Learning how to use diaphragmatic breathing

Hypnosis approaches to gastrointestinal (GI) conditions:

The ability to relax and clear your mind is a helpful coping skill for managing life's stressors. However, if you have many stressors, such as those that can be associated with having a chronic disease or pain, you may have some difficulties with relaxation. You may even wonder, "Where would I begin?" Your breath is a wonderful place to begin when it comes to relaxation. There are many advantages to learning diaphragmatic breathing (e.g., belly breathing, deep breathing). Here are just a few:

Lowers heart rate and blood pressure, decreases muscle tension, increases energy and motivation, improves concentration, strengthens the immune system, reduces stress hormones, activates the relaxation response of the body (reversal of the stress response) and can be easily implemented.

There are additional benefits for GI conditions:

The activation of the diaphragm through diaphragmatic breathing allows for a gentle massage of the internal organs (intestines and stomach). This can aid with abdominal pain, urgency, bloating and constipation.

For those who experience ***diarrhoea*** and urgency, use diaphragmatic breathing in those moments of panic (i.e., "I MUST get to the bathroom immediately) to aid with calming down your GI tract.

For those with *constipation*, use diaphragmatic breathing while sitting on the toilet attempting to have a bowel movement. The relaxed breathing can aid with calming and massaging your system, which may lead to a more complete bowel movement.

Learning to use diaphragmatic breathing:

1. Sit or lie in a comfortable place. Close your eyes.
2. Place one hand on your chest and one hand on your abdomen. Your bottom hand should do the moving. Your top hand should remain still or only move as the bottom hand moves.

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3. Inhale through your nose for about four seconds, feeling your abdomen expand. You may feel slight tension during these initial inhalations.
4. Hold your breath for two seconds.
5. Then exhale through your mouth very slowly for about six seconds. Mouth should be relaxed with a steady, slow exhalation.
6. Repeat for 5–15 minutes.

When first learning diaphragmatic breathing, you may have some uneasiness or lightheadedness. This is normal, so allow yourself time to acclimate after your practice (i.e., don't stand up quickly). Quicken your breath if you feel lightheaded.

Diaphragmatic breathing is a skill that requires practice. It will become easier with time and can become an excellent tool for relaxation, whether sitting, standing, or driving in your car.

This handout was written by Dr Megan Riehl based upon her chapter entitled "Hypnosis approaches to gastrointestinal conditions" (Chapter 15) from Knowles, S.R., Keefer, L., & Mikocka-Walus, A. (2019). Psychogastroenterology with Adults: A Handbook for Mental Health Professionals. Oxon, UK: Routledge Press.

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