
Begin with the Breath; the Mind & Body Will Follow

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Breathing is a powerful tool for reducing stress. But this doesn't mean being told to "just breathe" when you are feeling upset about infertility is necessarily helpful.

When we encounter stress we automatically hold our breath. As that stress becomes chronic, our breath becomes fast and shallow, filling only the top of our lungs.

Sometimes we even begin to breathe through our mouth. Unfortunately, this natural response can create a vicious cycle. Our irregular breathing triggers a stress response, which leads to more irregular breathing, and so on.

Fortunately, we can work with our breath to break the cycle. But it takes some time and attention.

According to yoga teachings, *pranayama* is the practice of regulating the breath to influence the mind and body. Over thousands of years, yogis have created and refined numerous methods for lengthening, directing, retaining, and regulating the movement of the breath to bring about transformation. One technique, called belly or abdominal breathing, offers a good starting point for reducing stress and making room for difficult emotions. While the practice can benefit anyone, I've found it to be especially helpful for women experiencing infertility.

Belly Breathing (preparation for three-part breath)

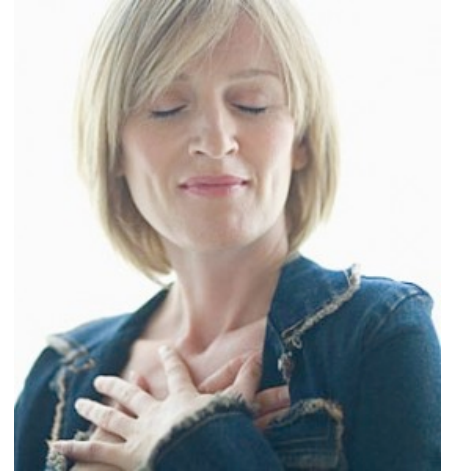
1. Lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the floor. Make sure you are comfortable and your belly is relaxed.
2. Place your right hand on your abdomen and your left hand on your heart.
3. Bring your awareness to your breath. Observe it flowing in and out as you gently and steadily inhale and exhale through your nose.
4. Exhale completely through your nose, pulling your abdomen gently back toward your spine.
5. Relax the belly and inhale through your nose, feeling the abdomen expand into your right hand and

allowing your lower lungs to fill. Try to keep the left hand on the heart from moving.

6. Continue to alternate between drawing the belly gently inward as you exhale and allowing it to expand outward as you inhale. Never force or strain.

After a few minutes you may notice that you feel calmer and more clearheaded and your muscles feel more relaxed. These sensations increase with time. With regular practice, your thoughts may become slower and more spacious, your heartbeat may slow, and your blood pressure may become lower. You will probably sleep and digest food better.

If challenging feelings arise, be patient with yourself. It is just part of the process. Take it slow; a little breathing may go a long way.



How does it work?

When you inhale deeply, the diaphragm, a large dome-shaped sheet of muscle that separates the chest and abdomen, descends further into the abdominal cavity than with normal breathing. This allows more air to flow in. The increased flow of breath brings more oxygen to the brain and body helping to break the stress-response cycle. When the diaphragm returns to its relaxed position on exhale it gently allows the air to flow out of the lungs.

Breathing through the nostrils moistens and filters the breath, warming or cooling it as needed. Breathing through the nose also naturally slows the exhalation, giving the lungs more time to extract the maximum amount of oxygen and energy from each breath. Last, slow, steady abdominal breathing for an extended period can activate the parasympathetic nervous system, producing the relaxation response.

[According to a recent study](#) published in the journal *Fertility and Sterility* and [reported in the New York Times](#), relaxation training may aid conception. Scientists reported that women who stopped using contraception took more time to become pregnant if they had high levels of a biomarker for stress.

Learning *pranayama* along with *asana* (yoga poses) and meditation [through Restorative Yoga at the Domar Center](#) can help to rebalance the mind, body, and spirit. And while these practices can't guarantee pregnancy, there's a good chance they will help you lower your stress levels and feel better during a difficult time.

ABOUT NATALIE ENGLER, RYT



Natalie Engler, RYT is a National Yoga Alliance Registered Yoga Teacher who offers private yoga and small group classes to women at all stages of the fertility process. Her approach synthesizes ongoing studies in Iyengar-influenced and Vinyasa yoga with immersion in Restorative Yoga, which she learned as part of her 200-hour yoga teacher certification with Bo Forbes, PsyD, creator of Integrative Yoga Therapeutics.

Natalie has been an avid yoga practitioner for 20 years and a yoga teacher for six



years. Through a dedicated personal practice and experience teaching individuals and groups, Natalie has witnessed the potent effects of Restorative Yoga on a wide range of issues. She is honored to be able to share this practice with women at the Domar Center.

In addition teaching yoga, Natalie is a wellness coach and health writer who has written for Harvard Medical International, Reuters Health, the Massachusetts Medical Society and Harvard Health Publications. She has been quoted in the Boston Globe, Yoga Journal, Parents Magazine, and Conceive Magazine.

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