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Three Big Sighs

When we are tense, we breathe from the chest rather than the belly. We also tend to hold our breaths in, which makes our in-breaths longer than the rather truncated out-breaths. If you want to relax, the quickest way to reverse this is to sigh.

One of my students told me he was trying to persuade a high-flying executive friend to relax. “Just stop and take three deep breaths,” he said. “Don’t be silly,” she wailed. “I haven’t got the time!” If you have time to breathe, you have time to sigh.

Three Sighs is the most time-efficient meditation you will ever do. It’s very short – maybe twenty seconds long – but you can change your state of body and mind markedly in that time. The slow, deep tempo of sighing is the perfect antidote to the fast, shallow, erratic pattern of tense breathing. The effect usually lingers for a few minutes afterwards, and when you find yourself starting to tense up, you can always sigh again.

Think of a sigh as having three parts: the in-breath, the out-breath and the pause at the end. The big in-breath opens the tight chest muscles. The out-breath is all about letting go control – you let the breath drop through the body without forcing it. Then you wait in the pause at the end for as long as is comfortable. Two or three big conscious sighs will break the pattern of tight breathing. If you want to continue relaxing thereafter, you can ‘sigh gently’ for a minute or two, as explained in the next chapter.

1. Three Sighs

Breathe in deeply, opening the ribcage.

Sigh: let the breath go without forcing it.

Rest in the pause, feeling the belly soften.

Wait until you really need to breathe in again.

Take a second big in-breath.

Feel the chest open further.

Drop into the soft, loose out-breath.

Pause again and wait.

And a third time, feeling everything loosen.

Let your breathing resume its natural rhythm.

It will now feel slow, deep and soft.

Breathe naturally or sigh gently as you wish.

COMMENTARY

Three Sighs is a classical spot-meditation: it's so versatile and portable that everyone should do it regularly. It can be done anywhere, anytime, in any position or activity and with your eyes open or closed. It will get you out of your head and bring you back to earth immediately. Sigh as often as you feel like. You can easily do it twenty times a day. Don't worry if your family or workmates think you're unhappy or exasperated. To be relaxed is more important than what people think about you!

I commonly sigh whenever I stand up and start to walk somewhere – even if it's just across the room. When I get up from the computer, I deliberately sigh to open up my posture. Whenever I walk out of my house or get out of my car, I think 'Breathe!'

The big in-breath opens my chest and oxygenates my lungs. The long out-breath lets all the stale air go and softens the belly, and the pause at the end centres my mind in my body. I feel my posture become more upright and open and energised. Three Sighs are a delight, and well worth those few seconds!

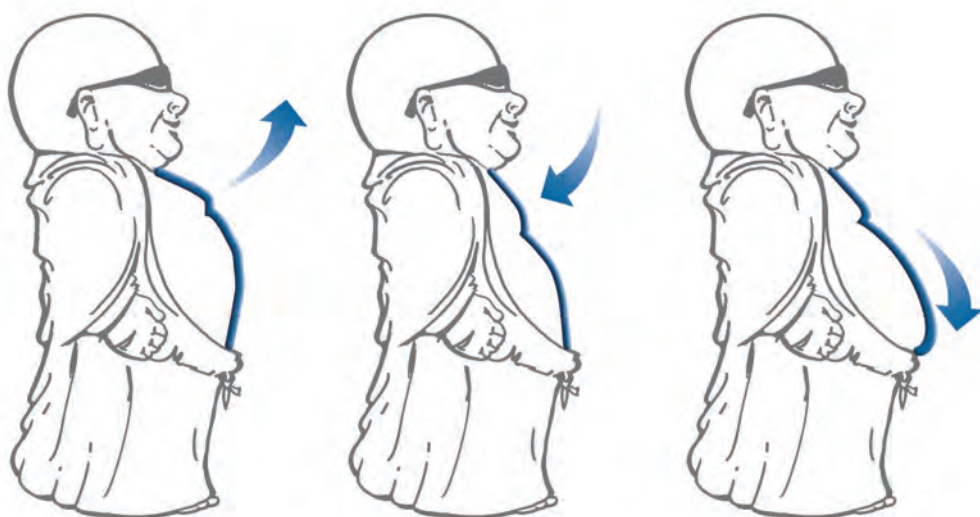
WHY THE SIGH WORKS SO WELL

Let's now look in more detail at those three parts of the sigh: the in-breath, the out-breath and the pause.

When you're tense, the upper chest and neck muscles are bound to be tight. That's virtually the signature sensation of anxiety. However the first part of a sigh – the big in-breath – stretches and opens up those muscles. Tight muscles often won't relax unless you stretch them out first, and you need more than one breath to do that. That is why you consciously take those big in-breaths. If you sigh while keeping the chest muscles tight, it won't be anywhere near as effective.

When you sigh, just let the breath drop as far as it wants to go without forcing it. If you're quite tense, don't be surprised if it doesn't go very far. When your muscles are tight, they naturally hold the breath in and up. After two or three big in-breaths however, you'll find there's more room in the ribcage and the out-breaths will drop deeper each time.

A genuine sigh has a pause at the end, where everything stops for a few seconds. It doesn't hurry through to the next in-breath. If there wasn't a pause, it wouldn't be a sigh at all – it would just be a deep breath. That pause can be surprisingly long and peaceful: no breath and usually no thoughts either. I suggest you just wait there, listening for that inner voice that says 'You need to breathe in again now.'



ADD A YAWN

Sighs and yawns happen naturally when you're relaxing, or about to relax, and they only occur when you let go some unconscious preoccupation in the mind. It is as if you instinctively realise the crisis is over and it's safe to release the tension in a sigh. By consciously sighing, you send a signal from your body back to the mind, saying 'It's okay to relax now. See? I'm sighing.'

A yawn is a kind of turbocharged sigh. If you also yawn as you sigh, you get maximum payoff from your few seconds of meditation. Firstly, a yawn refreshes you by increasing oxygen intake. More importantly, it stretches the powerful jaw muscles that many people clench tight all day (and often all night, grinding their teeth in their sleep). A yawn doesn't just loosen the breathing: it also releases the jaw, the eyes and temples and the connecting neck and shoulder muscles. Try it out and see.



I call this exercise 'Three Sighs' as three is a good number to aim for, but it is your choice how many sighs you take. Generally, if you take a huge sigh with an added yawn, you can only do one or two comfortably, whereas smaller sighs can continue for much longer.

In time, you will refine your sighs to suit your situation. You can take big sighs or small sighs. You can have discreet ladylike sighs when you are in company, and noisy open-mouthed sighs when you are alone. In general, big sighs are best when you stand or walk, and gentle sighs when you sit.

SIGH WELL

Simple and natural as a sigh is, you can still sigh badly! There are full, satisfying sighs that really work, and mediocre, half-hearted sighs that fail to make any impact on the onslaught of thoughts. The bigger the in-breath and the looser the out-breath, the better it works.

Key Words

Big in-breath

Yawn

Long out-breath

Let go

Pause

So give the sighs full attention for those twenty or so seconds. Don't sigh mechanically with your mind elsewhere and expect it to work. Feel the chest open more with each in-breath. Feel yourself release more with each out-breath. Enjoy the pause.

Above all, don't force the out-breath. A sigh is all about letting go control, so if you try too hard to make it happen, you'll miss the point. Don't try to artificially hold on to the pause at the end, either. Be relaxed about it! Let the new in-breath come when it wants to.

A perfectly executed sigh is just as elegant and satisfying, in its own small way, as a beautiful tennis stroke. If you focus fully on the sigh, your body and mind become one. The in-breath is full and expansive; the out-breath is luxurious and total, and the pause at the end seems to last forever. I hope you can become very good at sighing. Like a tennis stroke, it improves with daily practice.