



# How to Calm Down

Last September, a bright high school senior named Jamal came to see me. Anxiously, he asked me to help him raise his SAT scores by 200 points so the college of his choice would accept him. He had one last chance to take the test. After that, he was at the mercy of whichever college would take him. Why had he performed poorly?

“Because on the last SAT test,” Jamal told me, “I grew more and more nervous as the time went on. I couldn’t remember the information I studied so I started thinking, *What hope is there?* After I scraped by on three questions in a row, I hit a wall. I just froze up.”

As Jamal spoke, his right leg bounced up and down rapidly, his shoulders tensed and rose almost to his ears and his speech accelerated like a car with a jammed gas pedal. Several times while he spoke, he held his breath. “Just *talking* about the test makes me nervous,” he said anxiously, a comment which of course was unnecessary since his whole body communicated it. “I feel like I’m flipping out right now. This is what happened to me on the SAT.”

It was a natural mistake: Jamal believed that remembering the test was making him nervous. In fact, *all the nervous things he was doing with his body* were causing his anxiety: bouncing his legs, tensing his shoulders, holding his breath. His *body* made

his mind nervous, not his memories. When I told him this he looked at me like I was from another planet. “My *brain* is taking the test,” he shot back, “not my body. I *always* sit like this. What does all that have to do with my SAT scores?”

This is a very common misconception. Most people think that only their mind is working on an exam. That’s where the information is stored, right?

Not quite.

Since your body is one of the three key players on your team, *all* of your body is in the room and engaged when you take a test. If you want to perform at your best, then all of you, not just your brain, has to be fully present and supporting the process.

An agitated body creates a jumpy feeling of impatience and it makes you want to run away. Physical tension can quickly shut down your ability to remember what you have studied and if you are expected to produce this information for a test, you are immediately thrust into a state of anxiety. The feeling grows. Soon, you feel like you are losing control. The result: poor performance, perhaps failure.

On the other hand, a calm body can significantly improve your ability to think, to recall information, to answer questions properly, and to make good use of the time available.

When I observe students taking tests, I see so much nervous body language—hunched backs, tight shoulders, bobbing knees, facial grimaces, taut fists, and constricted breathing. Test takers are often completely unaware of what their bodies are doing and how profoundly that is affecting their performance. Frankly, it’s amazing that so many students even make it to the end of tests without having panic attacks.

**If your body is agitated, then your performance will suffer.**

Tensing during a test creates stress. Adrenaline surges through your gut, your blood pressure shoots up and your entire system goes on alert. Your brain screams *Danger!*—as if a tiger is chasing you. A torrent of stress hormones unleashes into your bloodstream. It becomes increasingly hard to focus and think. Looking at the test questions makes you panic because suddenly you just can’t answer them. It looks as if those questions are causing your anxiety, but questions are just printed words on paper. They aren’t doing anything *to* you. Your stress is mounting and your performance is suffering because you are disconnecting from your own body. You are not aware of what your body is doing, but it’s spinning out of control. You may even feel like you want to flee, but you can’t. You have to sit there and force yourself to answer the questions.

How can you possibly perform well in the face of all that tension, when you want to run away but can’t? These are all forms of disconnection. Remember: disconnection causes stress and too much stress causes poor performance.

It's the same for any type of performance. If a basketball player is sitting on the bench waiting to go into the game and she keeps tensing her body, when the coach finally sends her out on the court, she will be nervous right from the start. She'll miss shots she ought to be making and she'll be out of sync with her teammates. It doesn't matter how hard she practiced. She needs to stay loose on and off the court. If a piano player's fingers lock in the middle of a piece, they can't float effortlessly over the keys. Again, it doesn't matter how well he knows the music.

In all these cases, the performers disconnected from their bodies. Remember the three-legged stool? Disconnection in one leg immediately hobbles the other two. When you lose the feeling of calm in your body, it precipitates negative thoughts (in your mind) and you'll easily become distracted and lose heart (in your spirit). Stress can build very rapidly and when it grows past a certain point, your performance will suffer. Guaranteed.

To improve your test performance you have to reduce the stress in your body. Simply put, when you take a test, you want your body to be *calm*. The rest of this chapter will show you how to do that.

## **AWARENESS FIRST**

To keep your body in a calm state you need to learn two things:

- How to recognize when you are *not* calm.
- How to use specific tools to calm yourself down.

In this section we will work on your awareness of your body. We'll pay attention to how your body feels when you are anxiously anticipating a stressful event (like a test tomorrow), or when you are midway through the test itself.

If you're like most people, you are not too aware of your body throughout the day, unless you're in pain or you feel sick. A sore throat, a stomachache, a cold, a fever and a toothache call attention to themselves. But until the discomfort reaches an uncomfortable level, we tend to minimize or even ignore the early signs. *It's nothing. It will go away.* We don't become aware until the pain is virtually shouting at us. *My tooth is killing me!* That's when we do something about it.

For certain people this doesn't hold true—people who use their bodies all the time—dancers, swimmers or singers. They *have* to pay close attention and not ignore any signs that all is not well and then attend to them because their jobs depend on it, often in front of a crowd. The upside is that they are connected to what goes

on in their bodies. Most of us don't have that threat hanging over us. The problem we have is that when we ignore the signs of disconnection, it causes stress to build. But ultimately, we face the same failure. If we have a test to take, it behooves us to increase our body awareness—when are we *not* calm—so we know how to deal with it at critical times.

Let's start with this question: what signs and symptoms in your body tell you that *you* are not calm?

**I know when I'm not calm because . . .**

*(Which apply to you?)*

- My chest feels tight.
- I have a headache or feel one coming on.
- My shoulders ache.
- My neck feels stiff.
- I stop breathing.
- My stomach hurts.
- My heart beats rapidly.
- My muscles ache.
- I start sweating.
- My skin feels prickly.
- I feel tense all over.
- I feel like I'm gasping for air.
- My feet curl up.
- My legs cramp.
- I make fists with my hands.
- I feel like I want to run away.
- My mind starts racing.
- I start talking too fast.
- I bite my nails.
- My nerves are jittery.

- My eyes ache.
- My voice rises.
- I feel generally uncomfortable.

Perhaps you identified with one of the above, perhaps ten. Everyone is different, so consider what other symptoms may be true for you.

People often ask me, “But why is it necessary to be aware first?” Think about it this way. When you are driving a car and you

see a sign that says STOP, it is telling you exactly what you need to do: a put your foot on the brake and stop the car. If you disregard the sign and keep going, you are risking your own life and that of others. The physical signs of tension in your body are like a stop sign sending you a message.

It is your body’s way of signaling you that you are disconnected, which is useful to know because it tells you that you need to reconnect to your body and calm down. If you don’t pay attention to these signs, you are going to crash.

Awareness of when you are *not* calm is the first step in the process of reconnecting with your body.

**Pay attention  
to uncomfortable  
feelings in your  
body.**

## **THE THREE WAYS WE DISCONNECT PHYSICALLY**

It doesn’t matter how many or how few items you checked above. Becoming aware of what is going on with your body when you are not calm is a big step in the right direction. Besides, there are only three basic ways we human beings lose our sense of calm. Each of your responses, on the checklist, is related to one of these:

- We stop breathing or we breathe irregularly.
- We become ungrounded.
- We shut down in one or more of our five senses.

As I explain each way of disconnecting, think about how it characterizes you.

### ***Irregular Breathing***

The most frequent way we disconnect from our bodies is by holding our breath or breathing irregularly.

When I observe students taking tests, I see this familiar scenario: the exam proctor hands out the test booklets and then instructs everyone to open to the first page and begin the test. If you listen carefully, the next thing you hear will be a collective “gulp” of air. Then silence. That means most of the test takers are holding their breath.

Why is this significant? Because holding your breath immediately causes stress. Without breath your brain is deprived of oxygen. It starts sounding an alarm: *YOU ARE DYING!* This is a fact: if your brain really were cut off from oxygen permanently, you would die. The automatic reaction to a loss of oxygen broadcasts an emergency signal. This isn’t conscious. It’s instinctive. Your anxiety level is directly affected by how you breathe. Stop breathing and your anxiety level immediately shoots up.

But there is another connection between your breath and your ability to think clearly and logically when you are taking a test. Breath is intimately connected to your thinking. A shortage of breath causes a fear reaction, which disturbs an orderly thought process.

When your breath has stopped or it is irregular, chances are that your thoughts are jumping around and you are worrying about the future (*What’s going to happen . . . ?*) or you are dwelling on the past (*If only I had . . .*)

When your breath is steady and regular, and you are able to be in the present moment, then your

**The  
way you  
breathe mediates  
your anxiety  
level.**

brain is free to deal with the task at hand. Conscious attention to the breath puts you firmly here, now. And that’s just where you have to be when you take a test. You must deal with the question in front of you, right now. It doesn’t matter what you did yesterday (past) or what you’re going to do tomorrow (future), you have to think and answer test questions *now*, in the present. This is hard to do if your thinking is restless, if you’re anxious about what’s going to happen, or if you’re endlessly replaying what already went wrong. The remedy to this situation is not *mind* control. It’s *breath* control. With regular, steady breathing you can be in the present and give your full attention to the question in front of you. Your thinking will be clearer. You will be calm.

Problems with the breath show up in three ways, all of which pull you right out of the present and cause anxiety to mount rapidly. Which pattern describes how you breathe in a stressful test situation?

1. You hold your breath.
2. You breathe in short, shallow, little birdlike breaths.

3. You breathe erratically—you gasp, you hold your breath, you breathe only a little.

If you are not aware of your breathing habits, try observing yourself over the next day or so. For twenty-four hours, check in with your body and ask yourself, “How am I breathing?” You might be surprised to discover that sometimes you have stopped breathing or that your breath is very shallow or erratic. If you start feeling anxious—about an upcoming test or a speech you have to give—immediately pay close attention to your breath. Chances are it has stopped or is shallow or irregular.

I recommend that you keep a record of your observations in your journal. Use the log as you work through this chapter and record when you become aware of your breath. Using it will help you train yourself to be more aware of your unconscious breathing habits, which is the first step to changing these habits.

Turn to the log now and begin recording your observations of how and when you disconnect by not breathing in a steady, deep way.

### ***Becoming Ungrounded***

The next way that we disconnect in our bodies that causes anxiety is by losing our awareness of and contact with the ground.

There is a great, settling, connecting force on earth and it’s called *gravity*. Gravity holds us to the earth and keeps everything from spinning away and out of control. We’ve all seen the pictures of astronauts floating around. They’re in a zero-gravity environment. It looks like fun, but here on earth, it would make us feel shaky and tenuous. We feel most secure when we are in contact with the earth, and we become *ungrounded* when we pull away from the earth, often without even realizing it. Let’s examine the two ways we become ungrounded.

When I find myself deep in thought about some challenge—say I’m about to talk to an audience of a thousand people—my thoughts may become anxious, *I should have prepared more. Maybe I won’t remember everything I have to say. Am I going to start sweating? Will they like me?* I begin to notice that I am definitely *not* feeling the chair I’m sitting on, nor am I feeling the floor under my feet. This is what I mean by “becoming ungrounded.”

Why is this noteworthy? When I’m ungrounded, I literally lose touch with the ground. I’m running away from the present moment. When I pull my awareness back into the present, however, I feel the chair supporting me. When I consciously place my feet squarely on the floor, I feel that supporting me too. Immediately the anxiety lessens, even though the situation hasn’t changed. I am still about to speak



to a large group of people, but my attitude toward it has changed. I have physically *reconnected* to where I am *right now* and what I have to do *now*. Grounding, quite simply, has a profound calming effect on the body and mind, giving you an enhanced ability to fulfill your spirit and perform.

The second way we become ungrounded is by holding physical tension. When you tense a part of your body you are, quite literally, pulling away from the force of gravity. Joseph, a 45-year-old surgeon, failed his professional board certification exam three times. As he talked about the test I noticed his jaw becoming more and more rigid. When I called his attention to this he was surprised. “Hmmm, I’ve often felt tired in my jaw after I finish doing a surgery but didn’t know why. But how is that related to failing my test?” Because as he disconnected from his body through tension, he felt more and more stress, which increased the likelihood of making an error. I asked him to imagine an Olympic diver tensing up in the middle of a dive or a dancer tightening as she executes a pas de chat. As a performer disconnects from her body, the tension rises and she has less control of how she uses it. She can’t follow through with the performance. During Joe’s certification exam, or when he’s performing surgery, he tenses his jaw. He is not letting the calming, settling force of gravity work for him. Gravity, by definition, allows the body to relax, and that calmness improves performance.

**When  
your muscles  
stay tensed you are  
disconnected from  
the present.**

When you are tense somewhere in your body you are, quite literally, “holding on.” Think of life as an ongoing flow of events that moves through you and around you. If you are holding on somewhere—your shoulders, your jaw or your hands—you are disconnecting from the ongoing flow. It’s like taking a ride in a boat on a river, but the boat isn’t moving along with the river’s current because it is tied to the dock. The present is not a static point; it’s a series of moments in a sequential flow. Physical tension keeps you out of that flow. When you are tense, you are holding onto yourself, disconnected from the movement of things around you. As we learned earlier, physical tension is also “*anti-grounding*.” You’re pulling up and away from the ground, from the force of gravity that offers an ongoing connection to the present.

Chances are that in the past you haven’t paid a whole lot of attention to being grounded, but now you need to cultivate your awareness of it so that you learn to re-ground and stay calm. Observe how you become ungrounded as you study for a test and use your journal to keep a record of your observations. Especially observe yourself during a test because that is the environment that especially unseats us.

To help you identify the areas in your body where you habitually hold tension, look at the Tension Map that follows. Then ask yourself, “Where do I usually feel

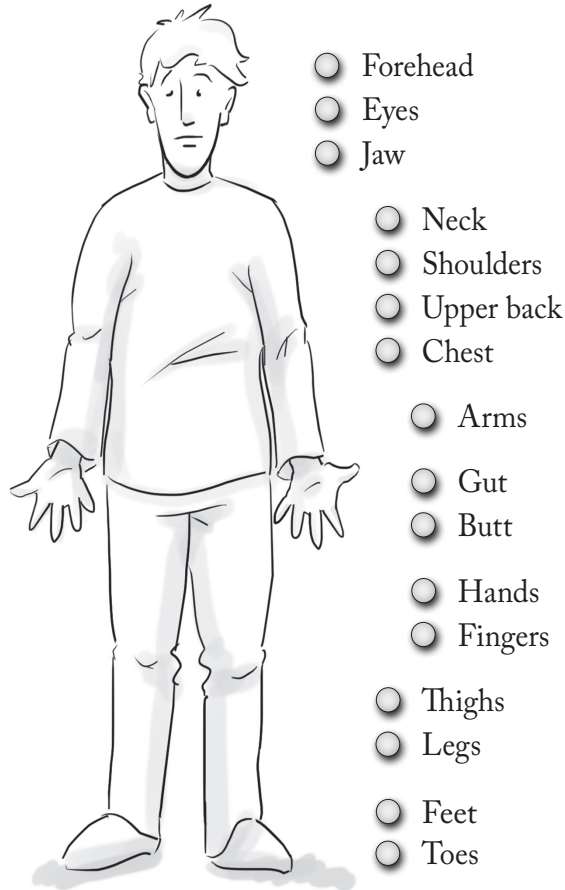


tension when I'm studying or when I'm taking a test?" Anywhere you are holding tension—anywhere that you are disconnecting—can be transformed and become a place of connection and calm relaxation instead—but only if you're aware of it first.

### **Tension Map**

*(with apologies for the gender specificity of the drawing!)*

**In which areas do you usually hold tension?**



It is often useful to observe other people too. The next time you are on the bus, in the market or standing in line at the bank just look around. We do not live in a relaxed society. You will see people with their shoulders hunched or holding one of their hands in a tight fist or making deep worried furrows in their forehead, marking the obvious places on the Tension Map. You can almost tell what they're feeling; all you have to do is remember what you felt like when you were tense in the same areas of your body while studying in the library for a three-hour stretch.

In addition to the usual areas of tension (upper back, neck, jaw) there are also not-so-obvious places—in the toes, the tongue, behind the eyes, in the arches of the

feet, to name a few. As you become more familiar with the obvious places where you store tension, you will start becoming aware of the deeper, more subtle places. Once you are able to observe your entire body, you can use the tools for calming down to establish a peaceful atmosphere throughout the entire test-taking period.

Now that you see how much you are affected by tension, it's time to cultivate your awareness of how and when it arises in your body by using your journal.

### ***Shutting Down the Senses***

The third way we disconnect in our bodies is by shutting down one or more of our five senses.

Sarah is an accomplished pianist working for a major opera company. A sensitive soul, she is also a consummate professional. She prides herself on being exceptionally well prepared for every job, but one day she had to step up and perform without the usual time to prepare. A colleague had taken ill, and Sarah was called in at the last moment to play for a run-through of Verdi's opera *Il trovatore*. She may have had some familiarity with the musical score, but it had been years since she'd looked at it, and there wasn't enough time to review it thoroughly. At the rehearsal, she grew increasingly nervous about being unprepared. "We started working on a scene," she recalled, "where the music is very difficult to play. I froze up. I became totally fixated on the notes. I wasn't listening to the singers or watching the conductor. Worse, I wasn't hearing the music."

We can hear from Sarah's own words ("I froze up") that she disconnected in the first two ways described in this chapter. She stopped her breath and she was caught up in physical tension. But there was one more thing she said that was a clue: "I wasn't listening to the singers or watching the conductor . . . I wasn't hearing the music."

Sarah shut down in her senses.

The five senses are the gateways to our awareness. We see, smell, hear, taste and touch the world. When we shut down in one or more of our five senses we disconnect physically to what is around us. When we say, "He's out of touch," we usually mean the person is disconnected from reality. This means that the person who is out of touch is not in *contact*, through his senses, with what is going on around him right now. If he is not in touch with the present through his senses, he is literally disconnected from the world. Performance is all about how you manipulate and interact with the world, so you can see how this puts you at a disadvantage.

I noticed this when I was eating lunch the other day. All I was thinking about was an upcoming meeting at 3:00 pm. I was not tasting the food that was passing my lips. I forked the bite of potato salad into my mouth and swallowed it, but the

physical, connected act of sensing the flavors, textures and temperature of the food was absent. When I finally shifted my awareness, I put my attention on the sensory experiences of taste, smell and sight. My stress instantly decreased several notches because I was connected, again, to the present, not fretting about the impending event. Finally, I enjoyed the meal even though I still had the difficult meeting a little later. The meeting would either go well or not. “Right now,” I thought, “I’m eating.”

The expression “Come to your senses!” has real import here. When you open up your senses you are connecting to what is going on right here, right now. And test performance always takes place in the now.

The other two ways of disconnecting (breathing and grounding) were fairly straightforward as far as tests are concerned. But being connected through the senses is a little tricky because being too open can also distract you. You don’t necessarily want to let your attention focus on your hearing in a big exam room where people are sighing heavily, or focus on your sense of sight when the person next to you is squirming with anxiety or picking his nose. The object of your senses is not an asset if it is upsetting, disturbing or frustrating. You want to use your senses selectively when you take a test so that you help, instead of hinder, your performance. In the next section I’ll show you how to do that. Right now, all you have to do is become more aware of when you are shutting down in your senses. Use your journal to bring your attention to all five.

**Use your five senses to stay in the moment.**

### ***Refining Your Awareness***

Before moving on to the three tools for calming down, I would like you to refine your awareness of how and when you disconnect from your body. Below is a chart that summarizes what we have covered in this chapter. Read through the chart and consider whether each item applies to you. If you’re not sure about some of the items right now, that’s fine. You might need to do some observation first so you can collect what we psychologists call “baseline data” on yourself with your journal.

Remember, the more you cultivate your awareness of the ways in which you disconnect from your body the more quickly you will be able to catch the stress well before it builds. In other words, you will reconnect right away and actually *reduce* the stress. It won’t have a chance to reach the point of having a negative impact on your performance. Even better, it will be at just the right level (remember the “Yerkes-Dodson Curve”?) so that you can perform at your best.

As you consider the chart remember a test you recently took or imagine one you are about to take.

<p><b>AWARENESS INVENTORY: BODY</b></p> <p>When I am in a stressful situation such as taking a test, I notice the following things in my body.</p> <p><i>In each category, which apply to you?</i></p>	
BREATHING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="radio"/> I hold my breath.</li> <li><input type="radio"/> My breathing becomes very shallow.</li> <li><input type="radio"/> I breathe erratically (I gasp, I stop breathing, I take small breaths).</li> </ul>
GROUNDING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="radio"/> I'm not aware of the floor or of the chair I'm sitting on.</li> <li><input type="radio"/> My feet are coming off of the ground.</li> <li><input type="radio"/> I feel tension in my (name body parts).</li> </ul>
SENSING	<p>I tend to close down (i.e. I'm not aware of) these senses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li style="margin-right: 20px;"><input type="radio"/> Touch</li> <li style="margin-right: 20px;"><input type="radio"/> Smell</li> <li style="margin-right: 20px;"><input type="radio"/> Taste</li> <li style="margin-right: 20px;"><input type="radio"/> Sight</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Hearing</li> </ul>

Remember, awareness means *paying attention to what's going on inside of you*. As you study for a test or take one you may realize that you are doing all sorts of unhelpful things with your body that you probably didn't notice before. The difference now is that you are going to *pay attention* and treat the symptoms in your body as road signs to help you stop and reconnect.

The more aware you are, the more effectively you can use the tools I'm about to give you.

## THE THREE TOOLS FOR CALMING DOWN

Now you are ready to learn the three tools for calming down. These tools will help you to reduce quickly any stress building up in your body. The tools are easy to learn and effective. If you worked through the last section on awareness you already have a jump start on them.

### ***TOOL #1: Calming Down by Breathing***

It should come as no surprise that breathing is the first tool. Let's work on this together.

- Take a good deep breath. Inhale. Breathe in through your nose.
- Exhale. Breathe out through your mouth.
- Do it again. Inhale. Exhale.

Notice *where* your breath is going. When I ask people to “take a good, deep breath” almost everyone puffs up his or her lungs and upper chest. This is not a *deep* breath. A breath that raises your shoulders and expands your chest does not calm you down; it actually amps you up. I call it a “fight or flight breath” because it prepares you to do battle or to run away. This kind of breathing feels like fear. It's what the body does when it's reacting to danger. Imagine you are walking in a jungle and suddenly a ferocious tiger is facing you, baring its teeth. Fear courses through your body. When you take a big gulp of air while facing a tiger, it goes to your upper chest. Either you're going to face the danger or you're going to run away from it. Either way, this is a survival breath and its purpose is not to relax you.

A calming breath, on the other hand, goes to a different and deeper place — your belly, which is why Tool #1 is a calming *belly* breath.

**Take a  
calming breath.  
Breathe deeply down.  
Inhale, exhale. Keep  
a steady rhythm  
going.**



## EXERCISE: The Belly Breath

To start with, sit comfortably in a chair with your back well supported.

Place your body in an open position—uncross your arms and your legs. (If your arms or legs are crisscrossed you will restrict your airflow.)

Rest your palms on your thighs and place both feet on the floor.

Now place your hands on top of your navel and let your belly just relax. This means don't hold your belly in. (Resist any temptation here to suck in your stomach so you can look thin.) Let your belly hang out and relax.

First, exhale through your mouth. Now breathe in through your nose, but don't suck in your belly. Let it stay expanded. You will feel the breath seep into your lungs as you breathe in, but your chest won't be heaving up and down. Both belly and chest will be calm as your breath keeps dropping down into your lower belly.

Slowly, **breathe** in and out three times in this open, expanded position, chest relaxed and belly wide.

If you want to deepen your breath even more, reach your hands around you and place your palm and fingers on both sides of your lower back right along the hips. Now, breathe deeply down and feel your bottom back ribs very gently expand as you do this. This is a small, subtle movement. You have to be quiet and tuned in to feel it, but as you sense this gentle movement of your ribs you will notice your calmness deepening.

Now, inhale again, deeply down into your belly and lower back.

Slowly exhale. Let the breath out gently.

Breathe in and out like this three times.

Feel yourself calming down. Don't force the breath in and out and don't hyperventilate.

At this point you might start yawning or feel sleepy. Many people have this reaction. Recently, a bright, athletic, 17-year-old girl came to me for SAT coaching. As she talked about herself she was so charged with energy she could hardly sit still. With lightning speed she rattled off an incredibly long list of activities in which

she was involved. I couldn't help but notice that she hardly took a nanosecond to breathe. We started working on deepening and regularizing her breath. In less than five minutes she started yawning. A lot. Then she actually fell asleep! Her system was so tightly wound and deprived of oxygen, so needing to *rest*, that given the first opportunity to calm down she conked out. So, if you are yawning, are sleepy, or feel light-headed as you start paying attention to and deepening your breath, know that this is actually a *good* sign. Your body is calming down. It is telling you that it is not used to breathing deeply and regularly, and it needs some rest!

The way to deep belly breathing is to work slowly, gently and determinedly on cultivating your breath. It may feel a little strange at first and all that oxygen might make you may feel a bit lightheaded. Your system simply isn't used to taking real breaths. It's used to short, choppy, mini-breaths. After a while though, deep, steady breathing will feel like the most natural, calming thing in the world.

### **Putting Breathing into Action**

The next time you notice that you are not calm, treat the anxious feelings like a road sign. If your stomach is churning or you start sweating or your legs are shaking, your body is sending you a message: "You need to calm down." This is your awareness kicking in. The first thing to ask yourself is, "How am I breathing?" because it is the most primary. You've probably stopped breathing or your breath has become very shallow or irregular. Do the exercise above and you will feel yourself calming down immediately.

Once you have started breathing deeply and regularly say, "Thank you" inside. Why do this? Because the awareness you just received that you were not breathing is a gift. It is a realization to be grateful for. Whether you believe your awareness comes from a God, a Goddess, a Higher Power, your Highest Self, Nature, the Universe, or Life, the very fact that it is coming to you at all is like a present. Gratitude acknowledges the giver and encourages future giving. Imagine receiving a wonderful gift from someone and not saying thank you. The giver wouldn't feel like being generous again, "Well, she didn't say 'Thank you' last time." Expressing gratitude invites more of what you're grateful for to come your way.

What most people do when they notice that they are "breathing wrong" is to beat themselves up: *I can't believe I'm still doing that! When am I gonna learn?* They don't appreciate the awareness at all. This kind of critical response is not allowed! I urge you to try saying "Thank you" every time you become aware of anything that you are trying to change in yourself. Gratitude is the opposite of criticism and it spreads an atmosphere of kindness and compassion—exactly the right atmosphere for inner growth.



Breathing deeply and then saying “Thank you” reduces feelings of stress, and you actually improve the possibility of attaining your goal of higher test scores because you are cultivating a helpful relationship with the powers of change. When you breathe deeply and regularly you are giving your brain, blood and body the oxygen it needs to perform optimally. Even if you don’t believe in a God, Goddess or Higher Power, expressing gratitude still cultivates a better relationship with your own consciousness and highest self (the best person you can be).

### ***TOOL #2: Calming Down by Grounding***

Susan is about to take the GRE. She is sitting in a room full of other college seniors. Everyone is fidgeting. You can smell the anxiety in the air. Susan herself is perched on the edge of her chair, one foot coiled around the leg; her other foot is lifting off of the ground, knee and leg bouncing. She is definitely *not* calm. What is wrong with this picture?

Susan is very ungrounded.

### **Feel Supported by the Floor and Chair**

Becoming grounded has two parts. The first part is feeling supported by the floor and the chair. To have this experience, do the following simple exercise as you continue reading:



#### **EXERCISE: Grounding Yourself**

Start by sitting comfortably, upright, in a chair.

Uncross your arms and your legs.

Place your feet flat on the floor.

Breathe down to your belly.

Now feel the floor under your feet.

Feel the floor supporting your feet.

Now feel your body sitting on the chair. Feel your legs and butt and back touching the chair. If the chair has arm rests, feel your arms being supported by them.

Feel your whole body being supported by the floor and the chair.

This is the first part of **grounding**. Continue it for one minute and enjoy the feeling that comes over you.

Did you remember to breathe? Most people, when they start learning how to ground themselves, often stop breathing! Don't let that happen. You can use two tools simultaneously just by keeping your breath deep and steady as you ground yourself by feeling the support of the floor and chair.

The combination of breathing and grounding is very powerful and goes a long way toward connecting you to your own body, calming yourself down and staying present.

### **Releasing Physical Tension**

The second part of grounding is letting go of physical tension. Let's look at Susan again, a little further into the test. Now her shoulders are hiked way up and her brow is deeply furrowed. Her left hand is making a fist and her right hand is tightly squeezing the pencil. All of this is *physical tension*. When you hold tension in your body you are actually pulling away from gravity, which is a great settling force. Gravity draws everything in us to the earth. When you tighten muscles in your legs, neck, back or forehead, you are pulling away from the earth, *ungrounding* yourself.

In the awareness section of this chapter you identified the areas in your body where you hold tension. Now, let's use the tool of grounding to release that tension. Another name for grounding is *letting go*. This means just what it says. Let go of—release—wherever you are holding tension. Let gravity work. Let the tension flow out of you and into the ground. Practice this by tightly clenching an object in your hand. Start with something soft like a small stuffed animal, an old tennis ball, or a bunched up T-shirt. Now clench it really tightly and heighten that tension. Squeeze it even more tightly. Good. Now let go. Relax your hand muscles. The object will drop to the ground. Feel the wave of calm pass through your whole body.

To practice letting go in your body, try an exercise called the “Tension/Release Scan.”



#### **EXERCISE: Tension/Release Scan**

Sit comfortably in a chair, arms and legs uncrossed.

Tighten the muscles in your left foot and leg.

Now, with an exhale, release the leg muscles.



Tighten the muscles in your right foot and leg.

With an outbreath, release them.

Tighten the muscles in your belly.

Breathe out and release.

Tighten the muscles in your left hand and arm.

Breathe out and release.

Tighten the muscles in your right hand and arm.

Breathe out and release.

Tighten your chest and shoulders.

Breathe out and release.

Tighten your neck muscles.

Breathe out and release.

Tighten your jaw muscles.

Breathe out and release.

Tighten your whole face.

Breathe out and release.

Tighten your whole body.

Breathe out and release.

After this exercise, locate the area in your body where you store the most tension. Is it your jaw? Your lower back? Your legs? Wherever it is, feel the tension there, hold it and even heighten it for five seconds. Now, on an out breath, let it go.

Release the tension into the ground. At the same time feel yourself supported by the floor and chair (the first form of grounding). Doing this expertly sets you well on the way to calming *down*. That phrase has more meaning now, doesn't it?

### **TOOL #3: Sensing**

The third tool for calming yourself is **sensing**. It is easy to turn on *one* of your five senses—seeing, hearing, touching, tasting or smelling—when you become aware that you are anxious. As you make the connection through your senses to the world around you, you will start feeling more calm in your body.

What is the relationship between opening your senses and calming down? This tool is a little more complicated than the first two, so stay with my explanation below and you will reap great rewards.

Your senses connect you to the world. They tell you what you are looking at, listening to, tasting, touching or smelling. Without your senses you wouldn't know where you were or what was happening around you. You would feel very disconnected, which would be frightening. A well-known psychology experiment proved this. When people were placed in a pitch-black, soundproof room they immediately became disoriented. Soon they grew severely anxious. Why? They had no reference points to anything familiar. They were cut-off and adrift, disconnected from any sensory input. Sensory input is connection, how we make contact with our world. Since stress is a function of *disconnection*, it makes logical and practical sense that to reduce stress, anxiety and tension, you want to increase your connection, this time, through your senses.

Let's start with your sense of sight. Opticians notice that when we are anxious, our sight tends to be compromised, as is reflected in the phrase, "He has tunnel vision." Commonly, we use the phrase to describe a person who is not taking in the whole picture. We might say, "John has tunnel vision when it comes to politics" because John is unable or unwilling to see the other side's position. We conclude, "John is cut off." Contrast this to a person who has a broader perspective: "Jane has a balanced approach to negotiating. She has a wider view." Jane may well have a position she feels passionately about, but her view of the overall situation is larger than the perspective of someone who can only see one side.

The narrow or expanded view isn't just an attitudinal state; it's an actual visual connection through the sense of sight. When you open up your sense of sight you can actually reduce stress in your system. This is true for the other senses as well. When you do so you will feel more calm.

Let's work on your sense of sight by starting with the following simple exercise. It is meant to open up your sense of sight by expanding your peripheral vision.



## **EXERCISE: Tapping Into the Big Picture**

Sit comfortably and look straight ahead of you.

Keeping your head still, move both of your eyes all the way to the left, and see how much you can see.

Bring your eyes back to center. Breathe.

Now move your eyes all the way to the right. See as much as you can see to the right.

Bring them back to center. Breathe.

Now look up as high as you can. See as much as you can above you.

Now bring your eyes back to center. Breathe.

And now look down, all the way down.

And back to center.

Breathe.

Now look straight ahead of you. You have just expanded your vision in four directions. Notice how much more you can see now than you were aware of before you started this exercise.

Breathe, ground, and feel the calm throughout your body.

Why would expanding your vision be a calming experience? The short answer is that when you are able to relax your eyes, you calm your whole body down because you have opened your peripheral vision and tapped into your parasympathetic nervous system. It all has to do with how the human nervous system works.

Your nervous system has two branches, the sympathetic and the parasympathetic, and each branch serves a different and complementary function. The sympathetic nervous system regulates arousal; it amps you up and keeps you alert. The parasympathetic system regulates relaxation; it calms you down. When a perceived danger

is lurking, your sympathetic nervous system kicks in, sounding an alarm and sending warning signals to the brain: *Danger! Watch out!* Adrenaline flows. Blood starts pumping. Your gut tightens. Your breath shortens. The fight or flight response takes over and you either attack the oncoming threat or you run away from it. In contrast, when the danger is passed, your body needs to settle, to be quiet, to rest. That's when the parasympathetic system takes over. We need both systems because they balance one another. If we were on alert all the time (sympathetic), we'd be freaked out, and if we were relaxed all the time (parasympathetic), we'd be flaked out.

How does all of this relate to your eyes and to calming down?

Our sense of vision has two parts, the central vision and the peripheral vision, and each part is hard-wired to a different branch of your nervous system. You use your central vision, which is connected to your sympathetic nervous system, to identify what is coming toward you or what is right in front of you. Whether you are staring at a ferocious mountain lion or reading a road sign, when your central vision is turned on, your system is at least somewhat aroused. On the other hand, when you are taking in "the big picture," and your peripheral vision, which is wired to your parasympathetic nervous system, is turned on, you are calming down.

This takes on immediate significance for test takers, since tests require reading, which almost exclusively uses the central vision. Thus, a high, ongoing demand is being placed on your sympathetic nervous system, putting you in a continuous state of arousal. No wonder students report feeling "fried" after they have hit the books for a long time, or after a lengthy exam. When they use their eyes for detailed focus (as in reading), they are actually amping themselves up without even realizing it. Uninterrupted reading for long periods of time is an intense stress-inducing activity. If you have ever felt more edgy while reading a test booklet, or when taking a test on a computer, you may believe that the test questions are "making you" nervous. But actually the problem is the strain you are putting on your sympathetic nervous system. You need to give your eyes a break. If you're studying for a test or taking one, you have to rest your eyes occasionally and let your parasympathetic nervous system take over, balance you out, and calm you down. That's what you did in the last exercise.

What we have just done with your eyes you also can do with one or another of your senses, though a bit differently with each one. Open up your sense of smell and taste when you are at the dinner table. Most of us race through our meals. We eat as if we are making a pit stop at the gas station—"Fill'er up!"—hurrying rather than really savoring the food. The next time you are eating a meal, take the time to taste the different flavors, feel the variety of textures as you chew, and smell the subtle

**Resting  
your eyes  
every so often helps  
you stay calm.**

aromas. This is how many Europeans dine. They enjoy their food and the occasion of sharing a meal with others.

Work on your sense of hearing by opening up to the sounds immediately around you (maybe those being made by your own body first). Then hear the sounds in the room, then the sounds just outside of the room and then the sounds outside of the building and beyond.

Work on your sense of touch by feeling the different textures of your clothes next to your body. How does your shirt or blouse feel next to your arms and chest? What does the fabric of your trousers feel like next to your legs? If you are holding a pen or pencil, feel its weight and firmness in your hands. (As you are doing this continue to breathe and ground yourself.)

Connecting with your senses is an effective way of staying in the present and not being swept into tension and anxiety. Your senses are always available and are the handiest tools you have to connect you to the here and now. It is remarkable to me how unaware people are of what is right around them and how infrequently they actually use their senses to help themselves feel calm.

This tool—sensing—can help you particularly when you are preparing for a test or thinking about one. We start fretting about what we don't know, or imagine failing; all kinds of other negative scenarios shoot us into the future or yank us back to the past and work us up. Are you worked *up*? Right. So calm *down*. Connect through your senses. Right here, right now. Breathe. Be grounded. Do it. It works.

### ***When You Are Taking a Test***

Please don't tell me, "I don't have time to breathe on the test." Recently, one student tried that out on me. I paused and looked at him. "No time to breathe?" I think what he meant was, "I don't have time to pay attention to my breath and to use the calming tools." My response? You're breathing all the time anyway. You might as well learn to *use* your breath to help you pass a test. It might take a few seconds away from a test question, but it will make a big difference in how you perform overall.

However, if you really think you can't afford to do the other exercises in this chapter, at least do this very effective exercise, which I call "The Wedge," which is like pressing the "restart" button. It gives you a new spurt of attention and energy, and it takes only a few seconds to learn, and even less to use once you are practiced at it.





## EXERCISE: The Wedge

As you exhale, close your eyes and let them rest.

Feel the breath go down the front of your body and into the floor.

Now breathe in, feeling the breath coming up the back of your body and up to the top of your head.

When it reaches the top of your head, open your eyes.

The Wedge is great because it combines all three calming tools—breathing, grounding and sensing. Some students who used The Wedge consistently through taking the SAT improved their scores 100 to 200 points.

Consistency is the key: decide that you are going to use the calming tools (breathing, at least) after every 5, 10 or 20 questions. If you study using old exam questions, practice this routine during study time and then carry it into the exam itself.

Another student confronted me after a class in which we worked on these calming tools. She was quite ticked off. “I’ve *done* the breathing thing,” she said, meaning, “That didn’t work. *Now* what?”

There is no other now or what. Breathing is a lifelong activity, and yet it takes time to become practiced at being more *aware* of your breath. It takes time to increase body awareness and to consciously use the tools to stay calm and present. You are reversing old habits of a lifetime, so be patient with yourself. If you have trouble remembering to prompt your awareness I encourage you to use my CD *Dr. B’s Gentle Prompts for Calming Down*. It is a CD you can download to your iPod or MP3 player and use while you are studying. On it you will hear my voice prompting you at varying intervals to breathe and ground and sense. The more you hear these reminders, the more your system is being trained to remind yourself.

### **Breathe, ground and sense.**

That’s all you need to do. Your body is the physical foundation for your power. Embody yourself. Do it, and keep doing it. For the rest of your life.

**Be patient  
with yourself.  
Staying calm  
takes practice.**



## QUICK CHECK-IN: Calm

### When you are studying for a test . . .

#### *Become aware*

Are you tense in some part of your body? (shoulders? stomach? jaw?)

Are you having anxious thoughts?

Are you holding your breath?

#### *Use the tools*

- Breathe** deeply down to your belly and lower back three times. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth.
- Ground** yourself (feet on the floor, butt and back in the chair).
- Open your senses** (see the colors, feel the fabrics, hear the sounds).

*Stay in this state for a few minutes.*

*Return to studying, staying connected in your body.*

### When you are taking a test . . .

#### *Become aware*

- Notice when you are not calm (jitters, physical tension, racing thoughts).

#### *Use the tools*

- Breathe** deeply down to your belly and lower back three times. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth.
- Ground** yourself (feel your feet on the floor, your butt and back in the chair). Release tension.
- Open your senses** (feel the fabric of your clothing next to your skin; relax your eyes).

*Return to the test items, staying connected in your body.*