



A BREATHWORK GUIDE & WORKBOOK

The Breath Within

*Finding calm, release, and steadiness in the face of
anxiety, grief, anger, and depression, one breath at a
time.*

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The Breath Within

A Breathwork Guide and Workbook for Anxiety, Grief, Anger, and Depression

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Important, please read. This book is intended for general education and self-help. It is not a substitute for professional medical, psychological, or psychiatric care, diagnosis, or treatment, and it does not create a therapist and client relationship. Breathing practices are generally safe for most people, but they are not appropriate for everyone. If you are pregnant, or live with a cardiovascular, respiratory, seizure, or significant psychiatric condition, consult a qualified healthcare provider before beginning. If you are in crisis or thinking about harming yourself, please reach out for help right away. In the U.S. you can call or text 988 (Suicide and Crisis Lifeline). Never practice breath retention or intensive breathing while driving, in water, or anywhere a brief dizziness could be dangerous.

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PART ONE

Foundations

You Are Already Breathing

Right now, without any effort from you, your body is breathing. It has done so every moment since you were born, and it will keep going whether you think about it or not. This is the quiet miracle we are going to work with together.

If you have picked up this book, there is a good chance you are carrying something heavy: a mind that races at 3 a.m., a grief that sits on your chest, an anger that flares before you can catch it, or a heaviness that makes ordinary days feel like wading through water. I want you to know, first, that you are not broken, and you are not alone. These experiences are some of the most human things there are. They are also, in part, states of the body, and the body has a door we can open from the inside.

That door is the breath. Of all the systems in your body, breathing is unique. It runs on automatic, yet you can also take the wheel. When you change how you breathe, slower and deeper, with a longer exhale, you send a direct, physical message to your nervous system that you are safe. You do not have to believe it for it to work. The body listens to rhythm before it listens to reason.

This is not magic, and it is not a replacement for therapy, medication, or the support of people who love you. Think of breathwork instead as a tool you can carry everywhere you go. It costs nothing, asks for no appointment, and is always available, even on your worst day. My hope is that by the last page, the breath will feel less like something that happens to you and more like a steady friend you know how to call on.

Let's begin, gently.

Dr. Smita Kapoor, DMFT, PhD (c), LMFT

*"Breath is the bridge which connects life to consciousness,
which unites your body to your thoughts."*

Why the Breath?

To trust a practice, it helps to understand why it works. This chapter is the clinical heart of the book: a clear, honest look at what science actually shows about breathing and the mind.

Two gears of the nervous system

Your autonomic nervous system runs the background functions you never have to think about, like your heartbeat, your digestion, and the dilation of your pupils. It works through two complementary branches. The sympathetic branch is your accelerator. It mobilizes you for fight or flight, speeding the heart, tightening muscles, and flooding the body with stress hormones. The parasympathetic branch is your brake. It governs rest and digest, slowing the heart and restoring calm.

Anxiety, anger, panic, and the agitated edge of grief are largely states of a stuck accelerator. Much of depression's heaviness, and the numb, frozen side of grief, involve a different dysregulation, a kind of shutdown. Breathwork is powerful because it can nudge this system in either direction. Slow, gentle breathing applies the brake, while fuller, more activating breathing can help lift a flat, shut-down state.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

A 2023 meta-analysis of 12 randomized controlled trials (785 participants) published in *Scientific Reports* found that breathwork was associated with significantly lower self-reported stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms compared with control conditions, including a meaningful effect on depressive symptoms (Hedges' g of roughly -0.40). The authors note the evidence is promising but still emerging, especially for clinical populations.[1]

The vagus nerve: your built-in brake cable

The brake of the parasympathetic system runs largely through the vagus nerve, a long, wandering nerve connecting brain, heart, lungs, and gut. The strength of this calming signal is sometimes measured as vagal tone or heart rate variability (HRV), the subtle beat-to-beat variation in your pulse. Higher HRV is generally a marker of a flexible, resilient nervous system that can recover quickly from stress.

Here is the elegant part: your heart rate naturally rises a little when you inhale and falls when you exhale. By deliberately lengthening and slowing the breath, especially the exhale, you amplify this rhythm and strengthen the vagal brake. Research shows that breathing at roughly five to six breaths per minute, with the exhale equal to or longer than the inhale, maximizes this effect and increases heart rate variability.[5]

THE EXHALE ADVANTAGE

A 2023 Stanford study in *Cell Reports Medicine* (Balban, Huberman, Spiegel, and colleagues) had 111 people practice five minutes a day of one breathing technique for a month. All breathwork groups improved mood and lowered breathing rate more than mindfulness meditation did, and the biggest gains came from cyclic sighing, an exhale-emphasizing pattern. Effects were measurable after a single session and grew with daily practice.[2]

From the body to the mind

We often assume calm thoughts must come first and a calm body follows. Breathwork reverses the order. By slowing the breath you lower heart rate and blood pressure, reduce circulating stress hormones such as cortisol, and shift brain activity away from pure threat-detection. A controlled trial of slow diaphragmatic breathing, for example, found reductions in cortisol alongside improvements in sustained attention and negative mood.[3] In plain terms: you can breathe your body into a calmer state, and the mind tends to follow.

A realistic promise

Breathwork is not a cure, and this book will never pretend it is. The honest picture from the science is this: breathing practices are low-risk, free, portable, and supported by a growing body of randomized trials for reducing stress, anxiety, and low mood, most strongly as a complement to other care, not a replacement for it. What you are learning is a genuine skill that rewards repetition. Like any skill, it gets easier and more effective the more you practice.

How to Use This Book

There is no wrong way to read this book. You can move straight through it, or flip directly to the chapter that matches what you are feeling today.

The shape of the book

Part One builds your foundation: the why, and the fundamental skill of breathing well.

Part Two devotes a full chapter to each of the four companions you may be living with: anxiety, grief, anger, and depression. Each of these chapters explains what is happening in the body, offers tailored breathing exercises as easy-to-follow cards, and includes journaling prompts. **Part Three** helps you weave it all into daily life with simple programs, troubleshooting, and reflection.

How to read an exercise card

Every practice in this book appears in a consistent card so you always know what to expect. Here is what the labels mean:

SAMPLE · CALMING

The Exercise Name

Best for: what it helps · **Time:** how long · **Where:** when to use it

1. Each numbered step is one clear action.
2. Counts (for example, "inhale for 4") are in seconds. Adjust to a pace that feels easy, never strained.
3. You finish by returning to normal, easy breathing.

A tip like this offers a small adjustment or a sign that it's working.

A few gentle ground rules

- **Comfort over performance.** Breathwork should feel like a relief, not a test. If a count feels like a strain, shorten it. There are no prizes for forcing it.

- **Start small.** Five minutes a day, done consistently, will do more for you than an occasional marathon session. The research showing real benefit used short, daily practice.[2]
- **Breathe through the nose** whenever you can, unless an exercise says otherwise. The nose warms, filters, and slows the air.
- **Notice, don't judge.** Some days will feel calmer than others. Both are information, not failure.

BEFORE YOU START

If you feel light-headed, dizzy, or anxious during any practice, stop and let your breathing return to normal. This passes quickly. Skip breath-holds if you are pregnant or have heart, lung, or seizure conditions, and check with your doctor first. Practice seated or lying down, never while driving or in water.

Learning to Breathe Again

Most of us, especially when stressed, breathe shallowly and high in the chest. Before adding any technique, it's worth relearning the body's natural, efficient way to breathe: from the diaphragm.

Meet your diaphragm

The diaphragm is a dome-shaped muscle beneath your lungs. When it contracts and flattens, it creates space and your lungs fill from the bottom; your belly gently rises. When it relaxes, air leaves and the belly falls. This diaphragmatic or "belly" breathing is quiet, full, and efficient. Chest breathing, by contrast, is shallow and is the breathing pattern of stress: quick, high, and tiring.

Under anxiety or panic we tend to over-breathe in the chest, which can actually intensify symptoms like dizziness and a racing heart. Relearning to breathe low and slow is the master skill underneath every other exercise in this book.

FOUNDATION · SKILL

Finding the Diaphragmatic Breath

Best for: everyone, as a foundation · **Time:** 5 minutes · **Where:** lying down to start

1. Lie on your back, knees bent, or sit comfortably. Let your shoulders soften away from your ears.
2. Place one hand on your chest and the other on your belly, just above the navel.
3. Breathe in slowly through your nose. Aim to keep the chest hand still and let the belly hand rise.
4. Exhale gently through your nose or pursed lips, feeling the belly hand fall.
5. Continue for several minutes, letting the breath grow slow and easy. The belly leads; the chest follows.

If the belly won't move at first, that's normal. Try a gentle sigh out first to "empty," then let the inhale fill from the bottom.

Posture: making room for the breath

Your breath needs space. Whether sitting or lying, aim for a tall but relaxed spine, an open chest, and soft shoulders. If seated, plant both feet on the floor and let your hands rest in your lap. A slumped posture compresses the diaphragm; an over-rigid one creates tension. Think "dignified and at ease."

The single most useful principle: lengthen the exhale

If you remember only one thing from this entire book, let it be this: **a long, slow exhale is your fastest path to calm.** The exhale is when the vagal brake engages and the heart slows. Many exercises ahead simply structure this principle in different ways: a longer out-breath than in-breath, a sigh, a hum, a pause. Once you feel how the exhale settles you, you will understand the engine behind everything else.

WHY THE COUNT MATTERS

Research on slow breathing finds that pacing the breath to roughly six cycles per minute, with the exhale at least as long as the inhale, produces the largest gains in heart rate variability and the clearest drop in self-reported anxiety. Even the ratio of inhale to exhale appears to matter independently.[5,6]

REFLECT

- ☞ Where in my body do I usually feel my breath: chest, belly, or barely at all?
- ☞ When during the day does my breathing get fast or shallow? What's happening then?
- ☞ How did my body feel after five minutes of belly breathing, compared with before?

PART TWO

The Four Companions

Breathing Through Anxiety

Anxiety is the body bracing for a threat that may never come. It is exhausting precisely because it is trying to protect you. The breath is how we tell that protector it can stand down.

What anxiety feels like, and what's happening underneath

Anxiety shows up as a racing or pounding heart, tight chest, shallow rapid breath, restlessness, a churning stomach, and a mind that loops through worst-case scenarios. Underneath, the sympathetic accelerator is engaged: adrenaline is up, the body is primed to fight or flee, and breathing has gone quick and high in the chest. That over-breathing can itself create the dizziness and tingling that make anxiety feel even scarier. It becomes a loop, and breathwork can interrupt it directly.

EVIDENCE IN BRIEF

Slow, paced breathing has repeatedly been shown to reduce anxiety. A 2025 study in *Scientific Reports* on slow breathing for anxiety regulation, and a randomized clinical trial in people with generalized anxiety disorder, both found that structured breathing exercises significantly lowered anxiety levels.[4,7] Diaphragmatic breathing is a standard component of cognitive-behavioral therapy for panic and anxiety.

How breath helps anxiety

Two things happen when you slow and deepen the breath during anxiety. First, you reverse the hyperventilation that fuels physical symptoms. Second, the long exhale activates the vagal brake, slowing your heart and signaling safety. You are giving your nervous system the one piece of evidence it trusts most: a calm, rhythmic body.

ANXIETY · RESCUE

The Physiological Sigh

Best for: fast relief in a spike · **Time:** 1 to 3 minutes · **Where:** anywhere, anytime

1. Inhale through your nose to a comfortable fullness.
2. At the top, take a second short, sharp sniff in through the nose to fully inflate the lungs.
3. Slowly release a long, complete exhale through the mouth, as if fogging a mirror.
4. Repeat one to five times. Even a single sigh can take the edge off.

This is the fastest tool in the book. The double inhale "pops open" collapsed air sacs, and the long exhale offloads tension. Use it the moment you feel the spike.[2]

ANXIETY · CALMING

4-7-8 Breathing

Best for: settling, falling asleep · **Time:** 4 cycles · **Where:** seated or lying down

1. Exhale completely through your mouth.
2. Close your lips and inhale quietly through the nose for a count of 4.
3. Hold the breath gently for a count of 7.
4. Exhale through the mouth with a soft "whoosh" for a count of 8.
5. That is one cycle. Repeat for four cycles to start.

The numbers matter less than the ratio: a long exhale relative to the inhale. If 4-7-8 feels long, try 2-3-4 and build up.[8]

ANXIETY · GROUNDING

Box Breathing (Square Breath)

Best for: regaining control, focus · **Time:** 3 to 5 minutes · **Where:** before a stressful event

1. Exhale fully, emptying the lungs.
2. Inhale through the nose for a count of 4.
3. Hold for a count of 4.
4. Exhale for a count of 4.
5. Hold empty for a count of 4. Repeat, tracing the four equal "sides" of a square.

Used by athletes, first responders, and military personnel to stay steady under pressure. The structure gives a racing mind something orderly to hold.[2]

A pocket plan for a panic moment

When anxiety surges, you don't need to remember a technique perfectly. Do this: **one physiological sigh, then breathe out longer than you breathe in, for as long as it takes.** Name five things you can see while you do it. Remind yourself: this feeling is a wave, and waves crest and fall. You are riding it, not drowning.

JOURNAL

- ☞ What does my anxiety try to warn me about? Is the threat here now, or imagined?
- ☞ Which physical sign of anxiety do I notice first? Could it become my cue to breathe?
- ☞ After using a breathing tool, what changed in my body, even by ten percent?

Breathing Through Grief

Grief is love with nowhere to go. It does not follow a schedule, and it cannot be fixed, only carried and slowly metabolized. The breath cannot take grief away, but it can help your body hold it.

Grief lives in the body

Grief is not only an emotion; it is a full-body experience. People describe a literal weight or ache in the chest ("heartache" is no metaphor), a tight throat, exhaustion, breathlessness, and waves that arrive without warning. The nervous system in grief can swing between hyperarousal, which looks like panic, agitation, and sobbing, and hypoarousal, which looks like numbness, fog, and shutdown. Both are the autonomic system struggling to find footing after a profound loss.

THE POLYVAGAL LENS

Stephen Porges's polyvagal theory describes how the vagus nerve organizes our state between safe-and-connected, mobilized (fight or flight), and shut down. Grief can pull us toward the extremes. Slow breathing, particularly long exhales at around six breaths per minute, strengthens the ventral vagal "safe" state, gently widening the window in which difficult feelings can be felt without overwhelm.[9]

How breath helps grief

The goal here is not to stop crying or to rush the process. It is to give your nervous system enough steadiness to be with the grief rather than be flooded by it or frozen out of it. Gentle, rhythmic breathing creates a felt sense of safety in the body. From that steadier base, the waves of grief can move through you the way they are meant to, rising, cresting, and passing, instead of getting stuck.

GRIEF · SOOTHING

Coherent (Resonant) Breathing

Best for: steadying the whole nervous system · **Time:** 5 to 10 minutes · **Where:** a quiet, safe spot

1. Sit or lie comfortably, one hand on your heart if that feels kind.
2. Inhale gently through the nose for a count of about 5.
3. Exhale gently through the nose for a count of about 5.
4. Continue at this smooth, even pace, roughly five to six breaths per minute, for several minutes.
5. Let the breath be soft and round, with no force at the top or bottom.

This pace is the body's "resonant frequency," where heart rate variability and the vagal brake are strongest. It is the most research-backed pace for everyday regulation.[5]

GRIEF · COMFORT

Extended-Exhale Breathing (with a hand on the heart)

Best for: waves of sorrow, a tight chest · **Time:** as long as you need · **Where:** anywhere private

1. Place one or both hands over your heart or belly. The warmth and weight are part of the practice.
2. Inhale slowly through the nose for a count of 4.
3. Exhale through the nose or mouth for a count of 6 to 8, letting the body soften downward.
4. If tears come, let them. Keep the long, gentle exhale going through them.
5. Continue until the wave eases, then rest in normal breathing.

You are not trying to stop the feeling. You are staying with yourself while it moves. The longer exhale tells your body you are safe enough to feel this.

Humming Bee Breath (Bhramari)

Best for: a tight throat, soothing the mind · **Time:** 5 to 7 rounds · **Where:** somewhere you can make a soft sound

1. Sit comfortably and gently close your eyes. You may rest fingertips lightly over your ears.
2. Inhale slowly through the nose.
3. As you exhale, make a low, steady humming sound, like a gentle bee, all the way to the end of the breath.
4. Feel the vibration in your face, throat, and chest.
5. Repeat for five to seven rounds, then sit quietly and notice the stillness.

The hum extends the exhale and the vibration is self-soothing. Many people find it eases a constricted throat, a common physical home of grief.

Permission, not pressure

On the hardest days, "practice" might simply be three slow breaths before you get out of bed. That counts. Grief is not a problem to solve at speed. Let the breath be a small, reliable kindness you offer yourself, again and again, for as long as you need it.

JOURNAL

- ✍ Where does my grief live in my body today? What is it asking for?
- ✍ What do I most wish I could say to the person, life, or thing I've lost?
- ✍ What is one small thing that brought a moment of ease, even briefly?

Breathing Through Anger

Anger is fast. It floods the body before the thinking brain can weigh in. The breath is how we buy back the few seconds we need to choose our response instead of being hijacked by it.

The anatomy of a flare

Anger is a high-arousal state. In a flash, heart rate and blood pressure climb, muscles tense, the jaw and fists clench, breathing turns fast and shallow, and the body dumps adrenaline. This is the sympathetic accelerator slammed to the floor. In that surge, the brain's emotional alarm can overpower the rational, decision-making regions, which is why we so often say and do things in anger that we later regret. Anger itself is not "bad"; it often signals a violated boundary or unmet need. The work is to feel it without being run by it.

COOLING THE SYSTEM

Because anger is driven by sympathetic activation, slow breathing that engages the parasympathetic system directly counteracts it, lowering heart rate and blood pressure within minutes. Alternate-nostril breathing, for instance, has been shown in trials to reduce blood pressure and heart rate and to increase the sense of emotional control.[10] Practices that lengthen the exhale reliably bring physiological arousal down.[2]

How breath helps anger

You cannot reason your way out of a flare in real time. The chemistry is too fast. But you can change your breathing, and the body's brake responds in seconds. A long exhale begins lowering heart rate almost immediately, creating a small but crucial gap between the trigger and your response. In that gap lives your power to choose.

ANGER · RESCUE

The Cooling Exhale (6-count out)

Best for: the first moments of a flare · **Time:** 30 to 60 seconds · **Where:** in the moment, before you react

1. The instant you notice anger rising, drop your shoulders and unclench your jaw and hands.
2. Inhale through the nose for a count of 3 or 4.
3. Exhale slowly through pursed lips for a count of 6 to 8, long and controlled, like cooling soup.
4. Repeat three to five times before you speak or act.

This is the classic "count before you respond," upgraded. The long exhale isn't a delay tactic. It is physically lowering your heart rate so the thinking brain can come back online.

ANGER · RELEASE

Lion's Breath (Simhasana)

Best for: discharging built-up heat and tension · **Time:** 3 to 5 rounds · **Where:** in private, it's loud!

1. Sit comfortably. Inhale deeply through the nose.
2. Open your mouth wide, stick out your tongue toward your chin, and open your eyes wide.
3. Exhale forcefully through the mouth with an audible "haaa," as if roaring softly.
4. Relax, breathe normally for a moment, then repeat three to five times.

This gives anger's physical energy a safe exit. The exaggerated exhale and face-release discharge tension instead of bottling it up or aiming it at someone.

Alternate-Nostril Breathing (Nadi Shodhana)

Best for: restoring calm and balance after a flare · **Time:** 5 minutes · **Where:** seated, quiet

1. Rest your left hand in your lap. With your right hand, fold the index and middle fingers toward the palm.
2. Close your right nostril with your thumb; inhale slowly through the left nostril.
3. Close the left nostril with your ring finger, release the thumb, and exhale through the right nostril.
4. Inhale through the right nostril, then close it and exhale through the left.
5. That is one round. Continue for several rounds, keeping the breath smooth and unforced.

The slow, deliberate hand movements demand just enough focus to interrupt an angry thought loop, while the slow breathing calms the body.[10]

The pause is the practice

Anger management isn't about never feeling angry. It is about widening the gap between feeling and acting. Each time you breathe before you react, you strengthen that pause. Over time, the breath becomes an automatic first response, and you reclaim the choice that anger tries to steal.

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- ✎ What is my anger trying to protect, or what boundary is it pointing to?
- ✎ What are my earliest physical warning signs, before the flare peaks?
- ✎ Think of a recent flare: how might a few cooling exhales have changed what happened next?

Breathing Through Depression

Depression is not sadness. It is often the absence of feeling, a flatness and fatigue that make even small things feel impossible. Here, the breath is used a little differently: not only to calm, but gently to re-energize and reconnect.

The weight and the fog

Depression can bring heaviness, exhaustion, slowed thinking, loss of interest and pleasure, disrupted sleep, and a harsh inner critic. Where anxiety is an over-revved engine, much of depression feels like an engine that won't turn over: a low-energy, sometimes shut-down state. Breathing in depression is often shallow and listless. Because energy and motivation are already low, the kindest approach is small, achievable, and forgiving.

EVIDENCE IN BRIEF

The 2023 *Scientific Reports* meta-analysis found a significant reduction in depressive symptoms with breathwork across randomized trials.[1] The Stanford study found that brief daily breathing practice improved positive mood more than mindfulness meditation, with cyclic sighing leading.[2] Breathwork is increasingly studied as a complement to established depression treatments, not a replacement for them.

PLEASE HEAR THIS

If your depression is moderate or severe, or if you have thoughts of harming yourself or that you'd be better off gone, breathwork is not enough on its own, and that is not a failure. Please reach out to a doctor or therapist, and in the U.S. call or text 988 for the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline. Use these practices alongside professional care, not in place of it.

How breath helps depression

Two aims. First, activation: slightly fuller, more rhythmic breathing can lift a flat, sluggish state and bring a sense of aliveness back into the body. Second, self-compassion: depression's inner critic is relentless, and a gentle breathing practice is a small, repeatable act of kindness toward yourself, a way of saying "I'm still here, and I'm worth five minutes of care." Consistency matters more than intensity; the goal is a tiny, daily anchor.

DEPRESSION · ACTIVATING

The Morning Three (Gentle Energizing Breath)

Best for: starting the day, lifting the fog · **Time:** 2 minutes · **Where:** in bed or at the window

1. Sit up as best you can and lengthen your spine, opening the chest.
2. Inhale slowly and fully through the nose, expanding belly then chest, for a count of 4.
3. Exhale through the mouth for a count of 4, with a soft sound if you like.
4. Repeat for just three to ten breaths. On the inhale, imagine drawing in a little light or energy.

The bar is intentionally low: three breaths is a complete success. Pair it with opening a curtain or stepping into daylight to reinforce the lift.

DEPRESSION · UPLIFTING

Cyclic Sighing (Mood-Lift Sigh)

Best for: improving mood over days · **Time:** 5 minutes daily · **Where:** a chair, the floor, anywhere

1. Inhale slowly through the nose to a comfortable fullness.
2. Add a second short sniff to top off the lungs.
3. Exhale slowly and completely through the mouth, longer than the inhale.
4. Continue this gentle cycle for five minutes.

In the Stanford trial, five minutes a day of this exhale-focused pattern produced the greatest improvement in positive mood of all the methods tested. Daily repetition is where the benefit grows.[2]

Coherent Breathing for Steadiness

Best for: a calm, present baseline · **Time:** 5 to 10 minutes · **Where:** a comfortable seat

1. Settle comfortably, feet on the floor, hands resting open.
2. Inhale through the nose for a count of about 5.
3. Exhale through the nose for a count of about 5.
4. Keep this smooth, even rhythm, around six breaths per minute, for several minutes.
5. When your mind drifts to heavy thoughts, gently return to counting the breath.

This balanced pace builds nervous-system resilience over time. Treat it as daily maintenance for your baseline mood, like watering a plant.[5]

Be gentle with the bar

On a depressed day, getting through the day is an achievement, and a single conscious breath is a real practice. Drop the word "should." If three breaths is what you can do, three breaths is a victory. Tie your practice to something you already do, like your morning coffee or brushing your teeth, so it asks almost nothing of your depleted reserves.

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- ✎ What is one very small thing I did today, however ordinary? Can I acknowledge it?
- ✎ If I spoke to myself as I would to a struggling friend, what would I say?
- ✎ When did I feel even a flicker more present or alive, and what surrounded that moment?

PART THREE

Living the Practice

Building a Daily Practice

A technique you remember in a crisis helps once. A practice woven into your day changes your baseline. This chapter turns the exercises into a sustainable habit.

The three pillars of a lasting habit

Small. Begin with five minutes a day, or even one. The research showing real benefit used short, daily sessions, not heroic ones.[2] **Anchored.** Attach your breathing to something you already do without fail: the first minute after waking, while the kettle boils, at a red light (eyes open, of course), or as your head hits the pillow. **Forgiving.** You will miss days. Missing a day is not failure; it's data. Simply begin again, with no penalty and no story about what it "means."

Three daily moments

A simple structure many people find sustainable: a morning breath to set the tone, a midday reset to discharge accumulated stress, and an evening wind-down to release the day and prepare for sleep. Even one of these is plenty to start.

A starter four-week program

This gentle progression builds the skill and the habit together. Adjust freely. It's a guide, not a rulebook.

WEEK	FOCUS	DAILY PRACTICE (ABOUT 5 MIN)
Week 1	Foundation	Diaphragmatic (belly) breathing, lying down, once a day. Just get familiar with low, slow breathing.
Week 2	The exhale	Extended-exhale breathing (in 4 / out 6 to 8), once or twice a day. Notice how the long exhale settles you.
Week 3	Rhythm	Coherent breathing (in 5 / out 5) for 5 minutes daily. Aim for a smooth six breaths a minute.
Week 4	Integration	Choose your favorite for a daily 5-minute anchor, plus one "rescue" tool (physiological sigh) ready for stress.

A condition-tailored weekly rhythm

Once the basics feel natural, you can lean your week toward whatever you're working with most:

IF YOU'RE WORKING WITH...	MORNING	IN THE MOMENT	EVENING
Anxiety	Coherent breathing, 5 min	Physiological sigh; box breathing	4-7-8 to ease into sleep
Grief	Hand-on-heart, extended exhale	Humming bee breath for waves	Coherent breathing, gentle
Anger	Alternate-nostril breathing	Cooling exhale; lion's breath	Coherent breathing to decompress
Depression	The Morning Three + daylight	Cyclic sighing, 5 min	Slow breathing + a kind reflection

Tracking without pressure

A simple tick on a calendar for each day you practice can be quietly motivating. Seeing a chain of marks builds momentum. But if tracking starts to feel like one more way to fail, drop it entirely. The practice serves you, never the other way around.

When It Feels Hard

Breathwork is simple, but it isn't always easy. Here are honest answers to the difficulties almost everyone meets, so a small bump doesn't end your practice.

"I feel more anxious when I focus on my breath."

This is common, especially for people with anxiety or a history of trauma. Turning attention inward can briefly heighten awareness of physical sensations. If this happens, try keeping your eyes open and softening your gaze on a point in the room, breathe a little less deeply, or anchor on something external too, like the feeling of your feet on the floor or a sound nearby. You can also try movement-based breathing (breathing in rhythm with a slow walk). If inward focus consistently distresses you, go slowly and consider working with a trauma-informed therapist.

"I get dizzy or light-headed."

Usually this means you're breathing too deeply or too fast, which is over-breathing. Make the breath smaller and slower, not bigger. Dizziness passes quickly once you return to normal breathing. Always practice seated or lying down so a brief wobble is never dangerous, and skip breath-holds if they trigger this.

"My mind won't stop wandering."

That's not failure. That's a mind. The practice isn't to have zero thoughts; it's to notice you've drifted and gently come back to the breath. That return, repeated kindly a hundred times, is the exercise. Counting the breath or tracing a shape (like the box) gives a busy mind a helpful handhold.

"I don't have time."

Then practice for one minute, or take three conscious breaths. There is no minimum dose below which breathing "doesn't count." A single physiological sigh delivers a real, measurable effect. Lower the bar until it's impossible to fail.

"It's not working."

Two thoughts. First, check your expectation: breathwork rarely erases a feeling instantly. A shift of ten or twenty percent, slightly calmer with a little more space, is success, and it compounds with practice. Second, give it consistent time; the studies showing benefit involved daily practice over weeks, not a single try. If you've practiced steadily and still feel stuck, that's a sign to add other support, not a sign that something is wrong with you.

SAFETY, IN FULL

Breathing practices are low-risk for most people, but please take these precautions. Avoid breath retention and intense or rapid breathing techniques if you are pregnant, or have cardiovascular disease, uncontrolled high blood pressure, a respiratory condition, glaucoma, epilepsy or a seizure disorder, or a history of fainting, and consult your healthcare provider first. Stop any practice that causes pain, strong dizziness, chest discomfort, or rising panic, and return to normal breathing. Never do breathwork while driving, operating machinery, or in or near water. Breathwork supports, but does not replace, professional medical and mental-health care. If you are in crisis, call or text 988 in the U.S., or your local emergency number.

The Reflective Breath

Pairing breathwork with a few written words turns a physical practice into self-understanding. You don't need to be a writer. A sentence or two is plenty.

Why reflect at all?

Noticing how a practice affected you, even a little, trains your brain to recognize what helps. Over weeks, your notes become a personal map: which tools settle your anxiety, which soften your grief, what your earliest anger cues are. That self-knowledge is its own form of regulation.

A simple daily check-in

Try this thirty-second ritual after your practice. Rate your state from 1 to 10 before and after a few breaths, and jot one line about what you notice. That's it.

DAILY THREE LINES

- ✎ Before I breathed, my body and mind felt... (and a number, 1 to 10).
- ✎ After a few minutes, I notice... (and a number, 1 to 10).
- ✎ One thing I want to remember or be gentle about today is...

Weekly reflection

ONCE A WEEK

- ✎ Which breathing practice helped me most this week, and in what situation?
- ✎ What feeling showed up most often, and how did I meet it?
- ✎ Where did I show myself even a small kindness?
- ✎ What would make next week's practice five percent easier?

A closing word

Whatever brought you to this book, the racing mind, the heavy heart, the quick temper, or the long grey fog, I hope you've found in these pages something steadier to hold onto. The breath will not erase pain, but it will always meet you where you are. It asks nothing, costs nothing, and is with you until your very last one. That is an extraordinary thing to have on your side.

Be patient with yourself. Healing is not linear, and neither is practice. Some days the breath will feel like coming home; other days it will feel like nothing at all. Keep going anyway, gently. You are doing something brave simply by trying.

"Feelings come and go like clouds in a windy sky. Conscious breathing is my anchor."

With warmth and respect for your journey,
Dr. Smita Kapoor

The Breath and Sleep

Anxiety, grief, anger, and depression all tend to disturb sleep, and poor sleep makes every one of them harder to bear. The breath is one of the gentlest ways back into rest.

The vicious circle of a tired mind

When you lie awake, the mind often races and the body stays subtly braced, a low hum of the sympathetic accelerator that keeps sleep at bay. The next day, depleted, you have fewer resources to manage difficult feelings, which in turn fuels more nighttime arousal. Sleep is not a luxury layered on top of emotional healing; it is part of the machinery of it. Much of the brain's emotional processing and repair happens while you rest.

Why breathing helps you drift off

Falling asleep requires the parasympathetic brake to take over. Slow breathing, and especially a long exhale, is a direct way to invite that shift: lowering heart rate, easing muscle tension, and quieting the threat-scanning mind. You are not forcing sleep (which never works); you are creating the physiological conditions in which sleep can arrive on its own.

SLEEP · WIND-DOWN

The 4-7-8 Sleep Breath

Best for: falling asleep, calming a racing mind · **Time:** 4 to 8 cycles · **Where:** lying in bed

1. Settle onto your back or side and let your body grow heavy against the mattress.
2. Exhale fully through the mouth.
3. Inhale quietly through the nose for a count of 4.
4. Hold gently for 7, then exhale slowly through the mouth for 8.
5. Repeat. Let each exhale sink you a little deeper into the bed.

If holding the breath feels activating at night, drop the hold and simply breathe in for 4, out for 8. The long exhale is what matters most.

SLEEP · RELEASE

The Body-Scan Breath

Best for: letting go of the day, physical tension · **Time:** 5 to 10 minutes · **Where:** lying down

1. Begin with a few slow belly breaths, exhaling longer than you inhale.
2. On each exhale, bring attention to one area of the body, starting at the feet.
3. Picture that area softening and releasing as the breath leaves.
4. Move slowly upward, through legs, hips, belly, chest, shoulders, jaw, and face, one exhale at a time.
5. If you reach the top still awake, begin again at the feet. Most people don't.

Pairing each out-breath with a "letting go" of one body part gives a busy mind a calming, repetitive task, and unwinds the physical bracing that blocks sleep.

A gentle evening ritual

Sleep is helped by a wind-down, not a hard stop. In the last half hour before bed, dim the lights, set screens aside, and let your breathing slow. Even three minutes of long-exhale breathing as you get into bed signals to your body that the day is complete and it

is safe to rest. If you wake in the night, resist checking the clock; instead return to the long, slow exhale and let it carry you back down.

EVENING REFLECTION

- ✍ What can I set down tonight that doesn't need carrying into tomorrow?
- ✍ What is one thing, however small, that went okay today?
- ✍ What would help my body feel safe enough to rest?

A Library of Breaths

Beyond the core practices, here is a wider collection of techniques to explore. Treat it as a menu: try them, keep what serves you, and let the rest go.

FOUNDATION · EXPANSIVE

Three-Part Breath (Dirga Pranayama)

Best for: full, deep breathing and body awareness · **Time:** 5 minutes · **Where:** lying or seated

1. Inhale slowly, first filling the belly so it expands.
2. Continue the same inhale into the lower ribs, letting them widen.
3. Finish by filling the upper chest, all in one smooth breath.
4. Exhale in reverse, chest then ribs then belly, slowly and completely.
5. Repeat, making each of the three "parts" smooth and connected.

This teaches you to use your full lung capacity and is a wonderful antidote to the shallow, high chest-breathing of stress.

CALMING · SOUND

Ocean Breath (Ujjayi)

Best for: focus, steady calm · **Time:** 5 to 10 breaths · **Where:** seated, quiet

1. Breathe in and out through the nose.
2. Slightly constrict the back of your throat, as if you were about to whisper "haaa."
3. This creates a soft ocean-like sound on both the inhale and the exhale.
4. Keep the breath slow, smooth, and even, listening to the gentle sound.

The audible breath gives the mind an anchor to follow and naturally slows the pace. Lovely for steadying focus and easing tension.

COOLING · CALMING

Cooling Breath (Sitali / Sitkari)

Best for: cooling heat, agitation, irritability · **Time:** 5 to 8 rounds · **Where:** seated

1. Curl your tongue into a tube if you can (Sitali); if not, lightly clench the teeth and smile (Sitkari).
2. Inhale slowly through the curled tongue or teeth, feeling cool air.
3. Close the mouth and exhale slowly through the nose.
4. Repeat for several rounds, noticing the cooling, settling effect.

Especially useful for anger and frustration. The cool inhale gives a literal sense of "cooling down."

ANYWHERE · GROUNDING

Five-Finger Breathing

Best for: grounding, kids and adults alike · **Time:** 1 to 2 minutes · **Where:** absolutely anywhere

1. Spread one hand. With the index finger of the other hand, start at the base of your thumb.
2. As you trace up the thumb, breathe in. As you trace down the other side, breathe out.
3. Continue up and down each finger, in on the way up, out on the way down.
4. When you reach the little finger, reverse and trace back.

Combining touch, sight, and breath makes this powerfully grounding in a moment of overwhelm, and it's discreet enough to do in public.

GENTLE · BREATHLESS RELIEF

Pursed-Lip Breathing

Best for: shortness of breath, slowing a fast breath · **Time:** as needed · **Where:** anywhere

1. Relax your neck and shoulders.
2. Inhale slowly through the nose for a count of 2.
3. Purse your lips as if about to whistle or blow out a candle.
4. Exhale gently and slowly through pursed lips for a count of 4, twice as long as the inhale.

The pursed lips create a gentle back-pressure that naturally slows breathing and relieves the sensation of breathlessness that often accompanies anxiety.

MOVEMENT · ACTIVE

Walking Breath

Best for: restlessness, depression, when sitting feels impossible · **Time:** a short walk · **Where:** outdoors ideally

1. Walk at a comfortable, unhurried pace.
2. Inhale through the nose for a count of your footsteps, say 3 or 4 steps.
3. Exhale through the nose for the same number of steps, or one or two more.
4. Let breath and stride find an easy rhythm together.

When inward stillness feels agitating, which is common in anxiety and depression, pairing breath with movement offers the benefits of both, plus the lift of daylight and motion.

WORKBOOK

Your Practice Pages

My Personal Breath Plan

Make the practice yours. Fill this in to turn ideas into a plan you'll actually follow. Come back and revise it whenever you like. There are no wrong answers.

Right now, what I'm working with most is (anxiety / grief / anger / depression / a mix):

My morning breath (which practice, how long):

My "in the moment" rescue tool when things spike:

My evening / wind-down breath:

I'll anchor my practice to this habit I already do (coffee, teeth, commute...):

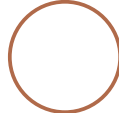
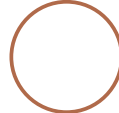
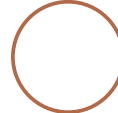
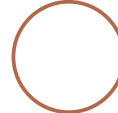
My earliest body cue that I need to breathe is:

When I miss a day, I will remind myself:

One kind sentence I want to say to myself each day:

28-Day Practice Tracker

Color or check a circle for each day you practice. Even one mindful breath counts. Watch the chain grow. If you miss a day, simply begin the next; the goal is gentle consistency, not perfection.

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
 1	 2	 3	 4	 5	 6	 7
 8	 9	 10	 11	 12	 13	 14
 15	 16	 17	 18	 19	 20	 21
 22	 23	 24	 25	 26	 27	 28

What I noticed over these four weeks:

The practice that helped me most was:



Quick Reference: Which Breath, When?

A one-page map for the moment you need it. Find what you're feeling, and reach for the matching practice.

IN THIS MOMENT...	TRY THIS	THE SHAPE OF IT
A sudden anxiety spike	Physiological Sigh	Double inhale (nose), long exhale (mouth)
Can't fall asleep	4-7-8 Breath	In 4 · hold 7 · out 8
Need to focus / steady up	Box Breathing	In 4 · hold 4 · out 4 · hold 4
Anger rising	Cooling Exhale	In 3 to 4 · out 6 to 8 through pursed lips
Need to discharge tension	Lion's Breath	Big inhale · forceful "haaa" out
A wave of grief	Extended-Exhale + hand on heart	In 4 · out 6 to 8, soft
Tight throat / sadness	Humming Bee Breath	Inhale · hum the whole exhale
Low, foggy, flat	The Morning Three / Cyclic Sighing	Full inhale · longer exhale, daily
Everyday baseline calm	Coherent Breathing	In 5 · out 5 (about 6 breaths/min)
Overwhelmed in public	Five-Finger Breathing	Trace fingers: up = in, down = out
Restless, can't sit still	Walking Breath	In for 3 to 4 steps · out for 4 to 5 steps
Hot, irritable, agitated	Cooling Breath (Sitali)	Cool inhale through tongue · nose exhale

REMEMBER

When in doubt, do the simplest thing: **breathe out longer than you breathe in.** That single principle is behind nearly every practice in this book.

A Small Glossary

A few terms used in this book, in plain language.

Autonomic nervous system

The body's automatic control system, running things like heartbeat and breathing without conscious effort. It has two branches, sympathetic and parasympathetic.

Sympathetic nervous system

The "accelerator." Mobilizes the body for action, the fight-or-flight response. Dominant in anxiety, panic, and anger.

Parasympathetic nervous system

The "brake." Governs rest, digestion, and recovery, the calming branch we activate with slow breathing.

Vagus nerve / vagal tone

The main nerve carrying the parasympathetic "calm" signal between brain and body. "Vagal tone" describes how strong and responsive that calming brake is.

Heart rate variability (HRV)

The natural beat-to-beat variation in your heart rate. Higher HRV generally reflects a flexible, resilient nervous system; slow breathing tends to raise it.

Diaphragmatic (belly) breathing

Breathing low and full using the diaphragm, so the belly rises. The body's efficient, calming default, as opposed to shallow chest breathing.

Coherent / resonant breathing

Slow, even breathing at roughly five to six breaths per minute, the pace that most strengthens heart rate variability and the vagal brake.

Pranayama

The yogic practice of breath regulation; the origin of several techniques in this book, including alternate-nostril, humming bee, and lion's breath.

Citations of Exercises & References

The breathing exercises in this book draw on long-established contemplative traditions and on contemporary clinical research. The list below credits the techniques and the peer-reviewed studies behind the claims made throughout.

Exercises and their origins

Many of these practices originate in pranayama, the breath-regulation tradition of classical yoga (including Nadi Shodhana / alternate-nostril breathing, Bhramari / humming bee breath, and Simhasana / lion's breath). The 4-7-8 breath was popularized by integrative-medicine physician Dr. Andrew Weil. Box breathing is widely used in athletic, first-responder, and military training. The physiological sigh and cyclic sighing were characterized in respiratory neuroscience and tested clinically by researchers at Stanford University. Coherent / resonant breathing (five to six breaths per minute) was developed and studied in heart-rate-variability and resonance-breathing research.

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A NOTE ON THE EVIDENCE

Research on breathwork is encouraging but still developing, with many trials small or conducted in non-clinical populations. The studies cited support breathwork as a helpful, low-risk practice, best used alongside, not instead of, professional treatment for diagnosed anxiety, depression, complicated grief, or anger difficulties.

About the Author

Dr. Smita Kapoor, DMFT, PhD (c), LMFT

Dr. Smita Kapoor has spent her career helping people find their way back to themselves. A Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, she earned both her master's degree and her doctorate in Marriage and Family Therapy at Loma Linda University, and is now working toward a second doctorate, a PhD in Human Sexology.

Much of her life's work has unfolded in the classroom as well as the therapy room. She teaches and mentors graduate and doctoral students in Marriage and Family Therapy, and has guided many of them through their own dissertations. She is an AAMFT Approved Supervisor and a CAMFT Certified Supervisor, and she serves as a Subject Matter Expert for the California Board of Behavioral Sciences.

Her way of working has always been integrative, paying as much attention to the body as to the mind. She is a Certified EMDR Therapist and a Certified Clinical Trauma Professional, trained in CBT, CPT, the Gottman Method, ACT, Internal Family Systems, mindfulness, and anger management, and certified in Mental Health Integrative Medicine. It is precisely this blend, trauma-informed therapy meeting genuine mind-body practice, that gave rise to this book.

At the center of everything she does is a care for people who are too often overlooked. Her research follows the threads of early childhood attachment trauma and the cultural forces that shape our closest relationships, and she has long argued for care that honors where a person comes from rather than smoothing it away. She sees clients in English, Hindi, and Punjabi, and believes, plainly and stubbornly, that healing should be within reach for everyone. That belief is, in many ways, what this book is. She keeps returning to one quiet truth she has watched hold up again and again: real change rarely begins with something grand. More often, it begins with the very next breath.

*May your breath be a steady companion,
and may you be gentle with yourself along the way.*