

## Do You Have Chronic Pain? *Have You Been Told to “Just Breathe”?*

*Here's what's actually going on — and what you can do about it.*

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If you live with chronic pain, you’ve probably heard it more times than you can count: “Sit down. Take a deep breath. Try to relax.”

It sounds simple. And yet, in a real moment of stress or pain, it can feel nearly impossible.

Here’s what no one tells you: you’re not failing. Your brain is doing exactly what it was designed to do. And that design, in that moment, works directly against the instruction you’ve been given.

Let’s look at what’s actually happening — and what can genuinely help.

### What Your Brain Is Doing When You’re Stressed

When stress or pain activates your nervous system, your brain rapidly shifts resources away from the thinking and reasoning center (the prefrontal cortex) and toward the survival center (the amygdala). This is a protection mechanism. It is fast, it is powerful, and it is not under your conscious control.

The problem is that “take a deep breath” is a cognitive instruction. It requires the thinking brain to be online. And at that moment, it mostly isn’t online.

So when you tell yourself to breathe and it doesn’t work, the door to that tool is temporarily closed. The goal isn’t to force your way through it. It’s to find the on-ramp that opens it.

#### The Sequence That Actually Works

**Body First → Exhale → Then Breathe**

### Step 1 Give Your Body Something to Do

Your nervous system built the stress response for movement. The charge it creates is meant to fuel action. When we freeze or stay still with it, it has nowhere to go.

So the first step is movement, not mental. Try one of these:

- Shake out your hands and arms for 20 to 30 seconds.
- Walk briskly for a minute or two.
- Press your feet firmly into the floor and hold the pressure.
- Push your palms together hard, then release.
- Grip the edge of a table or chair with firm intention.

You can also try cold water. Splash it on your face or run it over your wrists. This triggers something called the dive reflex, which directly slows your heart rate through the vagus nerve. It is involuntary. Your body does it automatically. No convincing required.

None of these require you to think about calming down. They simply give the nervous system something to work with.

**Research to explore:** *Peter Levine (Somatic Experiencing) • Stephen Porges (Polyvagal Theory) • Bessel van der Kolk*

## Step 2 Let the Exhale Come Before You Try to Breathe

Most breathing instructions start with the inhale. That is often too much too soon.

Instead, start with a sound or a sigh. A low hum. A groan. A long, audible exhale with your mouth open. These engage the vagus nerve through vibration in your throat and chest, and they put you on the exhale side of the breath cycle which is where the parasympathetic nervous system lives. That's the calming side.

You don't have to do it right. You don't have to do it quietly. You just have to let something out.

If you can sigh, you've already started.

**Research to explore:** *Deb Dana (Polyvagal Theory in Clinical Practice) • Stephen Porges (vagus nerve and the ventral vagal complex)*

## Step 3 Now the Breath Becomes Accessible

Once your body has moved and you've found the exhale, you'll often notice a small shift. A tiny loosening. That's the window.

At this point, try a double inhale through the nose — two quick sniffs in — followed by a long, slow exhale through the mouth. Research out of Stanford has shown this is one of the fastest ways to reduce physiological arousal, and it's easier to initiate than slower controlled patterns because the first move is active, not passive. You're not trying to meditate. You're not trying to relax completely. You're simply extending the exhale a little longer than the inhale, a few times, until the nervous system begins to settle on its own.

**Research to explore:** *David Spiegel and Andrew Huberman, Stanford University • Cyclic Sighing Research, Cell Reports Medicine*

## Why This Matters Especially for Chronic Pain

If you live with chronic pain, your nervous system is often running at a low-grade level of activation even on ordinary days. The stress response and the pain response share the same pathways. That means the access problem isn't only showing up in acute moments — it can be present any time your system is already loaded. Learning this sequence gives you a way that does not depend on willpower or cognitive effort. It works with your biology instead of against it.

### ***When stress hits and the breath feels out of reach:***

**Move something. Let something out. Then breathe.** Practice this on low-stress days so it's available when you need it most. The more familiar it becomes, the more quickly your nervous system can find it.