



Center for Integrative Oncology and Survivorship

Stress Reduction Breathing Techniques

For cancer patients and survivors, stress and anxiety can sometimes make it challenging to get a good night's sleep. Some people have trouble falling asleep, while others report waking up during the night unable to return to sleep. The "4-7-8" breathing exercise, also called the relaxing breath, aids in achieving a relaxed and clear state of mind. Stress causes your body to release adrenaline into your veins, your heart to beat at a rapid rate, and your breaths to become quick and shallow. The "4-7-8" breathing exercise slows your heart rate and helps reduce anxiety and stress, enabling you to fall asleep.

The "4-7-8" Breathing Exercise

To do the "4-7-8" breathing exercise, breathe in through your nose for four seconds, hold your breath for seven seconds, and exhale through your mouth for eight seconds. The timing of each segment of the exercise is very important. If you follow the exercise as directed, without speeding up or pausing between repetitions, you will feel your heart rate begin to slow. This results in a more settled mind and a relaxed body.

Stress and anxiety cause people to take short, shallow breaths, and even occasionally to hold their breath without realizing it. By focusing on a longer inward breath, you allow yourself to take in more oxygen. Holding your breath for seven seconds allows the oxygen to fully enter your bloodstream. The slow, steady eight-second outward breath helps release carbon dioxide from your lungs. This exercise immediately relaxes the heart, mind and nervous system. It may also make you feel slightly lightheaded, which contributes to its mild, sedative-like effect.

How it Can Work for You

There are many benefits to using this technique as a stress-reduction tool and sleep aide. It is free, as opposed to prescription sleep medications, and also avoids the side effects associated with such products. You can use this exercise in many scenarios—not only trying to fall asleep, but also calming yourself when you are angry or anxious.

Rooted in Tradition

Mindful breathing practices have been a part of yoga and Eastern wellness modalities for centuries. The most well-known champion of the "4-7-8" breathing technique in the US is Dr. Andrew Weil. He popularized the "4-7-8" technique among integrative medicine practitioners, yoga fans and those in search of stress reduction and relaxation. If you would like to learn more about mindful breathing to sleep, call the Center for Integrative Oncology and Survivorship at (864) 455-1346.

This education piece was adapted from a blog written by Alina Gonzalez.

