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Stop Before You Start

Anxious people typically can't stop at all. Their minds race and their bodies are perpetually restless, whether they're active or not. The fight-or-flight syndrome keeps them continually on the move or primed to move. When they do stop, they typically collapse into exhaustion, which is hardly a graceful way to land. From the moment they wake up they are on the run, until they hit their pillows at night.

It doesn't have to be this way. All of us have the chance to slow down and come to a halt maybe a hundred times a day, if only for a few seconds at a time. It is wonderful to be able to consciously stop one activity and then consciously start the next. This may seem impossible if you are habituated to speed, but it simply takes a little practice and understanding.



So look for the opportunities. Breathe out and stop before you answer the phone. Before you open the door. Before you drive away. Before you start your golf swing. Before you do the dishes. One full breath can be quite enough to create a punctuation mark before the next action. This exercise in fact abbreviates the Three Sighs meditation into a single sigh, and you get a very good return for your few seconds' investment.

I suggest you silently say a word or phrase to yourself to trigger the exercise. The full instructions for the below can be contained in the phrase: 'Breathe out and stop before you start'. Once you understand this exercise, you can abbreviate that phrase to suit yourself. Have a look at the options in the Key Words box.

4. Stop before you start

Before you start a new activity,

take a big breath and sigh.

Breathe out and mentally stop.

Find that point of stillness at the end of the breath.

Prepare yourself to act.

Consciously start the new action.

COMMENTARY

There is often a brief moment between one activity and another in which you can consciously stop, if you wish. If the phone rings, you don't have to instantly pick it up. You can pause and breathe out. You let the previous activity go and reorient yourself to the new task. Give yourself time to complete your one big sigh. Let the phone ring two or three times before you answer it. You'll be in a much better mental space when you do.

Just stop. Then start. Consciously pause between activities to make sure that you do stop. Breathe out and let the former activity go. Then start the next action deliberately and smoothly. It may surprise you to realise how ancient these instructions are. 'Notice how activities start and finish,' said the Buddha. ('And sensations and thoughts and feelings.')

You can completely stop in the space of a single breath, but don't confuse 'stopping' with 'freezing.' Feel the big in-breath open the tight chest muscles, and when you breathe out, let everything go. Wait in the pause until your body feels soft and still, and your mind feels centred in your body. Only then do you start the next activity.

Key Words

Breathe out and stop before you start

Breathe out and stop

Stop before you start

Breathe

Stop

Trivial as it seems, this can completely change the flavour of our day. When we're mentally restless, our minds leap ahead or lag behind what we are actually doing. All day long, we can stumble semiconsciously from one activity to another, doing each one awkwardly because

we're not really 'there'. No wonder we often feel anxious – we are never quite in tune with what we are doing.

If you stop before you start however, you can feel as if you are moving from one point of stillness to another all day long. Furthermore each activity will carry some of that still, present quality with it.

So breathe out and stop before you start anything new, however small. You see sports people do this all the time in preparation for a kick or a serve or a dive or a shot. I watched Maria Sharapova in a recent tennis competition. Before each serve, she would stop, turn around, look at her racket for a moment and then serve. I am quite sure she also breathed out and tried to clear the past shot from her mind as she did so. It took only a few seconds, but when she served, she was really there. To do anything efficiently, you need to be there at the start.

WHY CAN'T WE STOP?

I know it seems ridiculous, but students often tell me they can't even find the time for three sighs. Or that they find a sigh difficult to do. In fact, they are afraid to give up the habit of perpetual hurry and busyness. Their instincts are falsely telling them that even a moment's pause will undermine the fragile structure of their life. If they stop pedalling, the bike will fall over. To sigh and do nothing seems almost criminally negligent to them.

So I ask them, "Do you have time for a single sigh? Can you occasionally breathe out and stop for just five seconds?" There are actually thousands of opportunities each day. You don't even have to physically stop to do some of them. Even a mental pause will do, so



long as you really do pause. I suggest you try to breathe out and stop before you:

- Make a phone call
- Open a door
- Walk down steps
- Drive away your car
- Step into the shower
- Eat breakfast
- Read the paper
- Play a golf shot
- Switch on the computer
- Post a letter
- Slap your child
- Enter a shop
- Buy the next drink

