



e-quilibrium

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Sighing

A sigh is a particular type of breath, marked by a deeper and more prolonged inspiration and expiration than a typical breath. One specific definition of a sigh is that it is a breath that has a volume exceeding 200% of that person's typical volume. Many sighs are spontaneous, and it is well-established that they serve a resetting function for the respiratory system. That is, sighs help maintain respiratory balance.

Sighs also are recognized as a behavioral indicator of emotion. However, there isn't any specific emotion that is necessarily conveyed through a sign. A person may sigh when experiencing sadness, weariness, or frustration. A person may also sigh in conjunction with positive emotion, such as enjoyment or love. Intentional sighs may be used as nonverbal communication, such as to convey annoyance.

One prevalent hypothesis is that sighs are most likely to occur with the experience of relief, especially relief of some tension. A sigh of relief may occur when a threat diminishes, when resignation occurs (e.g., giving up), when a hoped-for outcome occurs, or when some stress eases.

If sighing is often related to some type of relief, might it be possible that one could intentionally use sighing to alleviate tension, stress, or some negative emotion, similar to the relaxation effect of deep breathing? A study reported in Physiology & Behavior (2010) compared the effects of spontaneous and instructed (intentional) sighing. Interestingly, instructed sighing seemed to inhibit recovery from mental stress, rather than facilitating tension relief. While spontaneous

sighing is frequently associated with (or reflective of) relief, research to date suggests that we cannot necessarily mimic this process with intentional sighing. Note, however, that deep breathing (slow, intentional deep breaths) is well-established as a technique to reduce tension.

As you read this, perhaps you have given more attention to your breathing than you typically do, and you may have even noticed a sigh. If so, what did the sigh mean? From a tongue-in-cheek standpoint, perhaps you've lived with much tension wondering about the purpose of sighs, and now this information has provided some relief. Or, maybe you are annoyed by the discussion of sighs, so your sigh was meant to convey that annoyance. Most likely, there was some instability in your respiratory system that was beyond your awareness, and your sigh was simply spontaneous, serving the purpose of restoring respiratory balance. That is, it was "just a sigh." (Imagine that! A psychologist suggesting that a physical behavior was just that... with no other implied meaning!)

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