

SOFT-BELLY

Breathing

Conscious use of deep breathing overrides the pattern of fast, shallow breathing that characterizes the fight-or-flight and stress responses, and it provides more oxygen to support relaxed mental function. Slow, deep breathing also decreases blood pressure and heart rate, improves intestinal function, and lowers the stress hormone cortisol. Here's how to do it:

1. Sit in a quiet place and close your eyes. Breathe slowly and deeply, in through your nose and out through your mouth. Allow your midsection to be soft as you breathe.

2. As you breathe in, say to yourself, "Soft." As you breathe out, say, "Belly." This will focus your mind and remind you that you want your belly to be soft and relaxed.

3. When thoughts come, let them come, and then let them go. Gently bring your mind back to the phrase "soft belly."

4. When you're ready, or when your timer rings, bring your attention back to the room.

Begin by doing this practice for five or 10 minutes, maybe twice a day. If you're too agitated to sit, get up and do some chores or take a walk. Then try it again. You can sit on a park bench, in a library or a church, or at home.

Sitting this way will not make the thoughts go away — and trying to force them away will only reinforce their importance — but it will give you some peace and quiet amidst your thoughts, and allow you to get some distance from them.