

The Healing Power of Breath

To be human is to experience stress. Stress is a primary cause of most illness. Even people with diseases of clearly organic, physical diseases can benefit from relaxation techniques.

Breathwork is one of the most efficient ways to increase wellness and achieve optimal health. It requires no equipment, it's free, and literally right under our nose. Breathing is the only body function that we do both consciously and unconsciously. We can breathe both involuntarily as well as voluntarily.

Breathing is controlled by two sets of muscles: one operates the involuntarily nervous system and the other muscle set governs the voluntary nervous system. As a result, breath is the only function through which you can influence the involuntary system. The involuntary nervous system is also known as the Autonomic Nervous System (ANS). The ANS has two branches: parasympathetic and sympathetic. These branches are designed to work in harmony. The parasympathetic branch slows heart rate, lowers blood pressure, increases blood flow to the surface of the body, and increases movement of the digestive organs. The sympathetic branch of the nervous system prepares the body for fight or flight. It speeds up heart rate, slows digestion, increases blood pressure, and diverts blood circulation away from the surface of the body to the interior. This is logical as, in an emergency, the top priority is to maintain blood circulation to the brain; if we can't think, we die. The heart speeds up to ensure the brain is fueled. In an emergency, digestion becomes a 'nonessential' function and slows or stops. Both branches of the system are designed to work in balance, to ebb and flow, back and forth as needed.

Today it appears that in many of us there is a dominance, or overactivity, of the sympathetic nervous system. It's as if the body is reacting constantly to a threat that never goes away. How we got to this point is unknown. Perhaps it is a consequence of the way we live today: improper nutrition, high population density, emotional stress, excessive noise, artificial light,

etc. All of these factors contribute to an imbalance in the nervous system; overactivity of the sympathetic nervous system and an underactivity of the parasympathetic nervous system.

Imbalances of the involuntary nervous system underlie many common disorders. For example, high blood pressure has, at its root, overactive sympathetic tone. Constant sympathetic stimulation can also lead to irregular heart beats, poor digestion, poor circulation, and other conditions. Many of the common complaints that lead people to visit their doctor have a connection to an overactive sympathetic nervous system. Western medicine does not recognize this type of disturbance, although it is commonly treated in Europe and Asia. In the United States, instead of getting to the root of the problem, the imbalance of the ANS, these conditions are treated by attempting to block the overactivity of the Sympathetic system or deal with its consequences at a superficial level by prescribing medications which are suppressive or counteractive. The problem with this type of pharmacological intervention is that it increases the body's tendency to rebound or to react; when the drug is removed, the imbalance returns with a vengeance.

Breathwork increases Parasympathetic tone. It helps to bring balance to the nervous system. It gets right to the root of the problem and corrects it. This is not an immediate fix, however. Corrective breathing works over time. Although results are much slower, this method is far superior to the conventional medical approach. It has none of the toxicity associated with pharmaceutical drugs, does not work in a suppressive or counteractive way, the results are long-lasting and get better over time.

In addition to allowing control of the involuntary nervous system, breath is also the bridge between the conscious and unconscious mind. Because breathing can be a conscious or unconscious act, it spans these two worlds. By focusing attention on breath, you are opening the channels between the conscious mind and the unconscious mind. In doing this work, one may find they have greater recall of dreams and easier access to meditative states.

Breath is also a connection between mind and body. Clearly, breath has a mental component. You can experience breathing in your mind and also experience it in your body. By doing breathwork, you can harmonize the influence that the mind has on the body. Oftentimes, the physiological disturbance that underlies excessive Sympathetic tone is a mental disturbance. For example, irregular heartbeat may have as its underlying

cause anxiety, so that the real root of that condition is in the mental component, not the physical.

Finally, breathwork helps us function more effectively by centering the mind and allowing us to better deal with life's challenges.

How to Prepare for Breathwork

Try to find a quiet place with no distractions. Sit in a comfortable chair and keep your back straight. You may keep your eyes open or close them. Practice these breathwork techniques daily. The amount of time spent on this work is not as important as doing it with regularity. Only with regular input can you change the rhythms in your nervous system for better health. Throughout the exercises, keep your tongue in the 'yogic' position: touch the tip of the tongue to the backs of the upper front teeth and the palate. Yoga philosophy teaches that there are two nerve currents of opposite polarity in the human body, which begin and end at those points. When you make that connection with the tongue, it is said that you are completing a circuit and keeping the energy of breath within instead of dissipating it to the outside.

Exercises

1. **Following Your Breath**

This is the simplest of all breathing exercises and serves as a training exercise. Just put your attention on your breath, without trying to influence it. Do not try to speed it up, slow it down, or change the rhythm; just follow it with your mind.

When attempting to follow your breath, you may find that your mind wanders - usually to thoughts or images. When you become aware of this, gently bring your attention back to your breath. Practice observing your breath for a few minutes a day. You can also try to lengthen this period as a form of meditation.

2. **Begin with Exhalation**

Start by observing your breath as you usually experience it: in, out, in, out. Now reverse your conception of the breath cycle and begin each breath with exhalation, so you breathe out, in, out, in. Do this for a few minutes, simply observing your breath as before, without trying to influence it.

This exercise helps you learn to take greater control of the breathing process. In particular, it helps to deepen breathing by increasing the amount of air you move out. Do this exercise for a few minutes each day after following your breath in the normal way.

3. **Squeeze More Air Out**

This is the secret to increasing breath. You have greater control over exhalation and the muscles controlling it are more powerful. By squeezing more air out of your lungs, you will automatically take more air into them. To do this, you recruit the intercostal muscles (between the ribs).

Take a deep breath through the nose - as deep as you can. Let it out through your mouth, around the tongue, and when you get to the end, try squeezing a little more air out. Now squeeze a little more....and a little more. Feel the effort in your ribs. Now let the air expand your lungs normally.

4. **The Stimulating Breath (Bellows Breath)**

This breath is designed to raise the energy of the nervous system and increase alertness. Breathe in and out rapidly through your nose, keeping your mouth lightly closed. Inhalation and exhalation should be of equal length and as short as possible. This produces a rapid movement of the diaphragm and is fairly noisy.

This is a real exercise; the muscles of your neck may become tired and your body temperature will increase. Initially, do this breath for no longer than fifteen seconds. After that, breathe normally. Each time you do it, you may increase the time by five seconds or so, until you work up to a full minute. Breathe normally when you are finished and observe how your body and mind feel.

5. **Breath Deep, Slow, Quiet, and Regular**

When we are stressed, upset, fearful, or angry, breathing becomes rapid, shallow, irregular, and noisy. In states of relaxation and harmony, breathing is deep, slow, quiet, and regular. This is an excellent example of how the voluntary aspect of breathing can be used to influence conditions we normally consider beyond our direct control.

Begin by relaxing; give yourself a good stretch. Take a good deep breath. Begin by just observing your breath...and now focus consciously on making it deeper, slower, quieter, and more regular. Do this for a few breath cycles, and notice how you feel. Doing this exercise several times a day will help retrain the nervous system.

6. **The Relaxing Breath**

This is the most powerful relaxation method I know. You may initially feel a bit lightheaded; this sensation will disappear with practice.

Begin by exhaling through the mouth completely. Then inhale quietly through the nose to a count of four, hold your breath for a count of seven, and exhale through the mouth noisily, around the tongue, for a count of eight. The sound you make when exhaling is a kind of whoosh. Repeat this for a total of four breath cycles. The ratio is important - your exhalation must last for a count of eight, so resist the temptation to blow it all in the first few seconds. Let out a slow, measured breath; then repeat the cycle again. At the end of four breath cycles, breathe normally and notice how you feel.

To maximize the benefits of the Relaxing Breath, do a minimum of four breath cycles twice a day. After a month, you can increase to eight cycles twice daily. Do not do more than eight cycles - this is a powerful technique and has profound effects on physiology.

This technique can also be used if something upsets you, makes you anxious, or you experience pain.

Resources

1. Weil, Andrew, *Breathing: The Master Key to Self Healing*, Sounds True, Boulder, CO, 1999
2. Fried, Robert, *Be Well, Breathe Well*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1999.