

## Breath Prayer Eases Anxiousness

Ancient practice synchronizes breathing with sacred words

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Whether it's threats like a pandemic - or whether we feel powerless after news of another shooting or natural disaster - we live in a state of fear and constant vigilance. Take a deep breath, I tell those who come to me for spiritual direction. Let's breathe together, slowly, I say. These are anxious times. We find ourselves restless and indecisive. We are less patient and more snappish. Self-doubt, stress eating and

insomnia have a hold on us. Our creativity is shot. Just breathe, I hear myself saying again and again.

While we cannot avoid stress in our lives, we can develop healthy ways of managing stressors, beginning with mastering "breath prayer" - a spiritual practice tracing its roots to the desert fathers and mothers in the third century A.D. We tend to be shallow breathers, using only about 15% of our lung capacity, which exacerbates fear and any anxiety we may be feeling. Deep breathing is the antidote, and it is as straightforward as filling the lungs by inhaling deeply through the nostrils, holding for three counts and exhaling slowly through the mouth. In the past few years, the health care profession has been touting breathwork for improved health. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, we have known for millennia the benefits of breath awareness and we understand that we are animated and enlivened by the breath that was breathed into us at Creation. Interestingly, in Hebrew the word for "breath" and "spirit" are the same - **ruach**.

In our Christian faith, we know the power of prayer. If we turn our attention to God, we can use our deep breathing with breath prayer. This prayer invites us to synchronize our breathing with sacred words. The psalms, with their emotions and poetic language, are well suited to breath prayer. Scripture and hymns work, too. Breath prayer is simple to do, requires minimal preparation and can be done anywhere. We rest in the Spirit and discover new dimensions of trust in God. These are anxious times. But just breathe and pray, I remind myself.

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### Put into practice

Choose a short phrase of up to 12 words. Divide it into two parts. You will be praying the first part on the inhale and the second on the exhale. For example, take words from Psalm 23 and as you inhale, pray, "beside still waters" and as you exhale, say, "you lead me." Or these words from Romans 8:38-39 (inhale): Nothing can separate us, (exhale) from the love of God.

Sit comfortably. Close your eyes. Tune out any distractions. Take three deep breaths, slowly. Resume your normal pace of breathing. When ready, introduce the first part of your prayer on the inhale. Exhale the second. Repeat the phrase in the silence of your heart as you breathe naturally. Slowly let the words fall away. Tend to your breathing. Open your eyes and reorient yourself. Carry your breath prayer with you as God's word to you today.