

The Brain Science Behind Gratitude Breathing

At first glance, sounds like some “new agey” meditation thing that is nice or cute, but not to be taken seriously. There is a great deal of brain science behind gratitude breathing, and not brain science only, but heart science as well.

First, let’s talk about the gratitude breathing technique itself. I am a big believer in simplicity. If a technique is too complex or difficult to remember, when you are under stress you likely won’t be able to use it.

HOW: as you slowly take in a deep breath for a count of six, feel your heart in the center of your chest actually taking in the oxygen and expanding—focus your attention on your heart. I like to place my hand over my heart to help me really focus. As you’re taking the breath into your heart, think of someone or something you are grateful for. In your mind, say, “I am grateful for _____.” With the gratitude image and thought in your mind, breathe out for a count of six, and as you do, imagine the gratitude flowing out from your heart into your whole body. Repeat this as many times as needed to get yourself in a peaceful place where your frontal lobes are back in the driver’s seat.

Just start slow and experiment. It might help to bring in recent events where you experienced happiness or success—in your recovery or from any area of your life—anyone or anything that you feel grateful for and has brought you peace or happiness. Use your acts of kindness, if you have an experience where you really connected with somebody, went on a fun “date” with spouse or friend, or “played” with children or pets. Bring these into your mind while taking slow breathes. Use the dream board to help you remember to what you are grateful for. Write them down, keep a list so you can pull it up when needed. Mix it up so you don’t habituate to it, get bored with it and just glaze over to it.

Let’s talk about the science. When we’re frightened or stressed, our limbic system is shouting at our frontal lobes and the rest of our brain and body—“Hey, we’re in crisis here—this is an emergency!” If the logic part of our brain believes the limbic system—whether the emergency is real or imagined, then our whole body starts to respond. We tend to hold our breath or take rapid, shallow breaths. Our heart rate and blood pressure increase and our muscles tense up as the adrenaline kicks in. But then when the stressful situation passes, or we “perceive” it’s safe, we let out a deep breath, a “sigh of relief” signaling the brain that everything is okay again. If

keep deep breathing, our heart rate continues decreasing, our lungs expand and our muscles relax. Equilibrium in the brain and body is restored. All we're doing with gratitude breathing is creating this calming process on demand—whenever we feel the need.

Now, the deep breathing part of this technique is obvious. For thousands of years breathing has been part of meditation and calming the brain and body, but what about the thoughts of gratitude? What is the science behind those? There is an amazing group of scientists in Northern California at the “Heart Math Institute” who have spent years studying the interaction between the human brain and the human heart. They have discovered that the heart is much more than just a magnificent pump. The heart is the most powerful generator of electromagnetic energy in the human body. The heart's electrical field is about 60 times greater in amplitude than the electrical activity generated in the brain. The heart has neurons just like those found in the brain. The heart stores memories. It has more links to the brain than any other organ in the body. In short, the heart and the brain have tremendous influence and effect on each other.

The effect we are most aware of is the one stress or panic in the brain has on the heart. We feel stressed, our limbic gets in the driver's seat and the rest of the brain follows in a panic. All of this messaging gets sent to the heart, which responds by speeding up, jagged, irregular heart rhythms, and over time, heart disease and failure. The scientists at the heart math institute decided to find out what kinds of thoughts and images in the brain have the most calming effect on the heart. Connecting individuals to brain and heart monitoring equipment, they had them bring different kinds of positive thoughts and images into their minds. They tried love, affection, courage, humility, compassion and many others. As each emotion was focused on, they measured the effect on the rhythms of the heart. Do you want to guess which emotion had the most powerful calming effect on the heart?

Gratitude!

Brain scans and heart monitoring show that when you engage in Gratitude Breathing, your heart rhythms become very smooth and even, and in turn have a centering and calming affect on your brain. In essence, your heart calms the limbic system of your brain down, and causes your logic centers to become fully engaged and highly focused.

Gratitude Breathing—6 Simple Steps:

When you feel down, depressed, stressed or you are just having a bad day immediately begin to Gratitude Breathing.

1. Quickly take several deep breaths and forcefully blow out the air releasing any tension in your body.
2. Then slowly take in a deep breath for a count of six.
3. As you breathe, focus on your heart in the center of your chest and imagine that your heart is taking in the oxygen. Actually feel your heart expanding as you take in the deep breath for a count of six.
4. As you take the breath into your heart, think of someone or something that you are grateful for. In your mind, say, “I am deeply grateful for _____.”
5. Holding the “gratitude thought” in your mind, breathe out for a count of six, and as you do, imagine the gratitude flowing out from your heart into your whole body.
6. Gratitude breathe until you sense your Director in charge and you feel calm.

Try practicing this when you wake up in the morning and right before you go to bed. Then when you really need to utilize this simple but powerful tool, it will be automatic.

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