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Take a Break, Take a Breath: Breathing Techniques

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Have you ever been panicked, stressed-out, or really uneasy and had someone tell you, “Calm down!”? How did that work out? I’m guessing it didn’t go over very well. Telling someone who is experiencing any type of strong emotion to simply “calm down,” typically doesn’t work. Why is that?



Fight or Flight

When a person is in a situation that feels frightening, threatening, or stressful, his/her brain triggers a fight-or-flight response that the body reacts to immediately. Fight-or-flight is a natural, survival mechanism that helps a person react quickly to a life-threatening situation. The body’s response to a perceived threat might include a faster heartbeat, rapid and shallow breathing, dizziness, increased blood pressure, increased muscle tension, trembling, butterflies in the stomach, and/or tunnel vision (loss of peripheral vision).



Perceived Threats

Does a situation actually have to be life-threatening for our brains to trigger the fight-or-flight response? No. A person just has to interpret a situation as threatening or dangerous for his/her body to react. This means that a situation that activates the fight-or-flight response in one person, may not trigger the same response in another person. Likewise, there may be some who have fight-or-flight responses that are more easily stimulated. Students who are anxious, angry, overexcited, or overwhelmed, or students who experience high levels of emotions, students who have had adverse childhood experiences, autistic students, students with ADHD,

or students with disabilities (and others!) are all more susceptible. These students can be affected by something that others may think is no big deal, like transitioning from one activity to another or going to a spontaneous school assembly. Because our bodies respond instinctively to perceived stressful situations, simply telling a child to “calm down” will not stop his/her body from reacting. So, what can we do?



Breathe

Breathe. It sounds simple, right? We do it all of the time without thinking about it. But learning, practicing, and employing specific deep-breathing techniques can lower blood pressure, slow down the heart rate, reduce tension, increase oxygen levels, and improve concentration and focus. Because of this, breathing techniques are powerful tools that students can use to help slow down, relax, reduce their anxiety, and regain control of their bodies when those fight-or-flight responses kick in. On the following page are four deep-breathing techniques to try.



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Resources:

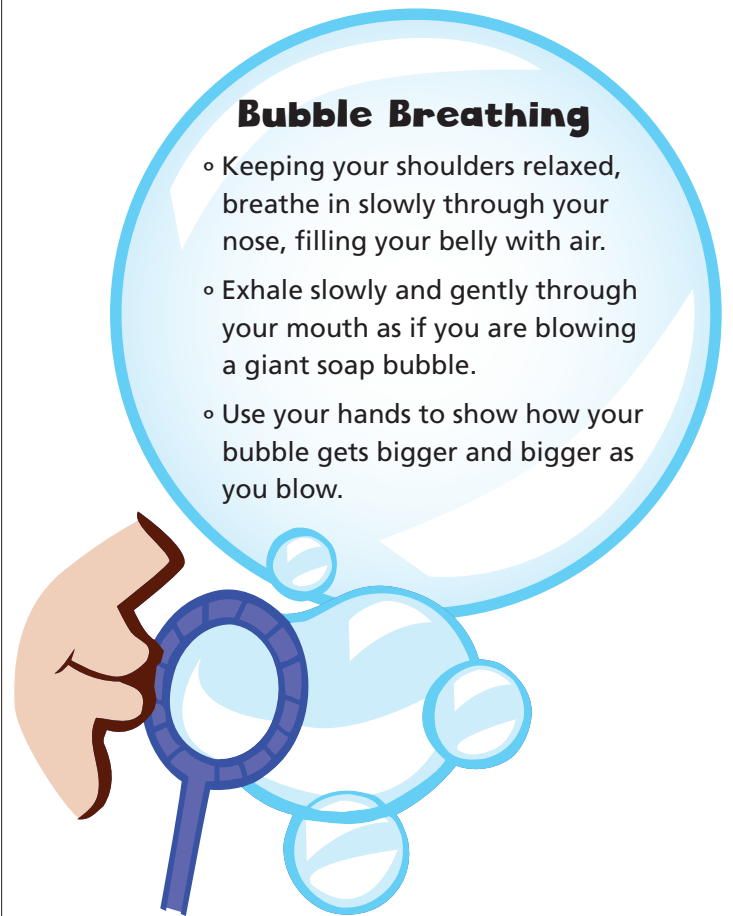
- “Breathing Exercises for Kids.” Children’s Health. September 27, 2003. <https://www.childrens.com/health-wellness/breathing-exercises-for-kids>.
- Brukner, Lauren. “Self-Regulation Strategies for Transitions.” Accessed September 26, 2003. Edutopia.org <https://www.edutopia.org/article/help-young-students-transition>.

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Rainbow Breathing

1. Start with your arms down at your side.
2. Picture a rainbow in front of you.
3. Keeping your shoulders relaxed, breathe in slowly through your nose as you raise your arms upward, tracing the arc of the rainbow.
4. When you reach the top, slowly exhale through your mouth as you lower your arms back down to your side.



Bubble Breathing

- Keeping your shoulders relaxed, breathe in slowly through your nose, filling your belly with air.
- Exhale slowly and gently through your mouth as if you are blowing a giant soap bubble.
- Use your hands to show how your bubble gets bigger and bigger as you blow.



Hot Cocoa Breathing

- Imagine you are holding a big cup of hot cocoa.
- Breathe in deeply through your nose, smelling the delicious chocolatey mix.
- Slowly breathe out through your mouth blowing across the top of the hot cocoa to cool it down as you exhale.



Beach Breathing

1. Imagine yourself sitting on a beautiful, warm, sunny beach. You're digging your toes in the sand as you watch the waves lap the shore.
2. Breathe in slowly through your nose as a wave rolls in, coming closer to you.
3. Pause as the wave rests just before your feet.
4. As the water starts to recede back to the ocean, breathe out slowly through your mouth.