A FEW WEEKS AGO, my seven-year-old son, Hayes, told me he was having trouble falling asleep. He said that he was having “many thoughts” at night and couldn’t stop his mind from thinking. I told him about a breathing practice that I had taught his older brother, Calder, a few years earlier, and I suggested that Hayes could try it while lying in bed at night to help him relax and fall asleep. The practice was simple: a few minutes of diaphragmatic breathing followed by a few minutes of consciously and gently extending each exhalation.

“Maybe you’d like to try it?” I said to Hayes. “I think it was helpful for your brother sometimes, and maybe it will help you, too.” Just then, Calder, who had been passing through the room, announced: “You’re wrong, Mom.” I held my breath, wondering if he’d tell Hayes that my advice wasn’t going to work. “It doesn’t help me sometimes,” he said matter-of-factly. “It helps me all the time.”

I was pleasantly stunned. I hadn’t realized that Calder was still using the practice I had taught him three years earlier. As I knelt on the living room floor to teach Hayes the same practice, I was reminded that pranayama, the fourth of the eight limbs of yoga outlined in Patanjali’s Yoga Sutra, does not have to be complicated.

Pranayama, which literally means “to extend the vital life force,” or prana, is an incredibly rich practice made up of many breathing techniques that vary in complexity from ones simple enough for a child to do to those appropriate only for advanced practitioners. While the best way to practice pranayama is under the guidance of an experienced teacher, there are simple techniques—such as gentle diaphragmatic
breathing and comfortably lengthening the exhalation—that can be used at any time to transform not only your breath but also your state of mind.

In my work as a yoga therapist, I treat people struggling with a variety of issues, including depression, anxiety, sleep disturbances, chronic pain, and even life-threatening illness. Time and time again, I’ve seen simple pranayama practices reduce stress and anxiety; promote restful sleep; ease pain; increase attention and reduce stress and anxiety; promote rest;

In the Yoga Sutra, Patanjali describes pranayama as a process by which you can break your unconscious breathing pattern. These techniques over time, you may start to notice when you are unintentionally holding your breath or breathing shallowly. You also may begin to associate patterns of the breath with your moods or states of mind. This self-awareness is the first step toward using the practices of pranayama to help shift your patterns and, through regular practice, create positive change in your life.

Try each practice daily for a week and observe how it affects your body, breath, and mind in order to figure out which is best for you. You can do them at just about any time of day, though preferably not immediately following a large meal.

The three breathing practices that follow—relaxed, diaphragmatic breathing; Sitali (or Sitkari) Pranayama; and gentle “extended exhale” breathing—are a good introduction to pranayama. Each supports the parasympathetic nervous system, quiets the mind, and helps to bring about a state of more focused attention. As you continue to practice these techniques over time, you may start to notice when you are unintentionally holding your breath or breathing shallowly. You also may begin to associate patterns of the breath with your moods or states of mind. This self-awareness is the first step toward using the practices of pranayama to help shift your patterns and, through regular practice, create positive change in your life.

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Though practice of pranayama is safest and most effective when guided by an experienced teacher who knows your needs and capabilities, there are several simple techniques you can try at home as long as you’re in good health and you don’t push beyond your capacity.

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Basic breath awareness

This gentle introduction to diaphragmatic breathing teaches you how to breathe more fully and consciously.

Benefits Quiets and calms the entire nervous system, reducing stress and anxiety and improving self-awareness.

Try it At least once a day, at any time.

How to Lie comfortably on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the floor about hip-distance apart. Place a palm on your abdomen and breathe comfortably for a few moments, noticing the quality of your breath. Does the breath feel tense? strained?

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uneven? shallow? Simply observe the breath without any judgment. Then gradually begin to make your breathing as relaxed and smooth as possible, introducing a slight pause after each inbreath and outbreath.

Once the breath feels relaxed and comfortable, notice the movement of the body. As you inhale, the abdomen naturally expands; as you exhale, feel the slight contraction of the abdomen. In a gentle way, try to actively expand the abdomen on the inhale and contract the abdomen on the exhale to support the natural movement of the diaphragm and experience the pleasure of giving yourself a full, relaxed breath. Continue the practice for 6 to 12 breaths.

the cooling breath

Sitlai Pranayama is often translated as “the cooling breath” because the act of drawing the air across the tongue and into the mouth is said to have a cooling and calming effect on the nervous system. To practice Sitlai, you need to be able to curl the sides of your tongue inward so that it looks like a straw. The ability to curl the tongue is a genetic trait. If you can’t, try an alternative technique called Sitkari Pranayama, which offers the same effects.

benefits Can improve focus; reduce agitation, anger, and anxiety; and pacify excess heat in the system.

try it Twice a day, or as needed during stressful times. Sitlai and Sitkari Pranayama are particularly supportive when you’re feeling drowsy in the morning or during an afternoon slump when you need to improve your focus.

how to Sitlai Pranayama: Sit comfortably, either in a chair or on the floor, with your shoulders relaxed and your spine naturally erect. Slightly lower the chin, curl the tongue lengthwise, and project it out of the mouth to a comfortable distance. Inhale gently through the “straw” formed by your curled tongue as you slowly lift your chin toward the ceiling, lifting only as far as the neck is comfortable. At the end of the inhalation, with your chin comfortably raised, retract the tongue and close the mouth. Exhale slowly through the nostrils as you gently lower your chin back to a neutral position. Repeat for 8 to 12 breaths.

Sitkari Pranayama: Open the mouth slightly with your tongue just behind the teeth. Inhale slowly through the space between the upper and lower teeth, letting the air wash over your tongue as you raise your chin toward the ceiling. At the end of the inhalation, close the mouth and exhale through the nostrils as you slowly lower your chin back to neutral. Repeat for 8 to 12 breaths.

the long exhale

This 1:2 breathing practice, which involves gradually increasing your exhalation until it is twice the length of your inhalation, relaxes the nervous system.

benefits Can reduce insomnia, sleep disturbances, and anxiety.
**living yoga**

**try it** Before bedtime to help support sleep, in the middle of the night when you’re struggling with insomnia, or at any time of the day to calm stress or anxiety. (In general, it’s best to avoid practicing 1:2 breathing first thing in the morning unless you’re experiencing anxiety. The relaxing effects of the practice tend to make it more difficult to get up and go on with your day.)

**how to** Begin by lying on your back with your knees bent and feet flat on the floor, hip-width apart. Place a palm on the abdomen and take a few relaxed breaths, feeling the abdomen expand on the inhalation and gently contract on the exhalation. With your palm on your abdomen, mentally count the length of each inhalation and exhalation for several more breaths. If the inhalation is longer than the exhalation, you can begin to make them the same length over the next few breaths.

Once your inhalation and exhalation are equal, gradually increase the length of your exhalation by 1 to 2 seconds by gently contracting the abdomen. As long as the breath feels smooth and relaxed, continue to gradually increase the exhalation by 1 to 2 seconds once every few breaths. Make sure you experience no strain as the exhalation increases and keep going until your exhalation is up to twice the length of the inhalation, but not beyond. For example, if your inhalation is comfortably 4 seconds, do not increase the length of your exhalation to more than 8 seconds.

Keep in mind that even an exhalation that is only slightly longer than the inhalation can induce a calming effect, so take care that you don’t push yourself beyond your capacity. (If you do, you’ll likely activate the sympathetic nervous system, or stress response, and feel agitated rather than calm.)

If your breath feels uncomfortable or short, or if you’re gasping on the next inhalation, back off to a ratio that is more comfortable for 8 to 12 breaths. Then finish your practice with 6 to 8 natural, relaxed breaths.
and then holding the breath. These breathing patterns can activate the sympathetic nervous system (often referred to as the “fight or flight response”).

One of the primary reasons that pranayama techniques that foster a long, smooth exhale (like the ones presented here) are so beneficial is because, when practiced correctly, they can support the parasympathetic nervous system and activate what is commonly known as the “relaxation response,” reducing stress and its effects on your body and mind. As a result, your resilience in the face of challenge or adversity increases, and your mind becomes more focused and still.

A QUIET MIND

The eight limbs of yoga outlined in the Yoga Sutra are a path to help you reach a state of Yoga, or focused concentration. But this focused concentration is not the end goal. As Patanjali tells us, the result of reaching this state of attention is that you experience clearer perception and a greater connection with your true Self.

When you’re connected with your true Self, it becomes easier to see what is not your true Self—your mind, body, thoughts, feelings, job, and essentially all of the changing circumstances around you. This discernment allows you to act from a place of the Self, and when you do that, you experience less suffering.

Pranayama is an important tool to get you to this state of more focused concentration, leading you to clearer perception, a greater connection with the Self, and ultimately a happier life. In Yoga Sutra 2.52, Patanjali writes, “As a result [of pranayama], the covering that blocks our own inner light is reduced.” In other words, through the practice of pranayama, you can reduce all of the mental noise—the agitation, distractions, and self-doubt—that prevents you from connecting with your own inner light, your true Self. In this way, pranayama can have a profound effect on your life.

Kate Holcombe is the founder and president of the nonprofit Healing Yoga Foundation in San Francisco (healingyoga.org).