

The first practice

One practice from the first step of the workbook, complete, with a log for your first week. Start it today. It does not need the rest of the book to work.

WHY THIS COMES FIRST

Your body will not do repair work while it believes it is in danger. That is not a figure of speech and it is not a comment on your character. When your nervous system reads threat it makes a set of trade-offs on your behalf, so digestion slows, sleep gets lighter, and your threshold for noise and light and food and supplements drops. Those are sensible short-term trades, and the trouble starts when the threat state stops being an event and becomes the background setting.

Most workbooks put the breathing exercises in an appendix at the back, as a nice extra. That is backwards, because insight does not land in a body that is braced. So we settle first, and the rest is built on top of it.

THE LEVER YOU CAN ACTUALLY REACH

You cannot directly instruct your heart rate. You can directly instruct your breathing, and your breathing is wired into the same system. The length of your out-breath relative to your in-breath is one of the few conscious inputs that reliably shifts the balance toward the brake. That is the mechanism, and what follows is one particular way of using it.

Cyclic sighing FIVE MINUTES A DAY

If you only do one thing from this page, do this one. In a randomized trial, five minutes a day of this practice over a month improved mood and lowered resting breathing rate, and it outperformed the same amount of time spent in mindfulness meditation.

- 1 Breathe in through your nose until your lungs feel comfortably full.
- 2 Take a second, shorter sip of air in through your nose on top of it.
- 3 Let the air out slowly through your mouth, longer than both in-breaths together. Let it be a genuine sigh.
- 4 Repeat for five minutes.

The part people skip

The second sip of air in step two. It reinflates parts of the lungs that have collapsed, and it is what makes this different from ordinary deep breathing.

The pocket version

A single cycle works on its own once you have the shape of it. It takes about eight seconds and nobody can tell you are doing it.

If this makes you feel worse, stop. Some people find that attention on the breath itself raises anxiety. That is common, it does not mean you are broken, and it does not mean you are doing it wrong. The rule is simple: if distress climbs and stays climbed for more than a few minutes, stop the exercise. The workbook prints a gentler alternative next to every practice for exactly this reason, and one of them is external rather than internal, which is usually the answer for people this happens to.

YOUR FIRST WEEK

The point is not to be perfect, and missing days does not spoil it. The point is to gather evidence about whether this particular practice does anything for you, because that varies between people more than you would expect. Rate how wound-up you feel just before you start and again just after, on a scale where ten is the worst it gets.

DAY	WHAT I DID, AND WHEN	BEFORE 0 TO 10	AFTER 0 TO 10	WHAT I NOTICED
—	<i>e.g. cyclic sighing, 5 min, before bed</i>	7	4	<i>shoulders dropped</i>
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6				
7				

READING IT BACK

At the end of the week, look at the gap between the two number columns rather than at the numbers themselves. A consistent drop of two or three points is a real finding and it is the thing to build on. If the gap is there on some days and not on others, the useful question is what was different about those days, and that is where the second step of the workbook picks up. If the log is mostly empty, you have not run the experiment yet, which is a different situation from having run it and got nothing.

WHAT IS IN THE WORKBOOK

Step One holds **four more practices** besides this one, including the gentler external practice for people that breath-focus does not suit, a version for building capacity over weeks, and a sixty-second version for when something has just happened. Every one of them comes with **recorded audio**, so that you can follow along with someone counting rather than reading instructions off a page while also trying to notice what your body is doing.

Then five more steps, one a week, with Step One running underneath all of them:

- 2 Track
- 3 Name
- 4 Test
- 5 Meet
- 6 Move

Along with the four inputs that decide whether any of it works, a flare plan you write while you are well, a script for your own doctor, a page for the person who lives with you, and an honest section on how to tell when a book has stopped being the right tool.

\$29.99 · September 8, 2026

Full-color paperback, 8.5" × 11" · doctorstafford.com