

Breath work for cancer recovery

Exercises for a calmer mind and body



SPARKLES OF GRACE

Breath work, also known as pranayama, is a vital part of practicing yoga. Pranayama comes from the Sanskrit word "prana," which means "life force" or "energy." When you practice breathwork, you use your breath to channel that energy and connect mind and body.

For cancer patients and survivors, breath work can have many benefits. It helps manage symptoms, improve quality of life, and support recovery.

One of the key benefits of breath work is reducing stress and anxiety. By engaging your respiratory diaphragm and taking slow, focused breaths, you activate your parasympathetic nervous system. This helps your body enter the "rest and digest" response, which can counteract the effects of the "fight or flight" response. As a result, you can lower your heart rate, reduce your blood pressure, and feel more relaxed.

Breath work can also help strengthen the muscles used in breathing, increase lung capacity, reduce inflammation¹ and support our immune system. It has been shown to increase natural killer cell activity, which is important for your immune system's defense against cancer cells². Additionally, it may help manage pain, regulate mood, and improve sleep quality.

It is important to remember that breath work is not a substitute for medical treatment. However, it is a valuable complementary therapy for cancer patients and survivors.

Here are three of my favorite simple breathing exercises that you can practice at home:

1. Belly button breath

Belly button breath is a gentle exercise that promotes breath awareness and relaxation. By engaging the diaphragm, it helps slow down the breathing rate, calm the mind, and bring about a deep sense of relaxation.

In addition, belly button breath may also help to improve digestion by massaging the abdominal organs and enhancing blood flow to the digestive tract.

Lie down on your back and make yourself comfortable. You can bend your knees and place your feet on the floor, or you can put a cushion or rolled blanket under your knees. You may want to add a pillow under your head as well.



Once you are comfortable, place a light book or object on top of your belly button. Rest your arms by your sides. As you breathe normally, through the nose, notice how the book moves with the movements of your breath.

On the inhale, notice how the book rises as the belly expands and, on the exhale, notice how the book lowers as the belly falls back down.

As you become more comfortable with the exercise, you may also want to experiment with expanding the belly further on the inhale and engaging the core muscles more deeply on the exhale to enhance the benefits of the exercise.

2. Straw breath

Straw breathing is a simple but effective technique that involves exhaling slowly through pursed lips, as if you are sipping through a straw. It can quickly reduce anxiety and panic, increase feelings of calm and relaxation, and improve your ability to think clearly. This technique can also help manage shortness of breath and improve lung function.

To practice straw breathing, find a comfortable seated position with your back straight and your face, neck, and shoulders relaxed. First, take a few moments to notice your natural breath.

When you are ready to start, inhale slowly through your nose, then purse your lips as if you are holding a straw in your mouth. Exhale slowly and gently through the imaginary straw in your mouth and repeat the process for a few minutes. Try to progressively make your exhale longer than your inhale.



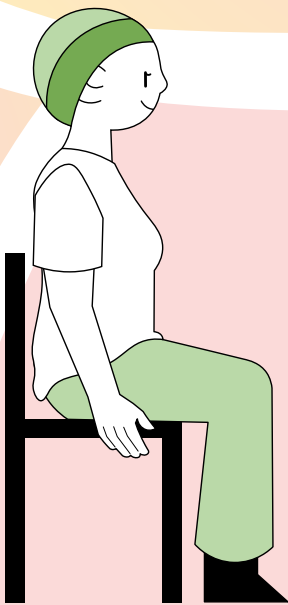
As you practice, focus on the rising movement of your abdomen as you inhale, and the falling movement of your abdomen as you exhale. Make sure your breath remains calm and without strain. You should start to notice a difference in your breathing and overall sense of calm within just a few minutes.

Remember, straw breathing is a simple but powerful tool that you can use anytime and anywhere to reduce stress and improve your breathing. Give it a try and see how it works for you !

3. Synchronizing movement and breath

By coordinating movement and breath, we create a sense of flow and fluidity that can be very soothing for the nervous system. The focus required to coordinate breath and movement encourages us to stay present. Moving with intention helps us escape mental ruminations, bringing a greater sense of relaxation and peace to the mind.

In addition to these mental benefits, synchronizing movement and breath also have physical benefits. It can help build strength and flexibility and improve coordination and balance. When we move with our breath, we engage our core muscles, creating stability and support for the body. Synchronizing movement and breath can also stimulate lymphatic drainage and support our immune system.



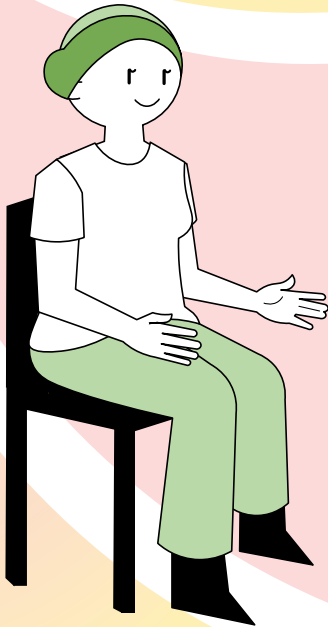
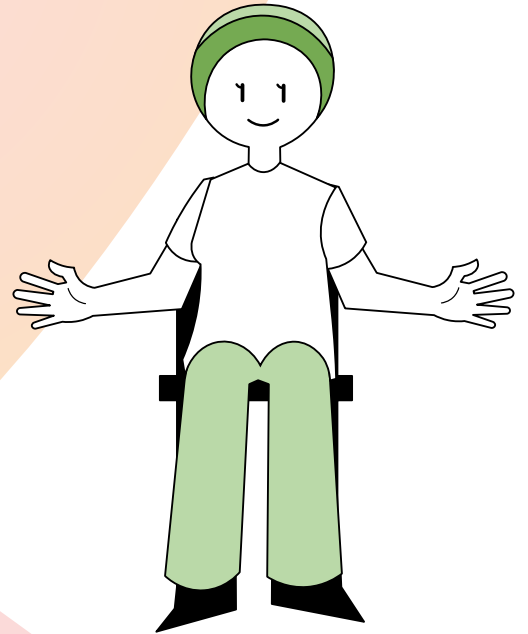
Here is an example of how you can synchronize movement and slow, gentle breathing :

Step 1 : Sit upright on a chair, without leaning back. Rest your arms down to the sides.

Step 2 : Keeping your elbows close to the body, bend your elbows 90° with your palms facing each other. Relax your shoulders down.



Step 3 : As you inhale through the nose, open your forearms to the sides. Try to keep your forearms parallel to the floor. Your elbows may move away slightly from the body. Feel your chest open and your shoulders broaden.

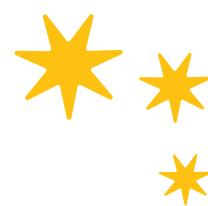


Step 4 : As you exhale through the nose, gently close your forearms until your palms face each other again with your elbows close to the body, back to step 2. As you do that, pull the navel in, and hollow your belly.

Repeat the sequence from steps 2 to 4 for five to ten slow and gentle breaths, feeling the movements of your hands and forearms with each inhale and exhale. Feel free to modify the arm movements to suit your body.

If it feels right to you, you may want to add a simple visualization to help focus the mind, deepen relaxation, and enhance the sense of connection between the body and breath. For example, you may want to imagine that you are holding a ball of energy between your hands. On the inhale, the ball of energy expands, and on the exhale, the energy gets concentrated into a smaller ball. You may want to explore different visualizations that resonate with you.

As you get more familiar with these techniques, consider adding them to your daily routines. Be creative and happy breathing!



Are you a breast cancer survivor and are looking to regain a sense of peace and fulfillment in life?

My holistic program will help you ease the side effects of the treatment, reconnect with who you are deep inside, and find harmony in mind, body, emotion, and spirit.

Contact me for a free consultation: alice@sparklesofgrace.com

References

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2. Vadiraja, H. S., Rao, M. R., Nagarathna, R., Nagendra, H. R., Patil, S., Diwakar, R. B., & Ram, A. (2008). Effects of yoga on natural killer cell counts in early breast cancer patients undergoing conventional treatment: a randomized controlled pilot study. *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 15(2), 130-136. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10705500801940728>