

## **The Suspended Exhale:**

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### Four Exhalations to Peace of Mind and Body

Melissa Owens LPC

Many people experience unmanageable emotions that ruin their relationships and unbalance their lives. Perhaps you experience anxiety, insomnia, racing mind, insecurity, heartache, jealousy, impulsivity, irritation, outbursts of anger or uncontrollable rage, or cravings for substances or addictive behaviors? When emotions are very intense, the limbic system, the mental seat of emotional life, overrides the cerebral cortex, the thinking part of the brain: our emotions hijack our thoughts. There are times when this is entirely appropriate and useful. If you step into the crosswalk and see a car coming at you, your cerebral cortex needs to give precedence to your emotional system so you can leap out of the way. Even a moment of contemplation might cost your life. But more often than not our painful emotions are ruining our lives, not saving them.

For most people, most of the time, emotional override of the cortical brain is destructive to relationships and self-esteem. Many people seek help from therapy because they want to gain understanding and control of the intense emotional/mental processes that are wreaking havoc on self and others. Why do we have these intense and often destructive experiences? The answers are complex, but even before we explore the reasons, we can physiologically address the distress.

By practicing four easy breaths, you will learn to conquer overly intense emotions by dialing them back to a level where your PreFrontal Cortex can function so you can see your situation clearly and make better decisions. Anyone can do this, and it always works because you will be using one of the basic chemical/ energetic/ mechanical processes of the human body! Read on: you are going to learn to activate the Ventral Vagal Complex, the safe social engagement branch of your ParaSympathetic Nervous System (PSNS).

First let's see why this works because you may want to understand what's happening in your body. Then you can learn how to do the Suspended Exhale.

### **Why the Suspended Exhale works**

The Suspended Exhale makes use of Heart Rate Variability (HRV), a measure of the slight increase in your heart rate when you inhale and the slight decrease in your heart rate when you exhale. This normal balanced fluctuation is mediated by the ParaSympathetic Nervous System (PSNS), the healing branch of your autonomic nervous system. The PSNS is always active, but it activates to a greater extent when you exhale, slightly slowing your heart rate and sending messages to your entire body to relax, calm and heal. Your body is constantly healing itself.

When you are stressed, even pleasantly, you tend to suspend your inhaled breath momentarily, orienting your attention and priming your body for active engagement. Surges of cortisol and adrenaline are released, giving you the boost of energy and the

physiological changes to meet the challenge. However, with increased or constant SNS activation, the PSNS is over-ridden, leading to relatively less recovery time. You may begin to feel tension, urgency, overwhelm, anxiety, irritability, anger, hostility, emotional reactivity, fatigue, pain, and illness.

The interplay between the Sympathetic (SNS) and ParaSympathetic (PSNS) branches of the nervous system is evident in all the organs of your cardiovascular and digestive systems, as well as in emotional expressions in your body.

Acid indigestion, digestive problems, sexual dysfunctions, butterflies in your stomach, breathlessness, tightness in the diaphragm, a lump in the throat, and heartache are evidence of an overly activated SNS.

There are two trunks of the PSNS. The Dorsal Vagal Complex appears to be older and is associated with regulation of the digestive system. Emotionally it is responsible for ParaSympathetic shutdown, the stunned, overwhelmed, embarrassed, shunned emotions that culminate in the freeze response.

The Ventral Vagal Complex of the PSNS is associated with regulation of the heart and lungs. It is the safe social engagement system, providing a more comforting brake to SNS arousal. This is the branch of the PSNS that people activate through safe touch, through singing and chanting, through yogic breathing techniques and meditation. You can activate the Ventral Vagal Complex when you use the Suspended Exhale.

The sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems operate in complementary opposition to one another, and since they are activated by inhaling and exhaling, respectively, you can control your physical/emotional state to a remarkable extent through your breath. Try the Suspended Exhale. See how you can feel better immediately by activating the Ventral Vagal Complex of your own PSNS, creating a calm stillness within and an instant reduction in painful anxiety, anger, overwhelm, even heartache, just by paying attention to and suspending your exhale for the span of only four breaths.

### **How to do the Suspended Exhale**

For many people, any attempt to control the breath, to lengthen and deepen the inhalation and exhalation, creates more stress. So don't do that. Just breathe in naturally through your nose and release the breath naturally through your nose. Notice the breath coming in your nostrils and then notice the breath going out. Follow a few breaths in and out, and then inhale intentionally, exhale all your breath and suspend your exhale out. Just leave it out there. Not until you begin to gasp for air, but just until you feel a real physical need to inhale. Then take a natural breath in, let it out, and leave it out – suspend your exhale again. Notice your urge when the breath is suspended out: you may think you need to inhale, but do you? Listen to the sounds around you, maybe the ticking of a clock nearby or other ambient sounds. Inhale when you comfortably need to.

So:

Inhale, exhale, suspend the breath out;

Inhale, exhale, suspend the breath out;  
Inhale, exhale, suspend the breath out;  
Inhale, exhale, suspend the breath out.

Each time you suspend the breath out, you may discover that it feels easier to suspend it for longer. That's because you are activating the Ventral Vagal Complex, calming and healing your body/mind, cooling your emotions. When you have done four breaths, assess your body, your emotions, and the thoughts that are in your mind. Has the emotional or bodily distress released its grip on you? Is your mind more still and peaceful? If you still feel distress, do another four breaths, suspending your breath after each exhale.

I hope you will do this exercise and email me at [melissaowenslpc@gmail.com](mailto:melissaowenslpc@gmail.com) to let me know the results. I welcome your feedback.

**Note:**

Since Herbert Benson's research on practitioners of Transcendental Meditation 50 years ago, leading to the inclusion of the 'belly breath' as an integral strategy of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, we know that abdominal breathing has some power to regulate emotion by deepening the breath into the lungs and releasing it fully. Abdominal breathing is helpful for most people and easy to do. You may also be acquainted with 'square breathing,' sometimes referred to as 'box breathing' or by other military names: a measured inhale, suspended for the same amount of time, then a measured exhale, suspended for the same amount of time. Square or box breathing is very useful for balancing the breath pattern, though controlling the breath to this extent is difficult for many people. A related strategy is included in the Buteyko method of breath retraining, named after Ukrainian doctor Konstantin Buteyko, who treated asthma patients in the 1950s by teaching them to relax and then training them to gradually extending their exhale in measured amounts. Yoga practitioners may be familiar with Ujjayi breath, which activates the Ventral Vagal Complex by vibrating the vocal cords. Information about any of these breathing techniques can be readily found online.

Information about the Sympathetic and ParaSympathetic Nervous Systems, including the Dorsal Vagal and Ventral Vagal Complexes, and Heart Rate Variability are likewise readily found online.

**Appreciation**

My deepest gratitude, more than I can ever express, goes to the millions of named and nameless explorers of the body/mind over the last 5000 years, and especially to Yogi Bhajan, who taught me how to breathe through Kundalini Yoga.

Recommended Western authors: Stephen Porges, Jeffrey Schwartz, Bessel van der Kolk, Rick Hanson, Norman Doidge, Kelly McGonigal, Peter Levine, Ron Siegel, Pat Ogden.