

BREATHWORK POCKET GUIDE

FAST FACTS

- Breathwork is a commonly used therapy in the military; it is known to ease symptoms of fear and anxiety and help with trauma-related illnesses like post-traumatic stress disorder.
- Breathwork can significantly decrease the risk of developing heart disease by decreasing one of its major risk factors: blood pressure.
- Breathwork is involved in many different mind-body practices including, but not limited to, yoga, meditation, tai chi, qi gong and guided imagery.

WHAT IS BREATHWORK?

Breathwork is a practice and/or therapeutic intervention that involves consciously exerting control over breathing patterns to address mental, physical and spiritual health concerns. Controlling one's breathing helps focus the mind, detach oneself from immediate reactions to thoughts, and make it easier to get in touch with one's inner sense of peace and calm. It also induces multiple physiological and chemical effects such as altering heart rate, blood pressure and cortisol (stress hormone) levels.

WHAT CONDITIONS DOES BREATHWORK TREAT?

Breathwork is used to help both physical and mental health conditions and address symptoms related to chronic health concerns. It has been used for:

- Anxiety
- Asthma
- Chronic pain
- Anger issues
- Depression
- Trauma and posttraumatic stress
- Grief and loss
- Emotional effects of physical illness
- Insomnia
- Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease
- Labor pain
- High blood pressure
- Irritable bowel syndrome symptoms
- Smoking cessation
- Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
- Other conditions

Breathwork also has a positive impact on healthy individuals who are seeking to improve their physical and mental health. Breathwork has been shown to alter:

- Immune system
- Stress levels
- Metabolic functioning
- Quality of life
- Emotional regulation

Is there evidence that breathwork works?

In the last 20 years, as patients increasingly integrate complementary and alternative medicine into their treatment plans, more and more literature is being published exploring the impact breathwork has on treating symptoms of certain conditions.

- Healthy males who engaged in slow breathing exercises for 12 weeks had significantly perceived stress and improved cardiovascular functioning.¹
- A systematic review looking at the impact of breathing exercises on participants with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) who participated in 16 randomized control trials found that patients with COPD who engaged in breathing exercises for over 4 to 15 weeks improved their ability to engage in and tolerate exercise.²
- Healthy adults who participated in 20 intensive sessions of diaphragmatic breathing exercises had improved sustained attention, decreased stress hormones and increased positive mood.³
- Children (ages 6-14) with moderate to severe anxiety who participated in a 12-week relaxation-breathing program had decreased anxiety levels which improved children's asthma related symptoms.⁴

If you or your health care provider would like to explore more research on breathwork's impact on a particular health concern, visit: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/?term=breathing+exercises>

Are there precautions, side effects or safety concerns I should be aware of before I start breathwork?

Breathwork is widely considered a safe way of addressing physical and mental symptoms; side effects are rare.

Precautions

- Although rare, there have been reports that engaging in breathwork has worsened symptoms of patients with psychiatric problems. If you are suffering from an existing psychiatric condition, it is recommended you do not initially engage in breathwork without the supervision of a licensed breathwork practitioner. If you are attending a breathwork class, please make sure to alert your instructor of your condition.
- Excessively rapid breathing can drop carbon dioxide levels and change the pH of the blood, causing muscle cramps and, on rare occasions, seizures. If you are susceptible to seizures, consult your doctor before engaging in intensive breathwork.

How often should I seek treatment from a breathwork practitioner? How long is each session?

How often and for how long you attend breathwork sessions is dependent on the reason you are seeking the help and the type of breathwork in which you are engaging. Typically, classes or an individual session with a practitioner can run anywhere from 20 minutes to an hour. Many practitioners will encourage you to begin a daily breathwork or meditation practice in addition to attending your breathwork sessions.

Do I need to attend classes or work with a certified clinician to begin breathwork?

If you do not have a history of severe psychiatric illness or seizures, you can begin developing a breathwork practice on your own. Applications on mobile phones like Headspace and Calm are available to help with breathwork practice. Research has shown that using online breathwork programs can replicate the benefits of in-person programs.⁵

What training/certifications do breathwork clinicians have?

The training and/or certifications that your breathwork clinician holds depends on the type of breathwork therapist you will see or classes you will attend. Unlike in other disciplines, a centralized organization that oversees the certifications and training requirements of breathwork clinicians and practitioners does not exist unless they are attached to a specific meditation discipline.

Currently, many independent organizations lead trainings and provide certifications to individuals who either take their courses or meet their qualifications. Before seeking the treatment of a breathwork therapist, please ask your practitioner for his/her qualifications and research the organization where they received them.

The following websites can help you ask the right questions and address the training qualifications prior to your first session with a breathwork practitioner:

Breathwork Alliance

<http://breathworkalliance.com/member-directory/certified-schools>

The Breathwork Alliance has standardized the requirements needed to become a breathwork practitioner and certifies different breathwork training schools. To find out more about their requirements and how they certify particular breathwork schools, visit: <http://breathworkalliance.com/about-ibta/training-standards>

How do I find breathwork classes being taught near me?

Depending on the type of breathwork services you are seeking, please visit: <http://breathworkalliance.com/member-directory>

Many hospitals and clinics have also incorporated breathwork and relaxation techniques into their inpatient and outpatient programs. To see if there is a center near you offering breathwork or similar trainings and/or classes visit:

Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Memorial Medical Center in Worcester, Massachusetts
www.umassmed.edu/cfm/mbsr

How much will seeing a breathwork practitioner cost me?

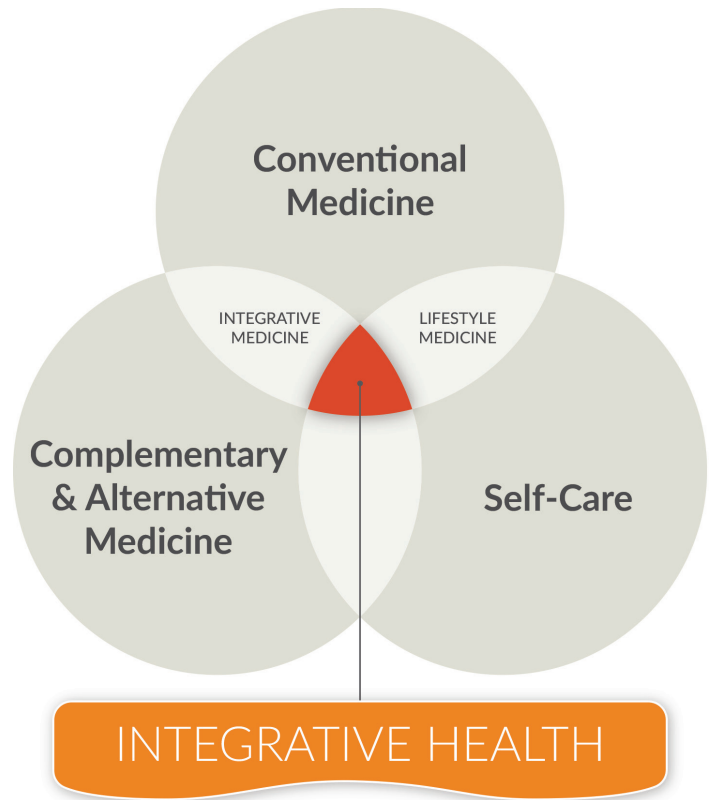
The cost of attending breathwork classes or seeing a breathwork therapist will vary based on location, provider and extent of services needed. If you have membership at a gym or spa, check to see if it includes free or discounted breathwork classes that meet your needs.

Will my insurance company cover the cost of seeing a breathwork clinician?

Currently, there are very few instances in which insurance companies cover the cost of breathwork therapy or classes.

Should I inform my primary care physician that I am seeing an breathwork therapist?

Let your primary care physician and any other health care providers treating you know that you would like to include breathwork in the tools you are using to address your medical condition or concern. Open communication can help you and your health care providers avoid complications that may arise from not openly discussing any treatments and help coordinate clinicians you employ to address your condition.



References:

- 1 Naik, G.S., Gaur, G.S., & Pal, G.K. (2018). Effect of Modified Slow Breathing Exercise on Perceived Stress and Basal Cardiovascular Parameters. *International Journal of Yoga*, 11(1); pp. 53-58.
- 2 Holland, A.E., Hill, C.J., Jones, A.Y., & McDonald, C.F. (2012) Breathing exercises for chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. *Cochrane Database Systematic Review*, 17(10).
- 3 Ma, X., Yue, Z.-Q., Gong, Z.-Q., Zhang, H., Duan, N.-Y., Shi, Y.-T., ... Li, Y.-F. (2017). The Effect of Diaphragmatic Breathing on Attention, Negative Affect and Stress in Healthy Adults. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8.
- 4 Chiang, L.C., Ma, W.F., Huang, J.L., Tseng, L.F., Hsueh, K.C. (2009). Effect of relaxation-breathing training on anxiety and asthma signs/symptoms of children with moderate-to-severe asthma: a randomized controlled trial. *International Journal Nursing Studies*, 46(8): pp. 1061-70.
- 5 Spijkerman, M. P. J., Pots, W. T. M., & Bohlmeijer, E. T. (2016). Effectiveness of online mindfulness-based interventions in improving mental health: A review and meta-analysis of randomised controlled trials. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 45; pp. 102-114.