



Jennifer
Monness

Breathing and Meditation

Looking for the perfect way to wind down? Why not find some inner Zen with these breathing and meditation tactics from a local pro.

Now that you've learned to eat right, it's time to turn your attention to something you do even more often: breathe. "I believe that one of the most effective stress management tools is the practice of mindful breathing," says Jennifer Monness, a mindfulness/meditation facilitator and owner of The Meditation Lab, in Irvington.

Breathing exercises are a natural answer to the unrest we all feel daily. "When we experience stress, the fight-or-flight response is activated, and your heart rate is elevated. You have a lot of adrenaline moving through your body and cortisol," Monness explains. "When we start to take some long, deep breaths in very patterned, rhythmic ways, we actually signal our nervous system that now, in response to fight-

or-flight, we can rest and digest. The heart rate is lowered, and blood pressure goes down."

To experience these effects for yourself, try a couple of simple breathing exercises. "One would be counting the beats to your inhale and then doing your best to double the count of the beats on your exhale, so if you're inhaling for three beats, you would do your best to exhale for six," Monness says. "You could begin to feel benefits in as little as one to two minutes." Or, try simply counting ten breaths, she suggests. "Sometimes practitioners just make a mental note of the word 'in' as they inhale, and then they exhale the number one, and then they mentally note the word 'in' as they inhale, and exhale the number two, working their

way from one to 10." By taking time each day to close your eyes and connect with your breath, you're allowing yourself to slowly let some of the thoughts in your mind to begin to settle, Monness says.

Meditation, on the other hand, "allows us a bit of perspective so that we can observe ourselves, observe the mind moving all around and create a bit of space from it, so we feel a little more detached from the chatter," she explains. "The chatter loses its charge and doesn't have such a strong power over us, because we're not in its grip; we're creating that space that allows us to be a little less connected to that stressful dialogue." Yet many shy away from giving meditation a try. "A lot of people think, There's no way I would be able to do it, because I'm just not a relaxed person," Monness observes. "Like any other skill, you have to think of it like exercising a muscle that you haven't really worked out before. Over time and with consistent practice, that muscle will get stronger."

Start with these easy exercises: Sit up tall (this sends a signal to your nervous system that you're focused and alert) and take long, deep breaths. Then, anchor your attention on the sounds that are around you. Simply note them, without trying to mentally process them in any way. "I might make a mental note, 'birds chirping,' and then I'm bringing myself back to the breath, and I bring myself back to the breath again and again and again," Monness says. Try this exercise for three to five minutes — chances are you'll be successful, making it your first step in achieving mellow mindfulness.