

# Soft Belly Breathing

## *Purpose:*

- Relaxation is the basis for the mind-body approaches and the soil that will nourish their use. Regular relaxation decreases levels of stress and increases immune functioning; can lessen pain; decreases anxiety, improves mood, and allows emotions to rise to the surface.
- Relaxation also helps you to gain perspective on every aspect of your life, and to feel less overwhelmed by it. If you can relax during a difficult time, it is, by definition, no longer such a powerful stressor to you.
- “Soft belly” is just one of many forms of relaxation.

## *Instructions*

The first time you teach soft belly breathing you may want to use this longer script. As you progress through the group session, you may want to abbreviate this. (See below)

## *Soft Belly Breathing Script:*

*Take a deep breath and allowing your eyes to close to remove external stimulation...if you are not comfortable closing your eyes, then just find a soft gaze on the floor...*

*Begin to breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth... this is a very relaxing way to breathe, maybe a little unfamiliar but you will get used to it after a little bit...*

*Allow your belly to be soft and relaxed... If the belly is soft and relaxed, more air goes to the bottom of the lungs where there is better O<sub>2</sub> exchange which feeds all the cells in your body, improves the metabolism of the working of the cells...*

*If the belly is soft and relaxed, it helps to activate the vagus nerve. Vagus means “wandering” in Latin. This nerve wanders up through the belly, through the chest to the central nervous system, to the brain... it quiets the body, slows heart rate, improves digestion, lowers blood pressure, helps muscles to relax... It also quiets the mind... it reduces activity in the amygdala, a part of the emotional brain that registers fear and anger and exerts control over them... The vagus nerve is the antidote to the “fight or flight” response, to the stress response...*

*One branch of the vagus nerve connects with centers in our brain that make it easier to connect with other people, to bond, so when you are breathing slowing and deeply, in through your nose and out through your mouth, with your belly soft and relaxed, you are relaxing your body and bringing your body into balance... you are quieting the “fight or flight” response... improving the activity in all the glands in the body as well as in the nervous system, endocrine system... , nervous system improving immunity... you are decreasing the inflammatory response and you are also making it easier to connect with other people to feel closeness, which helps to relieve stress...*

*If your belly is soft and your abdominal muscles are relaxed, then all the other muscles begin to relax as well... and perhaps you can feel that now... as you exhale, feel the muscles relax in your pelvis and buttocks, in your legs and feet, in your back, relax with each exhalation, feeling the muscles relax in your chest and shoulders, and your arms and hands, feeling the muscles relax in your neck, and face and head... feeling your whole body relax with each exhalation...*

*To encourage this process, you can say to yourself “soft” as you breathe in and “belly” as you breathe out... if thoughts come, let them come and let them go, and gently bring your mind back to “soft belly” ...*

*Okay open your eyes, let your attention come back to the room.*

### ***Soft Belly Breathing: Shorter Version:***

*Take a deep breath and allow your eyes to come closed or find a soft gaze in front of you...Breathe deeply, in through the nose and out through the mouth... Imagine your belly is soft... To encourage this process, you can say to yourself “soft” as you breathe in and “belly” as you breathe out... If thoughts come, let them come and let them go and return your awareness to your breath and soft belly breathing... no matter how often your mind wanders, just gently bring it back each time to the breath, the breath coming into the body and the breath leaving your body...*

*Take a deep breath and a stretch and open your eyes...*

### ***Home Practice:***

- Do this two or three times a day – not right after meals, you may fall asleep, and at bedtime, if you’re having trouble sleeping. Use a timer (but not at bedtime) so you won’t be preoccupied with how long you’ve been doing it or how long you have left.
- It is helpful to practice this approach for five or ten minutes at a time, each day you can add another minute or two to it.
- Soon, you’ll find that in times of stress you can take a few deep breaths and say “soft... belly,” and relaxation will come.