

The Healing Power of Breath

In 24 hours we take about 20,000 breaths.

Breathing is the only autonomous process that we can control: we can let it happen without any conscious attention or we can choose to more deeply engage its healing powers.

Given that breath is fundamental to life, anything that decreases our capacity to breathe is compromising our full capacity for well being, on the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual levels.

HOW WE TYPICALLY COMPROMISE OUR BREATHING

Under stress our body moves into flight or fight mode. Our entire body readies to maximize our defenses, and this includes tensing our belly and other muscles, minimizing blood flow to our digestive processes, and shifting our breath high into our chest. Breathing becomes shallow and shorter.

In a demanding and hurried lifestyle, breathing can be regularly compromised. We know that for an asthmatic, stress can trigger an asthmatic attack. For people without such breathing difficulties, the same stress can still restrict breathing, but we may not see the impact to the same degree or as quickly. Yet long-term, the effect can be significant.

You know the feeling of compromised breathing. How many times have you spent the day rushing from one task to the next, on to the next demand, reacting to the push and pull for your attention, when FINALLY- you let out a huge “hhhaaaa” and take a minute to catch your breath.

Since mind, body, spirit and emotion are integrated, compromised breathing shows up in other ways as well. We hold our breath when we are emotional, thinking this will help the feelings to go away, when in fact the opposite is true. When we anticipate pain, we hold our breath. Under utilizing our breath can also lead to confusion and anxiety.

THE BENEFITS OF BREATHING

Conscious breathing, when practiced daily, can have tremendous healthful benefits and can help you take charge of your own health.

Physical:

- Increase body awareness
- Melt body tension
- Over time, smooth out unstable and energy highs and lows
- Heal stress-related disease
- Resolve high blood pressure
- Improve heart health
- Reduce or eliminate any pain
- Improve athletic performance
- Eliminate toxins in the body and improve health of skin

Mental:

- Clarify and focus the mind
- Improve mental concentration
- Give pause to the negative thought patterns
- Suspend self-criticism and judgment of others
- Awaken and dissolve limiting beliefs and patterns

Emotional:

- Help you to notice when you are having a feeling
- Move through the resistance to painful emotions
- Clear sadness, anger, fear and hurt from the body

Spiritual:

- Enhance the present moment
- Deepen your mystical connection with infinity
- Hear your own intuition
- Clear the barriers to loving yourself
- Shift struggle to surrender
- Open to universal support

HOW TO BREATHE CONSCIOUSLY – THE FOUNDATION

This process of diaphragmatic/belly breathing allows you to take oxygen into the bottom third of your lungs where there is the most blood flow, by relaxing and expanding your belly. As a result, your diaphragm (between your belly and the bottom of your lungs) expands fully.

NOTE: Please consult your physician before you begin any new health regimen, especially if you are being treated for breathing difficulties such as asthma or breathing difficulties associated with diabetes.

As you follow these instructions for the first time, you may find it easier to first place your focus only on the inhale. Once you feel comfortable with the inhale, then take your attention to the exhale. When you feel comfortable with each, you can place your focus on both at the same time for one fluid process.

1. Stop whatever you are doing and be still. Sit or lie comfortably with your back straight. It is ideal to remove any restrictive clothing from your mid-section. Close your eyes. Close your mouth to breathe through your nose. Rest one hand on your belly below your belly button.
2. Allow yourself to slow your breath to an even pace. Soften your body. Let go of any noticeable tension as much as possible. It is common to drop your shoulders and drop your jaw.
3. Slowly and gently take air in through your nose, and down into your chest. Keep pulling the air down into your belly. Imagine your belly is a balloon filling up with air, and feel it gently push your hand out. Notice your rib cage expanding in

all directions as well. This inhale should not be effortful. If you are dizzy or tense, you are trying too hard. Relax. Do this without raising your shoulders or tightening your stomach.

4. As you exhale, imagine deflating the balloon and feel the hand on your belly move back in towards the centre of your body.

5. Gently continue to push your breath out of your lungs and notice your rib cage narrowing.

6. Repeat this process slowly and gently for 10 minutes or until you feel refreshed and calm.

By practicing your breathing for 10 minutes twice per day, you will realize a greater sense of well-being. You can also use conscious breathing anytime during the day, when you need a breather and want to feel refreshed. Even a few deep breaths can be calming.

(Note: Your body may not be used to so much oxygen and the experience may feel unusual at first. However, if you experience prolonged dizziness or feel very uncomfortable, stop, rest and resume the process more slowly and gently. If the problem persists, consult your physician.)

ENHANCEMENTS

NOTE: Before adding any of the following enhancements, it is advisable to be practiced in the foundational belly breathing as described above, so that your technique remains in tact and you receive the full benefit of the breath.

DIAPHRAGMATIC BREATHING AT ITS BEST

Building on the foundational breathing, this practice massages the organs through the deep belly breath and stretches your spine.

First practice this lying down to appreciate the movements. Raise your knees and place your feet flat on the ground. Be sure your legs are a comfortable distance apart and your heels a comfortable distance away from your buttocks.

You may exaggerate this movement at first to get the feel of the movement, but as a practice, the movements should be small, smooth and gentle.

- ♦ As you take air in and down to your belly so that it rounds out, very slowly and gently arch the small of your back away from the floor. This allows your diaphragm, which is like a tight drum skin, to expand and flatten down to your belly, making room for your organs to breath.
- ♦ As you exhale and feel your belly fall back towards your body's centre, very slowly flatten the small of your back against the floor. Your diaphragm now rounds up into its dome shape in your chest.

- ♦ Make these two moves a smooth, gentle movement.

As you continue this exercise, focus your attention on your tailbone. As you inhale, notice your tailbone is rolling down the floor toward its tip – the coccyx. As you exhale, notice your tailbone rolling up the floor where it joins your spine.

Now practice this same exercise sitting with your back straight against a chair.

- ♦ As you inhale, very slowly arch the small of your back and notice that you rock forward on your sit bones. Let your belly fall out and down. Keep your stomach muscles very relaxed. Again, you may exaggerate this movement to start, but this should be a subtle movement that you can do anywhere without anyone noticing.
- ♦ As you exhale, slowly flatten the small of your back against the chair.
- ♦ As you practice, set your intention and envision the movements of your spine. This will help to keep the movements small, smooth and gentle.

DEEPENING THE BREATH

- ♦ Inhale for 4 counts. Use 1 second per count.
- ♦ Exhale for 4 counts.
Be sure to check that you are maintaining the foundational technique.

Some people can inhale to a count of 6 or 8 once they are practiced at this. Start simple so it's comfortable and effortless for you. With practice you can increase the count to slow your breath even more.

ALTERNATE NOSTRIL BREATHING

This breathing process can be a quick refresher. It also serves to balance the right and left brain, increasing our capacity to deal with situations and challenges more holistically.

1. Using your dominant hand, place your thumb on one nostril and your middle finger on the other. The index finger can rest on your forehead if you like.

- ♦ Exhale and then plug your one nostril with your thumb. Inhale.
- ♦ BEFORE you exhale, switch and plug your other nostril with your middle finger.
- ♦ Exhale. Inhale.
- ♦ Switch and plug your other nostril. Exhale and inhale.
- ♦ Switch. Exhale and inhale.
- ♦ Always inhale before switching nostrils. Keep repeating this process for about 1.5 minutes.

2. Using your non-dominant hand, repeat the process for another 1.5 minutes.

3. Finish using your dominant hand for 1.5 minutes.

BREATHING THROUGH PHYSICAL PAIN

It is your anticipation of pain which causes you to hold your breath, as much as the pain itself. When you participate with the sensations involved in the pain you can transform the pain.

- ◆ Focus your mind on here and now.
- ◆ Focus on all the sounds, sights and body sensations of the moment. Be as fully present as possible.
- ◆ Take slow deep breaths. Lean or breathe into the pain. Become one with it.
- ◆ If your mind wanders, bring your attention back to the present sensations and your slow and steady breathing.
This is the same way that someone might have dental work done without anesthetic, although this is not recommended unless you are highly confident of your breathing ability in this regard.

BREATHING THROUGH EMOTIONAL PAIN

When you feel painfully emotional, you may have a tendency to hold your breath, thinking you can suppress your feelings and make them go away. And you can, for the short-term, but the energy of the emotions stays in your body building up negative energy. You may also ignore, hide or let your emotions linger because this is the way you were taught to deal with emotions through your parents' modelling.

- ◆ Breathing will help you to become aware of your emotions so you have choice in how you manage them.
- ◆ When you are experiencing a painful emotion, allow it to come up.
- ◆ Keep taking slow, deep breaths with the emotion.
- ◆ By breathing with the emotion, it clears your body and the feeling moves through you much faster.

Adapted from Conscious Breathing, Gay Hendricks – audio tapes.

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