The hand on the belly should rise and fall noticeably. The hand on the chest should stay relatively still.



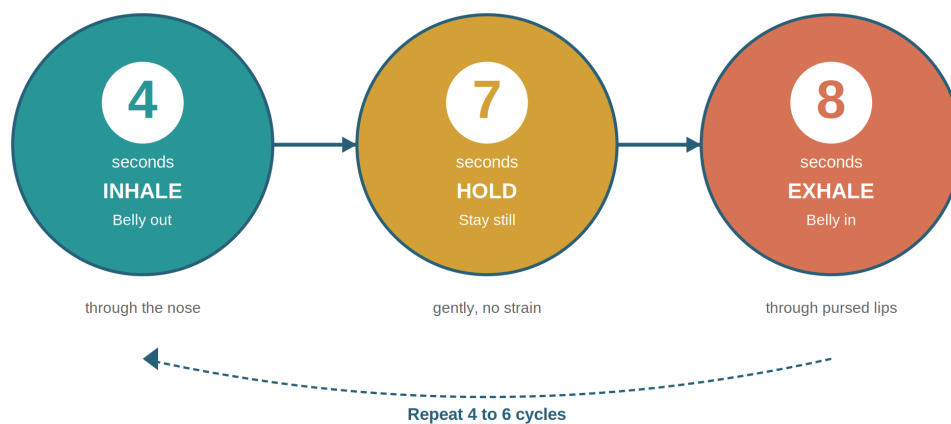
This is not just a learning aid. Many therapists recommend keeping the hands in this position during the actual breathing practice, because the gentle pressure of the hand provides a tactile anchor that the mind can return to when it wanders.

Part 3: The 4-7-8 Breathing Cycle

The 4-7-8 pattern is a structured breathing technique, drawing on pranayama traditions and supported by contemporary research on autonomic nervous system regulation. The key principle is simple: the exhale should be longer than the inhale, because a long exhale is what activates the calming branch of the nervous system.

The 4-7-8 Breathing Cycle

Slow, even rhythm. Repeat 4 to 6 cycles.



If 4-7-8 feels too long, start with 4-4-6. The point is the exhale is longer than the inhale.
A longer exhale activates the parasympathetic (calming) system.

If 4-7-8 feels too intense

Some people find a 7-count hold uncomfortable, especially at first. There are gentler alternatives that still work:

- 4-4-6 (inhale 4, hold 4, exhale 6) is a good starting point.
- 4-2-6 (inhale 4, hold 2, exhale 6).
- 4-0-6 (no hold) is fine if holding feels stressful.
- **The essential rule: the exhale is longer than the inhale.**


Part 4: Step-by-Step Practice

The diagram below summarises the four phases of a single breath cycle. Practise this five times a day, spread them out morning and evening, perhaps after every *salah*, for at least 5 minutes each time.

Step-by-Step Diaphragmatic Breathing

Four steps. Practise twice daily, 5 minutes each time.

1 GET INTO POSITION




Sit comfortably or lie down.
Back straight, shoulders relaxed.

If sitting: feet flat on the floor, knees comfortable.

Close your eyes if comfortable.

2 PLACE YOUR HANDS




One hand on your chest, one hand just below the ribs (on the belly).

This lets you feel which hand is moving.

Aim for the lower hand to do the work.

3 BREATHE IN SLOWLY




Breathe in slowly through your nose for 4 counts.

Feel your belly push out (not your chest).

Lower hand rises.
Upper hand stays mostly still.

4 BREATHE OUT GENTLY



Breathe out slowly through pursed lips for 6 to 8 counts.

Feel your belly draw in gently.

Long exhale activates the calming nervous system.

Repeat the cycle 4 to 6 times. Then breathe normally and notice how your body feels.

Detailed instructions

Step 1: Get into position. Sit comfortably with your back straight, or lie on your back. If you have just made wudu, this is an especially good time to practise. Close your eyes if it feels comfortable.

Step 2: Place your hands. One hand rests on your chest, the other rests just below the ribs on the belly. This gives you immediate feedback about which area is moving.

Step 3: Breathe in slowly through the nose. Count to 4 as you inhale. Feel your belly push out against your hand. The hand on your chest should barely move. The air goes deep into the lower lungs.

Step 4: Breathe out slowly through pursed lips. Count to 6 or 8 on the exhale. Imagine you are breathing out through a thin straw. Feel your belly draw in gently. This long, slow exhale is what tells your nervous system to calm.

Part 5: When to Use This Skill

Diaphragmatic breathing is most effective when practised twice a day as a daily habit, not only used in moments of crisis. Like any skill, it becomes more accessible the more you practise it in calm conditions.

Daily practice times

- After Fajr, before starting your day.
- Before Maghrib or after Isha, to wind down for sleep.
- While waiting (in the car, in queues, between tasks).

As-needed moments

- Before a difficult conversation.
- When anxiety or panic starts to rise.
- When anger arises (combined with seeking refuge in Allah).
- During tahajjud, dhikr, or contemplative recitation.
- When struggling to fall asleep.

Combining With Dhikr

Once the basic breathing pattern feels natural, you can add dhikr to deepen the practice. A simple combination is:

On the inhale: silently say SubhanAllah.

On the exhale: silently say Alhamdulillah.

This is not a religious innovation; it is simply using the natural rhythm of the breath as a vessel for remembrance, which has classical precedent in Islamic contemplative practice.

Part 6: When This Skill Is Not Recommended

Diaphragmatic breathing is generally safe for almost everyone. However, there are a few situations where caution is warranted:

- Severe respiratory conditions (active asthma flare, COPD exacerbation, pneumonia): consult your GP first.
- Recent abdominal surgery: belly movement may be painful or contraindicated.
- Trauma survivors with breath-related triggers: belly breathing can occasionally cause distress in people whose trauma involved suffocation or restraint. If this applies, work with a trauma-trained clinician.
- Active hyperventilation: paradoxically, taking very deep breaths can worsen hyperventilation. Use shorter, gentler breaths until the episode settles.

Important note

Diaphragmatic breathing is a regulation skill, not a substitute for medical or psychological treatment.

If you are experiencing panic attacks, severe anxiety, or persistent breathlessness, please speak with a qualified clinician.

[Inference] Combining this skill with professional therapy typically produces better outcomes than either alone.

My Practice Log

Use this log to track your practice over two weeks. Aim for twice-daily practice. Rate how you felt before (0 to 10) and after (0 to 10), where 0 means very calm and 10 means very tense.

Day	Time	Duration	Before (0-10)	After (0-10)	Notes
1					
2					
3					
4					
5					
6					
7					
8					
9					
10					
11					
12					
13					
14					

Reflection After Two Weeks

After two weeks of consistent practice, take a moment to reflect on what changed.

What did I notice about my body?

What did I notice about my emotions and thoughts?

What did I notice about my salah or dhikr?

A Final Note

The breath is something we share with every living being and something we receive every moment from Allah, often without noticing. Learning to breathe deliberately is, in one sense, a return to something we have always done. In another sense, it is a form of remembrance: an acknowledgement that this body, this breath, this moment, are entrusted to us.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) said:

"There are two blessings which many people lose: health and free time." (Sahih al-Bukhari 6412).

Taking five minutes twice a day to attend to the breath is one small way of honouring the blessing of health while it is yours.

May Allah grant you sakinah in every breath.