

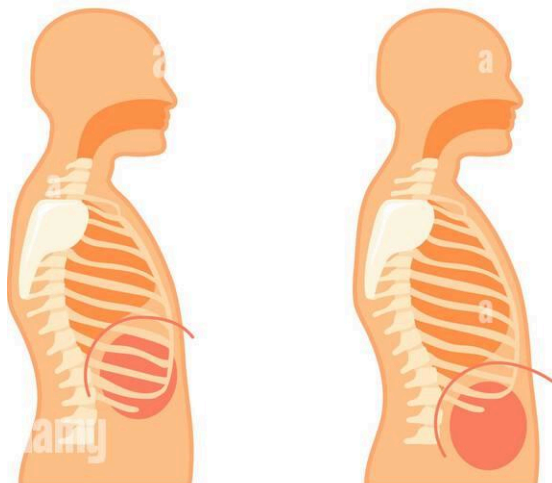
# Practitioner's Guide to Pranayama Protocols in Anxiety Care

Safe, Evidence-Informed Breathing Practices for Mental Health  
Professionals, Yoga Therapists, and Integrative Practitioners

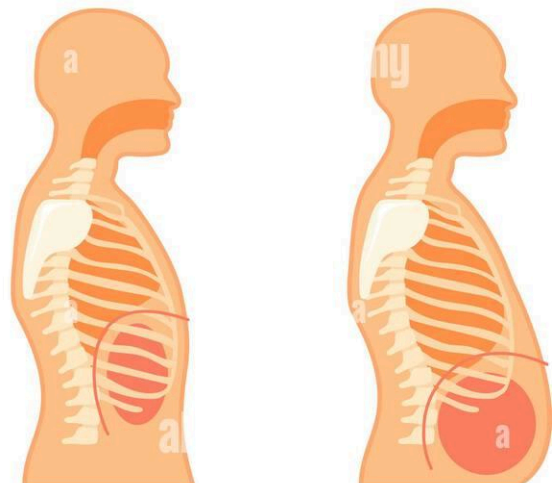
Version 1.0

Prepared for clinical and therapeutic use  
*Always individualize. Combine with standard care.*

## CHEST BREATHING



## DIAPHRAGMATIC BREATHING



[alamy.com](https://www.alamy.com)

## 1. Introduction & Rationale

Pranayama is the yogic practice of consciously regulating the breath to influence prana (life-force energy) and the autonomic nervous system.

For clients experiencing anxiety, pranayama offers a direct, accessible way to down-regulate the sympathetic nervous system, increase vagal tone, and restore a sense of safety in the body. Slow, gentle, exhale-focused practices are particularly effective because they stimulate the vagus nerve, reduce cortisol, and interrupt amygdala-driven fight-or-flight responses.

Key benefits supported by research:

- Reduced anxiety symptoms (comparable to standard care in multiple studies)
- Improved heart-rate variability (HRV) and emotional regulation
- Better sleep and lower perceived stress
- Noticeable effects often appear within 4–12 weeks of consistent practice

**Important note:** Fast or forceful practices (e.g., Kapalabhati, intense Bhastrika) are generally avoided in anxiety care as they can increase sympathetic arousal.

## 2. Client Screening & Safety Considerations

*Always screen before teaching.*

**Ask about:**

- History of panic disorder, asthma, COPD, cardiovascular issues, pregnancy, or trauma
- Current anxiety level (consider GAD-7)
- Comfort with seated or supine breathing

**Cautions / Contraindications:**

- Acute panic attacks or breath-holding sensitivity → avoid prolonged breath retentions
- Uncontrolled hypertension, recent cardiac events, or pregnancy → no forceful breathing
- Any increase in anxiety, dizziness, or dissociation → stop immediately and return to natural breathing

**Practice guidelines:**

- Teach on an empty stomach or 2+ hours after eating
- Start in a supported seated or lying position
- Use calm, permissive language: “If anything feels off, simply return to your natural breath.”
- Always combine with evidence-based therapy (CBT, medication, etc.) and obtain medical clearance when indicated

**Red flags:** Hyperventilation, chest pain, or escalation of symptoms → discontinue and reassess.

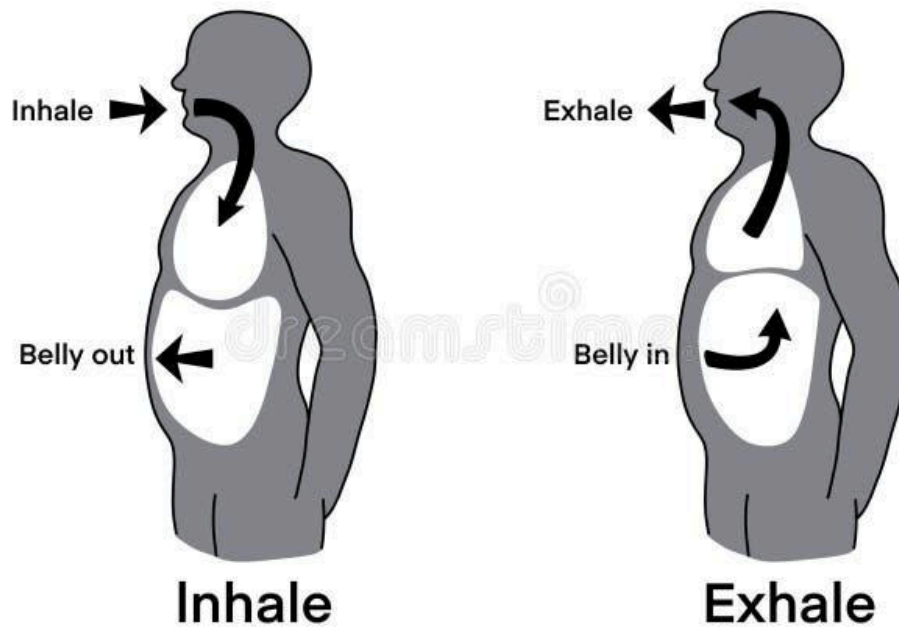
## 3. Core Pranayama Protocols

**Foundational Practice:** Diaphragmatic (Belly) Breathing

**Best for:** Beginners, acute anxiety, daily grounding.

**Protocol (5–10 minutes, 3–4× daily)**

1. Sit or lie comfortably. Place one hand on your chest and one on your belly.
2. Inhale slowly through the nose → feel the belly rise (chest stays relatively still).
3. Exhale slowly → belly falls.
4. Aim for 4–6 breaths per minute. No force.



[dreamstime.com](https://www.dreamstime.com)

**Belly Breathing Stock Illustrations – 245 Belly Breathing Stock Illustrations, Vectors & Clipart - Dreamstime**

**Acute Relief: Bhramari (Humming Bee Breath)**

**Best for: Racing thoughts, emotional overwhelm, bedtime anxiety.**

**Protocol (5–7 rounds, as needed)**

1. Sit comfortably, eyes gently closed.
2. Inhale deeply through the nose.
3. Exhale with a gentle humming “mmm” sound (lips closed).
4. Optional: Place thumbs gently in the ears or fingers on the face to amplify vibration.
5. Notice the soothing resonance in the head and chest.



## Bhramari Pranayama

[himalayanyoganepal.com](http://himalayanyoganepal.com)

**Bhramari Pranayama | Humming Bee Breathing | Learn Breathing Techniques |**

**Balancing & Maintenance: Nadi Shodhana (Alternate Nostril Breathing)**

**Best for: Daily practice, mental clarity, baseline anxiety reduction.**

**Protocol (5–10 minutes, 1–2× daily)**

1. Sit tall. Use right hand in Vishnu mudra (thumb and ring finger ready).
2. Close right nostril with thumb → inhale left (4 counts).
3. Close left nostril with ring finger → exhale right (6 counts).
4. Inhale right (4 counts) → exhale left (6 counts).
5. Repeat 5–10 rounds. (Start without retention.)

## Alternate Nostril Breathing: Steps

**1**

Sit in a comfortable position with the spine straight and shoulders relaxed.

**2**

Close the right nostril with the thumb and inhale through the left nostril for 4 counts.

**3**

Close the left nostril with the ring finger, release the right nostril, and exhale for 4 counts.



**4**

This completes one cycle. Continue for 5-10 minutes, increasing the count once comfortable.

**5**

Inhale for 4 counts on the right, and exhale for 4 counts from the left.

# Nadi Shodhana



[skinrange.com](http://skinrange.com)

## Additional Techniques (Introduce after mastering the core three)

- **Extended Exhale (Visama Vritti):** Inhale 4, exhale 6–8 counts → strongest vagal activation.
- **4-7-8 Breathing:** Inhale 4, hold 7, exhale 8 (tongue on roof of mouth) → excellent for panic and insomnia.

# Deep Breathing Techniques



## 1

**4-7-8 Breathing:** Inhale for 4 seconds, hold for 7, and exhale for 8. Helps reduce anxiety, cravings, and stress. Proven effective in improving mental health and respiratory issues.



## 2

**Belly Breathing:** Breathe deeply into the diaphragm, feeling the belly rise and fall. Boosts oxygen, reduces stress, and supports recovery.



## 3

**Morning Breathing:** Inhale deeply while raising arms and exhale as you lower them. Energizes the body, improves circulation, and relieves tension.



## 4

**Abdominal Breathing:** Engage the diaphragm fully, keeping the chest still. Enhances lung capacity, mental clarity, and reduces respiratory issues.

[betterliferecovery.com](https://betterliferecovery.com)

Deep Breathing Exercises: Popular Techniques, Benefits, Application, and Integrating into Daily Life - Better Life Recovery

## 4. Sample Session Structures

Quick Anxiety Reset (1–5 minutes – use in session or as needed)

Bhramari or Extended Exhale only.

Daily Home Practice (10–15 minutes)

- 3–5 min Diaphragmatic Breathing (warm-up)
- 5–7 min Nadi Shodhana
- 3–5 min Bhramari or Extended Exhale
- 1–2 min natural breath observation

In-Therapy Integration

Begin or end a session with 5 minutes of guided diaphragmatic breathing + simple interoception cues (“Notice any shift in sensation or emotion”).

Progression

**Weeks 1–2: Foundational practices only.**

**Week 3+: Add ratios or retentions only if the client feels comfortable and grounded.**

## **5. Monitoring Progress & Integration**

- **Use simple 0–10 anxiety scales before/after practice**
- **Track sleep, mood, and perceived stress weekly**
- **Integrate with CBT, mindfulness, or yoga therapy for enhanced outcomes**
- **Refer out if no improvement after 4 weeks or if symptoms worsen**

## **6. Resources & Further Reading**

- **Yoga Therapy texts and certified yoga therapists**
- **PMC / PubMed reviews on slow pranayama and anxiety**
- **Free guided audio recordings (create your own or recommend trusted apps)**

## Belly Breathing Details

