



ROOTED RECLAIMERS FOUR PILLARS · BOOK 1

FREE BASICS EDITION

Breathe

Noticing Your Breath, Finding Choice

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A companion to *Journey from the Edge* · rootedreclaimers.com

About this guide

This is the free Basics edition of *Breathe*, one of four Rooted Reclaimers pillar books: Breathe, Movement, Nutrition, and Connection. The pillar books are companions to *Journey from the Edge: From Weaponized Survival to Self-Reclamation* by Dr. Stephen Thompson.

This guide explains the core idea of the Breathe pillar and gives you a few practices you can start today. It takes about fifteen minutes to read.

Before you begin

This book offers education and self-directed practice. It doesn't diagnose, treat, or cure any condition, and your own medical, mental-health, and emergency providers stay in charge of your care.

- **Go at your own pace.** You can adapt, shorten, or skip any practice.
- **Stop a practice** if it causes pain, dizziness, lightheadedness, distress, or worsening symptoms. Return to your usual breathing, look around the room, and reach out for support if the feeling continues.
- **Check with your clinician first** if you're pregnant, recovering from surgery or injury, or living with a heart, lung, seizure, eating, or other medical condition that these practices could affect.
- **Use what fits.** Some pages discuss stress and trauma. You can use every part of this book without reliving a painful experience.

If you're in crisis right now: In the US, call or text **988** (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline), text **HOME to 741741** (Crisis Text Line), or call **911** if you or another person is in immediate danger. Outside the US, contact your local emergency number or find a crisis line at findahelpline.com.

Why Breathe matters

You breathe from your first minute of life to your last, usually without thinking about it. Chronic stress, trauma, or years of feeling unsafe can change that. Many of us learned to keep our breathing shallow and restricted, or stopped noticing it at all, because a small, quiet breath helped us get through.

For years, slow breathing felt dangerous to me, and a slow belly breath made me feel exposed. I had learned that safety could disappear at any moment, so I breathed high and shallow, with my chest tight and my diaphragm barely moving. I survived, and it cost me: I stopped noticing my own breath.

When I started paying attention to my breathing again, it felt awkward, unsettling, and sometimes frightening. My first slow, deliberate breaths brought relief and discomfort at the same time.

Here's what I learned. Slow breathing may help some people feel steadier, and paying attention to the breath can also bring up feelings or memories. Both can happen, and you can stop at any time. If strong feelings come up, open your eyes, look around the room, and let your breathing return to its own pace.

Many kinds of stress can change how you breathe, including racism, money pressure, unsafe housing or work, chronic illness, and disability. You can use this guide without naming the source of yours. If a practice doesn't fit your body, change it or skip it.

If breath practice feels frightening, awkward, or strange at first, those reactions are common, and they make sense. Go gently and at your own pace. Over time, many people find that a few slow breaths become a dependable way to steady themselves.

Three ideas to start with

1. Shallow breathing often started as protection

After long stress or trauma, slowing your breath can make you feel exposed. You may tighten your belly, and your chest may rise and fall in short, shallow breaths. You learned to keep your breathing small because a small breath felt safer, and that was a smart response to what you faced. In my experience, these patterns often continue after the threat is gone, and they usually ease over time when you pay gentle, curious attention to them.

2. Your breath is one signal you can adjust

Breathing runs on its own, and you can also change it on purpose. The vagus nerve connects your brain with your heart, lungs, and gut, and it helps slow your heart rate. When you breathe slowly, the vagus nerve may have more influence on your heart.

Research links slow breathing with higher heart rate variability, the natural rise and fall of your heart rate as you breathe in and out (Laborde et al., 2022). Many people experience it as feeling calmer. A review of breathwork trials found small-to-medium benefits for stress and anxiety (Fincham et al., 2023). Results vary, and any shift tends to be gradual.

3. Keep each breath a comfortable size

“Take a deep breath” is common advice. Breathing much bigger or faster than you need to can lower the carbon dioxide in your blood. For some people, that brings on lightheadedness, tingling in the hands or lips, or a racing heart, which can feel like panic (Meuret & Ritz, 2010). That’s why the practices in this guide use slow, soft breaths with a longer out-breath and no pauses between breaths.

Try this

TAKE CARE

Breath safety in brief

- **Over-breathing:** If you feel lightheaded or tingly, you may be breathing more air than you need. Stop, let your breaths get smaller, and let your breathing return to its own pace.
- **Panic or strong feelings:** Stop, open your eyes, and name five things you can see in the room. Stopping is always allowed.
- **Health conditions:** If you have asthma or another lung condition, a heart condition, epilepsy or seizures, or you're pregnant, ask your clinician which practices suit you before you start.

Practice · Noticing your breath

Time: about 1 minute · **Position:** sitting, standing, or lying on your side

1. Keep your eyes open, or let them rest on one spot.
2. If it feels okay, place one hand on your belly and one on your chest. Or rest your hands in your lap.
3. Let your breath stay as it is. Notice where it moves, and any tightness or ease.
4. Say to yourself: "I'm learning to notice my breath again."
5. After a few breaths, look around the room and let the practice end.

Make it easier: Notice a single breath. Skip the hands and the words.

Stop and switch if: noticing your breath makes you more anxious or brings up distress. Look around the room, name five things you can see, and let your breathing find its own pace.

Practice · A longer out-breath

Time: about 1 minute · **Position:** sitting or standing

1. Sit or stand however is comfortable. Let your eyes rest on one spot, or close them if that feels okay.
2. Breathe in gently through your nose for a count of about 4.
3. Breathe out slowly for a count of about 6, as if you were fogging a window. Let the breath flow out easily.
4. Move straight into the next in-breath without pausing.
5. Repeat 5 or 6 times. Then breathe normally and notice your shoulders and jaw.

Make it easier: Skip the counting. Let each out-breath be a little longer than the breath in.

Stop and switch if: you feel dizzy, lightheaded, tingly, short of breath, or more anxious. Breathe normally, look around the room, and try Noticing your breath instead.

WHAT RESEARCH SUGGESTS

In a one-month randomized study, mostly of university students, a 5-minute daily breathing practice with long out-breaths improved mood more than mindfulness meditation did (Balban et al., 2023). That practice also added a second, deeper in-breath, which this guide leaves out. This is one small study, and people respond differently.

Practice · Two breaths at a daily anchor

Time: under 30 seconds · **Position:** any

1. Pick one moment you know will happen each day, such as making coffee, parking the car, or lying down at night.
2. Before or after it, take two slow, comfortable breaths. Let each out-breath be a little longer than the in-breath.
3. Let that be enough.

Make it easier: Notice one breath, just as it is.

Stop and switch if: slowing your breath brings up distress or dizziness. Breathe normally and look around you.

Your first three days

DAY	PRACTICE	WHAT I NOTICED
1	Noticing your breath, once in the morning and once at night	
2	A longer out-breath, 5 or 6 rounds, at a stressful moment	
3	Two breaths at a daily anchor, plus any practice you liked	

REFLECT

- What did you notice about your breath that surprised you?
- Which practice felt easiest? Which felt hardest?
- What's the smallest version you'd keep doing?

Add it to My Ground Plan

My Ground Plan is your own page for the smallest version of each practice and your plan for harder days. Write down the breath practice that helped most, in a version small enough for a low-energy day.

Breathe: _____

Inside the full book

- How to use this book
 - Introduction: Learning to Breathe Freely Again
 - Chapter 1: Survival Breath: When Breathing Feels Like a Risk
 - Chapter 2: The Science of Breath: How Breathing Changes Your Stress Response
 - Chapter 3: Practices to Reclaim Your Breath
 - Chapter 4: Tracking and Reflection Tools
 - Chapter 5: Integrating Breath into Life and Community
 - Quick reference: breath practices
 - A sample week of breath practice
 - References
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Go deeper

The full *Breathe* book has every chapter, more practices, a practice log, and the research behind each practice.

Rooted Reset includes the full book. The 30-day guided program comes with all four full pillar books, 30 daily lessons, a weekly live group session, and My Ground Plan.

- **Start free:** Starter Ground, a free seven-day introduction, at rootedreclaimers.com/starter-ground.html
- **Go further:** Rooted Reset, at rootedreclaimers.com/rooted-reset.html
- **Read the framework:** *Journey from the Edge*, available on Amazon

About the author

Dr. Stephen Thompson, DC, DACM, BCTMB, CNT, FAIHM, is an integrative clinician, educator, and author based in the Twin Cities, Minnesota. He treats people living with chronic pain, burnout, autoimmune conditions, and long-term stress, and he teaches clinicians and organizations.

He wrote *Journey from the Edge* and founded Rooted Reclaimers, the first stage of The Founded Project.

rootedreclaimers.com • thefoundedproject.com

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