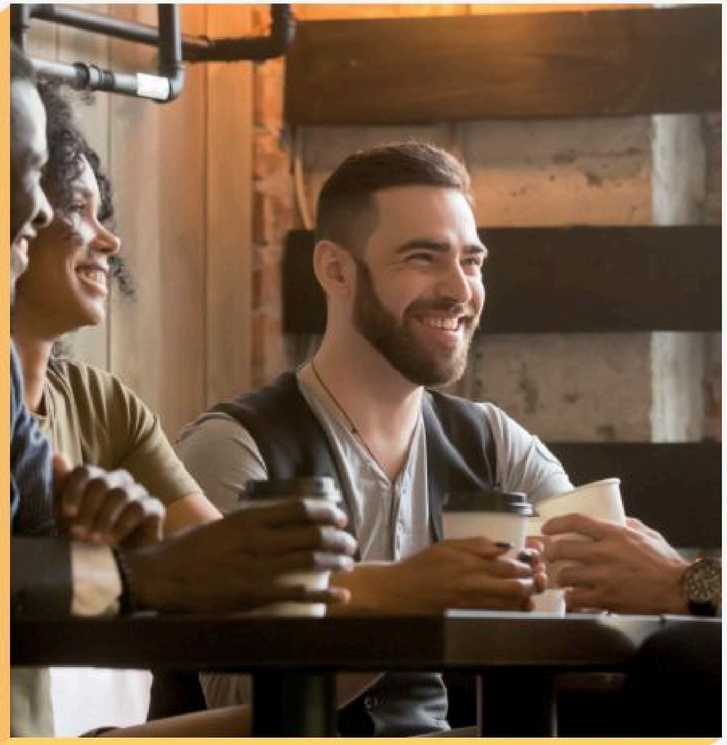
Inside This Issue

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The Science of Happiness

Mental Health Awareness Week, taking place from 12th to 18th May 2025, is an annual campaign focused on promoting a better understanding of mental health. This year's theme, 'Community,' underscores the crucial role social connections and a stable, supportive community can play in our mental wellbeing.

In recognition of this important week, this article explores how social connections, leading with kindness, and staying present are strong predictors of long-term happiness. In today's increasingly digital world, where genuine connection can sometimes feel distant, maintaining a sense of community has never been more essential.

Happiness is a universal aspiration, yet its meaning is often misunderstood.

While many associate it with fleeting moments of pleasure or material success, psychological research reveals that happiness is far more profound – it is a combination of emotional satisfaction, purpose, and flourishing. By exploring the science behind happiness, we will uncover actionable strategies to enhance wellbeing and live more meaningful lives.

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Defining Happiness

Happiness is not merely about feeling good in the moment. Instead, it can be viewed through two distinct but interconnected lenses:

- **Happy in Your Life:** The day-to-day experience of positive emotions, such as joy, laughter, and contentment, balanced with relatively few negative feelings.
- **Happy with Your Life:** Overall life satisfaction, reflecting a broader perspective of fulfilment, meaning, and purpose.

Interestingly, these two aspects do not always align. A new parent, for instance, might feel immense life satisfaction while enduring stress and exhaustion in their daily routine.

Researchers Daniel Kahneman and Alan Krueger further explain the experiences of happiness through two perspectives:

1. **The Experiencing Self:** which captures moment-to-moment emotions.
2. **The Remembering Self:** which evaluates life retrospectively, creating a personal narrative.

Both the Experiencing and Remembering Selves contribute to the framing effect, i.e. how we perceive our experiences of happiness.



Reframing Experiences: The Power of Perspective

How we interpret and frame our experiences significantly impacts our happiness. Positive reframing can transform even challenging or unpleasant moments into meaningful memories.

Here's how the framing effect works:

Our interpretation of an event often matters more than the event itself. For example:

- Climbing a mountain might feel gruelling and painful in the moment, but in hindsight, it becomes a source of pride and accomplishment.
- A psychological experiment revealed that participants who unknowingly received adrenaline interpreted their emotions differently based on their surroundings. Those in a happy environment felt exhilarated, while those in a tense setting experienced anxiety.

By changing how we view setbacks, we can transform failures into stepping stones for growth. This approach is echoed even in ancient philosophies like stoicism, which emphasise the freedom to reinterpret past events as sources of resilience and pride.

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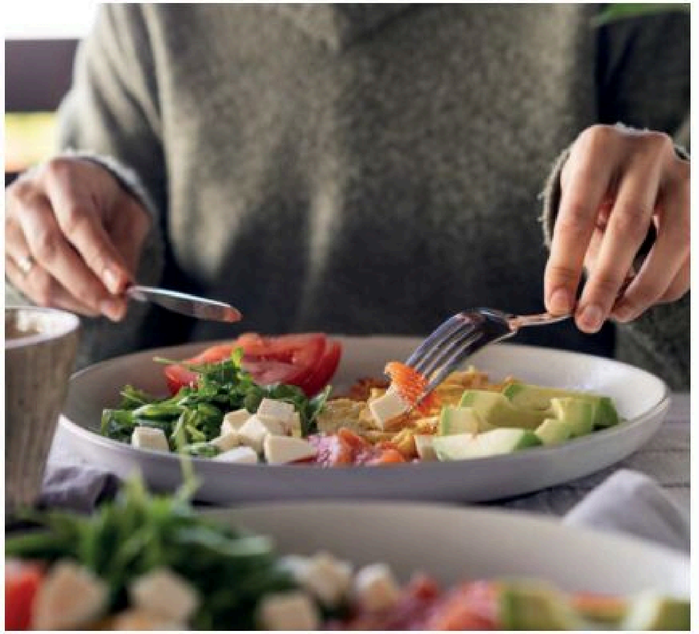
Social Connections: The Cornerstone of Happiness

Strong social relationships are a cornerstone of happiness. Research consistently highlights their essential role in mental and physical wellbeing:

- **Longevity and Health:** Studies, including the long-running Harvard Study of Adult Development, demonstrate that people with robust social connections are healthier, happier, and live longer.
- **Acts of Kindness:** A study on the link between personal happiness and spending money on others finds that shifting focus from oneself to the wellbeing of others (through volunteering, donating, or simple acts of kindness) creates a sense of purpose and deepens social bonds.

Where modern life often prioritises productivity over relationships, reassessing these priorities is key to cultivating deeper connections and greater fulfilment.





Healthy Habits: The Foundation of Wellbeing

Simple yet effective habits can profoundly impact happiness by contributing to improvements in both physical and mental health. These include:

- **Sleep:** Sleep is essential for emotional resilience and cognitive function. A lack of sleep, i.e. sleep deprivation undermines mood and increases stress.
- **Exercise:** Regular physical activity boosts endorphins, reduces anxiety, and enhances self-esteem.
- **Nutrition:** A balanced diet supports emotional stability and mental clarity by giving us essential nutrients and a consistent source of energy.
- **Mindfulness and Gratitude:** Being present and appreciating the positives in life can reduce stress and improve overall happiness.

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Technology and Social Connection

While technology has revolutionised communication, it has also diminished the richness of face-to-face interactions. Smartphones, in particular, can fragment attention and create a barrier to meaningful connections. Research by the University of Essex and Ofcom shows digital devices lead to:

- **Decreased Social Interaction:** The presence of smartphones reduces smiling and positive engagement in shared spaces.
- **Impaired Family Bonding:** Families often report feeling less connected when devices are present during shared activities.

Setting boundaries around technology use — such as putting phones away during meals — can help reclaim attention and strengthen relationships.

The Problem of "Time Confetti"

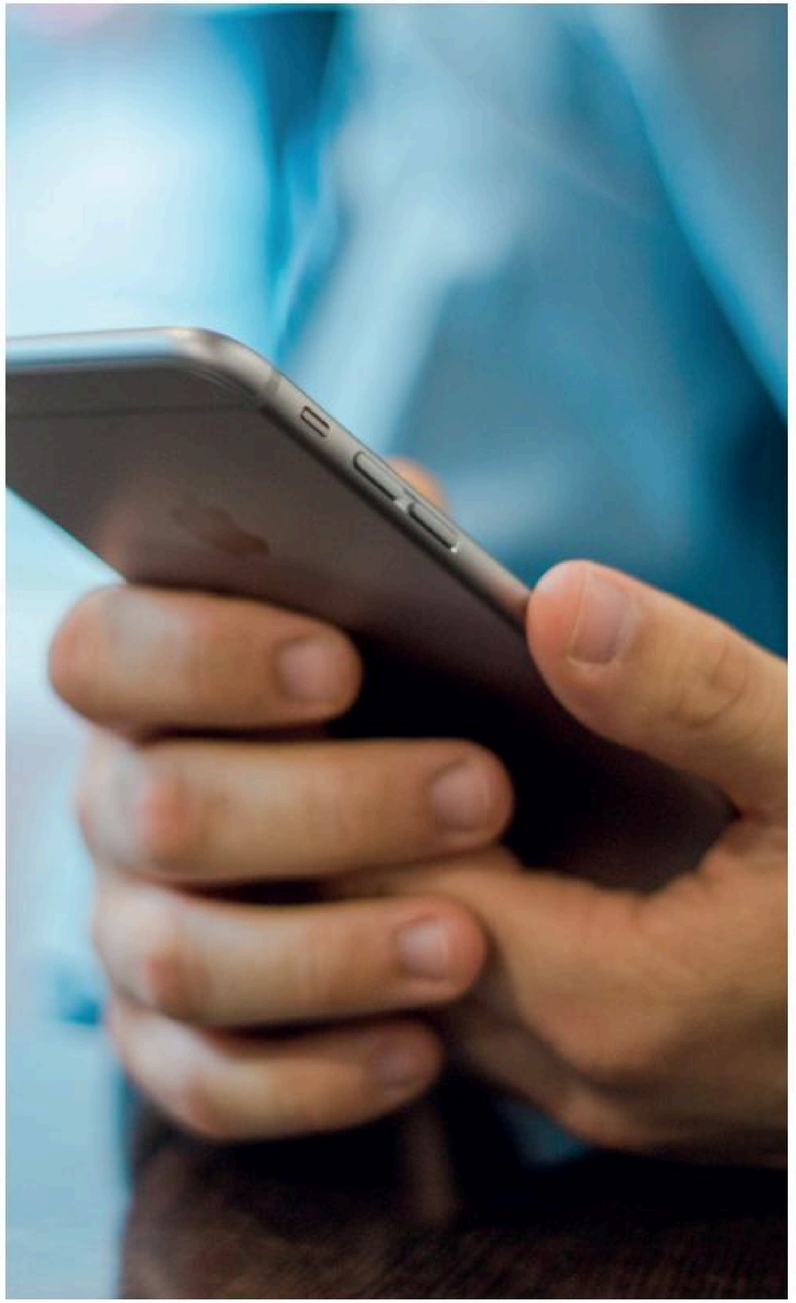
Modern life fragments our time into tiny, unproductive moments - a phenomenon known as "Time Confetti." This happens when we have small pockets of free time throughout the day, but instead of using them to relax or enjoy ourselves, we fill them with distractions like checking emails or scrolling through social media.

This results in:

- **Stress and Inefficiency:** Scattered time makes it harder to engage in meaningful activities like deep conversations or pursuing hobbies.
- **Defaulting to Distraction:** Quick tasks like scrolling social media or checking emails feel productive but rarely contribute to long-term happiness.

To counteract this, we can:

- Create uninterrupted blocks of time for meaningful pursuits.
- Limit notifications and digital distractions.
- Prioritise quality time with loved ones.



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Challenging Intuition and Combatting Misconceptions About Happiness

Our intuitions about what makes us happy are often misguided. For example, people frequently overestimate the happiness derived from material possessions or achievements while underestimating the joy of simple, social interactions like chatting with a stranger. By recognising and challenging these misconceptions, we can make more intentional choices to enhance our wellbeing.

Here are our top 5 tips to boost happiness and challenge negative thoughts:





1.

Gratitude: A Simple Yet Transformative Practice

Gratitude helps counteract "hedonic adaptation"—our tendency to grow accustomed to positive changes and take them for granted. Regularly practising gratitude can:

- Reignite appreciation for familiar joys, such as a loving partner or a morning coffee.
- Strengthen relationships through expressions of thanks.
- Build resilience by focusing on what remains positive during challenging times.

2.

Stoicism and Resilience: Lessons from Ancient Philosophy

The Stoic practice of **negative visualisation**, i.e. imagining the loss of cherished people or possessions, can enhance gratitude and deepen appreciation for what we have. By accepting life's impermanence and reframing challenges as opportunities for growth, we can build emotional resilience and find contentment even in adversity.

3.

Breaking Free from the Pursuit of Insatiable Goals

- Many of us fall into the trap of believing that achieving certain milestones will bring lasting happiness. However, the joy of achievement is often short-lived. Instead, we should:
- Focus on intrinsic rewards like personal growth and meaningful experiences.
- Savour the journey rather than fixating on the destination.
- Redefine success to align with our values and purpose.

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4.

Living in the Present: The Key to Lasting Happiness

Happiness is not a future destination but an experience available in the present moment. Practising mindfulness helps us:

- Let go of "when" thinking, where happiness is deferred to future achievements.
- Fully engage with life as it unfolds, finding joy in small, meaningful moments.



5.

Supporting and Engaging with Each Other Through Kindness and Empathy

Many individuals today face unique challenges, including rising rates of anxiety and stress. The contributing factors include:

- Social media's emphasis on comparison and external validation.
- Societal pressures to prioritise financial and academic success over wellbeing.

To help each other live happier lives, we must:

- Embrace evidence-based happiness practices, such as building social connections and practising mindfulness.
- Normalise failure and encourage resilience.
- Emphasise intrinsic goals like relationships and personal growth over extrinsic achievements.

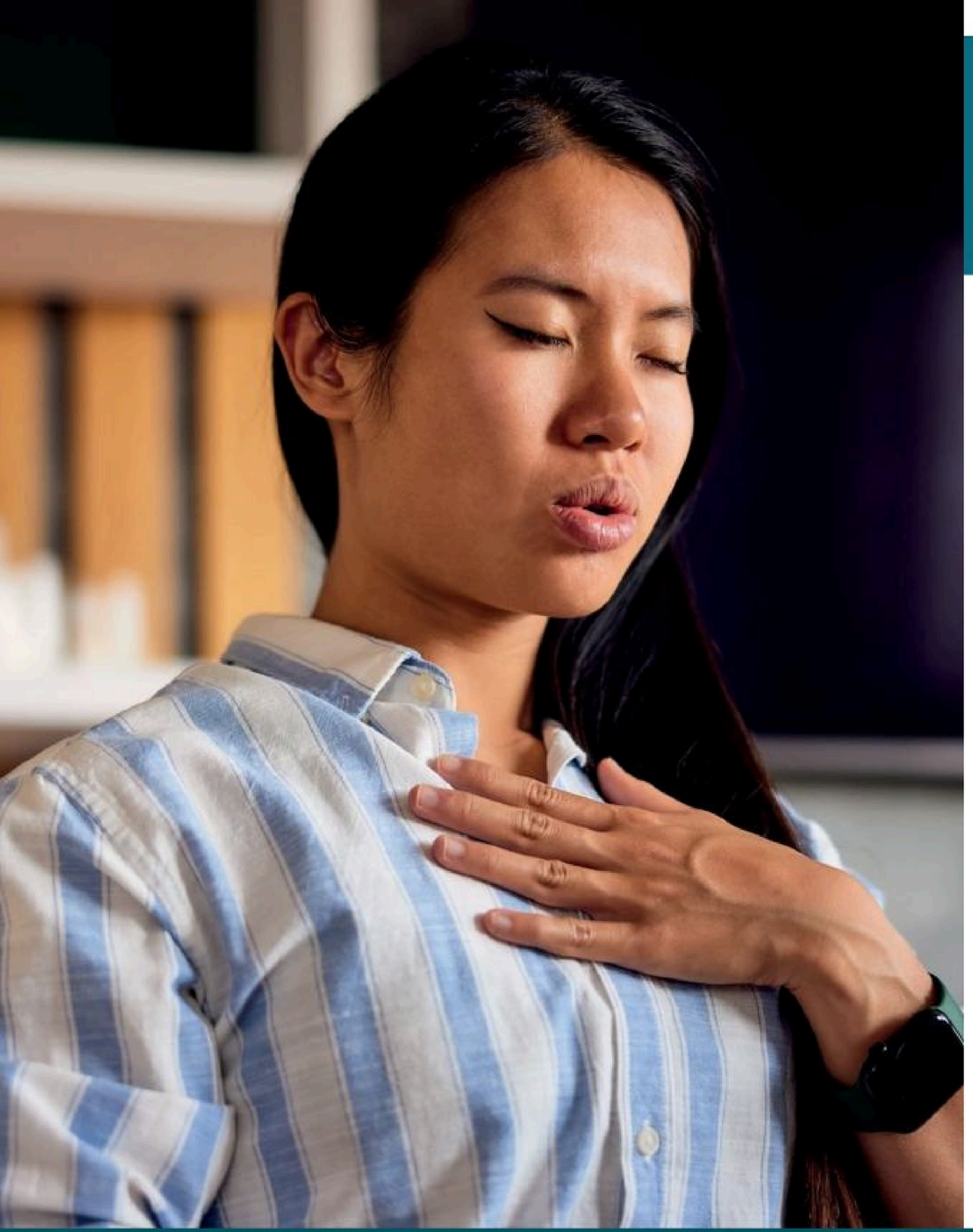
Happiness is not a fixed state but a skill that can be cultivated through intentional practices. By understanding the science of happiness, reframing our perspectives, nurturing social connections, and living mindfully, we can create a life of greater meaning, resilience, and joy. Whether through small daily habits or broader lifestyle changes, the pursuit of wellbeing is an ongoing journey – one that begins with understanding and adapting our mindset.

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Breathe Better: Unlocking Health, Mood, and Performance

Breathing is an automatic function essential for life, yet its impact on our health, cognition, and overall performance is often underestimated. We take around 20,000 breaths daily, but the quality of those breaths influences everything from stress levels to brain function and even our resilience to illness. By understanding the science of breathing and employing targeted techniques, we can use this natural process to enhance our wellbeing, focus, and performance in both our personal and professional lives.

The Unique Role of Breathing

Unlike other autonomic functions, such as digestion, breathing is one of the few bodily processes we can consciously control. This duality, where breathing operates both automatically and voluntarily, makes it a powerful tool for influencing mental and physical states. Through specific breathing techniques, we can regulate stress, improve concentration, and optimise physiological responses.

Research on the Science of Breathing has shown that different breathing patterns activate different areas of the brain, allowing us to shift between states of heightened alertness and deep relaxation. Controlled breathing techniques have been extensively studied for their benefits, including stress reduction, improved sleep, and enhanced focus. Beyond mental benefits, proper breathing techniques can also aid in digestion, cardiovascular health, and immune system function.

Keep reading to learn more about these techniques!

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The Mechanics of Breathing

Breathing is more than just the intake of oxygen; it is a complex physiological process involving multiple systems. Key components include:

Lungs and Alveoli: The lungs contain hundreds of millions of alveoli, which maximise oxygen absorption.

Diaphragm: This dome-shaped muscle contracts to create space for lung expansion.

Intercostal Muscles: These muscles between the ribs aid in expanding and contracting the chest cavity.

Phrenic Nerve: This nerve controls diaphragmatic breathing, which is essential for efficient respiration.

While we can breathe through both the nose and mouth, nasal breathing is often superior as it provides natural resistance, filters the air, and promotes optimal oxygen absorption. Nasal breathing has been shown to have cognitive benefits, particularly in modulating brain oscillations and memory retention. Furthermore, it aids in reducing snoring and symptoms of sleep apnea.





The Chemistry of Breathing

Breathing regulates oxygen and carbon dioxide (CO2) balance, which is essential for maintaining homeostasis. While oxygen is vital for cellular energy production, CO2 plays a crucial role in oxygen delivery. The Bohr effect explains how haemoglobin (the protein that carries oxygen in the blood) releases more oxygen in response to CO2 levels. This means controlled breathing can directly improve how efficiently oxygen is delivered to tissues.

Hyperventilation, often caused by stress or shallow breathing, disrupts this balance by expelling too much CO2. This can lead to symptoms such as dizziness, anxiety, and cognitive fog. Learning to regulate breathing depth and frequency prevents these issues and enhances cognitive clarity. Slow, deliberate breathing can also help regulate blood pressure and improve overall circulation.

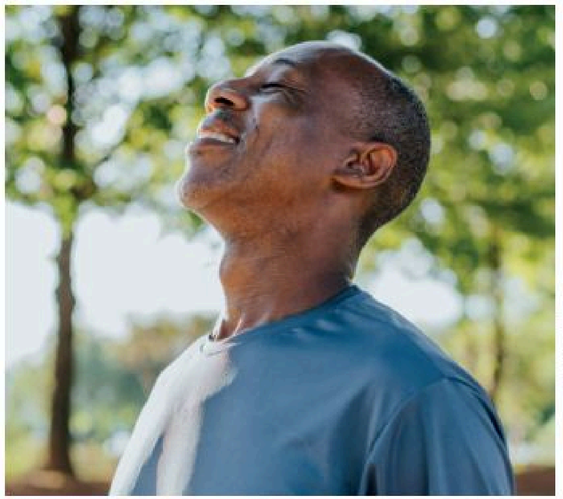
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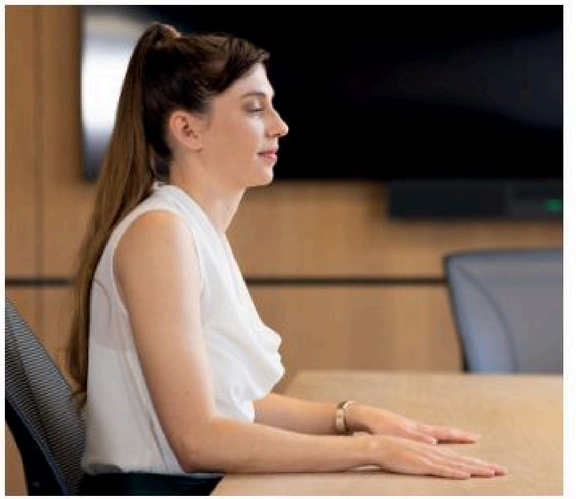
Four Breathing Techniques for Reducing Stress and Improving Performance

1.

The Physiological Sigh

- Two deep inhales through the nose, followed by a long exhale through the mouth.
- Proven to quickly reduce stress by balancing oxygen and CO2 levels.





2.

Diaphragmatic Breathing

- Encourages belly expansion on inhalation.
- Ideal for relaxation, stress reduction, and improving respiratory efficiency. This technique is particularly beneficial for those with asthma or anxiety-related breathing issues.

3.

Box Breathing

- Inhale (4 seconds), hold (4 seconds), exhale (4 seconds), hold (4 seconds).
- Used by athletes and military personnel to manage stress and enhance focus. Regular practice can strengthen lung capacity and increase endurance in physical activities.

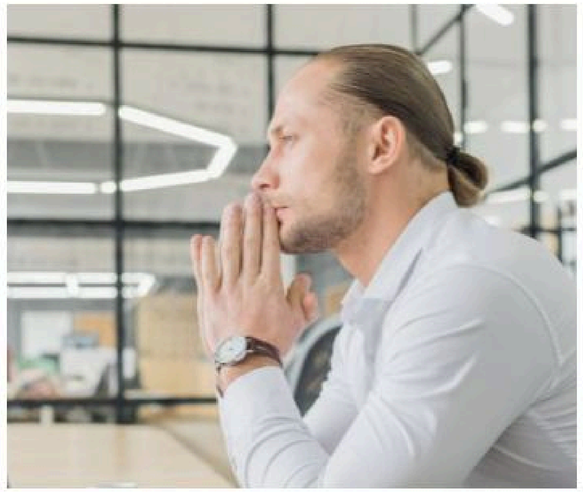
4.

Cyclic Sighing

- A Stanford study on the Benefits of Breathwork found that five minutes of cyclic sighing daily had the most significant impact on reducing stress and improving mood. It is an effective technique for improving emotional regulation and mitigating the physiological effects of chronic stress. A cyclic sigh involves two quick inhales, followed by an exhale (similar to the physiological sigh).

Controlled breathing has a greater impact on our bodies than we may think! At high altitudes, lower air pressure makes breathing more challenging. Over time, the body adapts by increasing red blood cell production and enhancing respiratory efficiency. This principle explains why high-altitude training improves endurance performance. While most professionals won't train at altitude, practising breath control can mimic some of these adaptations, increasing oxygen efficiency in everyday life. Additionally, controlled breathing can aid in preventing altitude sickness and help acclimatisation to different environments.

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Practise Nasal Breathing

Poor breathing habits can lead to sleep apnea, a condition where breathing stops momentarily during sleep, reducing oxygen levels. This can contribute to daytime fatigue, cognitive impairment, and cardiovascular risk. Encouraging nasal breathing – even using mouth tape at night – can mitigate these risks and improve sleep quality.

Developing a habit of nasal breathing during the day can not only help reinforce better breathing patterns at night but also improve long-term respiratory health. Nasal breathing offers numerous advantages over mouth breathing, including better oxygenation, nitric oxide production, and improved facial aesthetics. Chronic mouth breathing, by contrast, can lead to respiratory inefficiency and altered facial structure.

Testing and Improving Breathing Efficiency

You can first test and then train your breathing efficiency by following these two techniques:

1. **Carbon Dioxide Tolerance Test**

   - Take a deep inhale, then time how long it takes to exhale fully.

   Results:

   - <20 sec: Low CO2 tolerance (likely overbreathing).
   - 20-45 sec: Moderate.
   - 45 sec: High tolerance, indicating efficient breathing.

2. **Box Breathing for Performance**

   - As mentioned above, box breathing involves inhaling for 4 seconds, holding that breath for 4 seconds, then exhaling and holding the exhale for 4 seconds each.
   - Used by corporate professionals to manage stress before high-pressure meetings.
   - Enhances resilience by training the nervous system to stay calm under pressure. This practice is also effective in managing public speaking anxiety and improving decision-making under stress.

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How To Incorporate Healthy Breathing Practices Into Your Daily Routine

In busy work environments, breathing practices can be integrated into daily routines in the following ways:

- **Pre-meeting Stress Reduction:** Physiological sigh or box breathing for immediate relaxation.
- **Enhancing Focus:** Nasal inhalation before important tasks to optimise cognitive function.
- **Preventing Fatigue:** Conscious nasal breathing during work to sustain energy levels.
- **Sleep Optimisation:** Encouraging nasal breathing at night to improve sleep quality and recovery.

By implementing such breathwork techniques for wellness, we can improve our productivity and mental wellbeing both at home and in the office!

Breathing is a fundamental yet underutilised tool for improving mental and physical health. Whether through simple techniques like the physiological sigh or structured methods such as box breathing, conscious breath control can transform wellbeing, resilience, and cognitive performance. In busy work environments, where stress and high performance go hand in hand, integrating breathing exercises into daily life offers a science-backed strategy for maintaining balance and achieving optimal function.



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