



Breathing

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THROUGH THE ACT OF BREATHING, oxygen is brought to the lungs, where it is absorbed into the blood stream and then delivered to all the body's tissues for the important energy-creating function of metabolism. Since this is such an automatic life function, people generally pay little heed to the important effects of breathing. It is a major issue that deserves some close attention.

When we are in a resting state, our bodies require little energy, so our oxygen requirement is low. Thus, our breathing level is slow and shallow. If we were to get up and begin to be active, the demand for oxygen would increase, and we would automatically begin to breathe more frequently and deeply. In simple and straightforward situations, the breathing system is remarkably sensitive and responsive, based on need. If the demand and supply of oxygen are not 'in sync,' the body experiences distress, which can ultimately influence a person's state of health and happiness.

Besides providing for changing levels of activity, breathing has a close relationship to our feelings, which in turn have a remarkably strong influence on our health. For example, if we find ourselves in a situation that we interpret as dangerous, we automatically prepare ourselves for either fight or flight by breathing quickly and deeply. The necessary oxygen level is thus provided. When the danger has subsided, the body should automatically return to the resting state. But what if it does not? Even though the individual's breathing pattern slows down, and the heart rate diminishes, there is a tendency to hold on in the tissues of the body. The result is chronic muscle tension, elevated blood pressure and the general experience of stress.

After being caught up in a series of dangerous or unpleasant situations (for example, at work or in a dysfunctional family) many people are afraid to let go of their preparedness to protect themselves. This is especially dramatic in emotionally trying situations that result in

post-traumatic syndromes. The entire body of such a person becomes chronically tight and rigid, maintained by shallow, ineffective breathing. If an individual continues this pattern of holding over an extended period of time (through a process referred to as a 'fixation'), this can contribute to the development of stress, and sometimes can lead to serious physical or emotional illness.

Many people are afraid to 'let go' because they believe that the expression of feelings is unacceptable. They maintain their holding by shallow breathing, and are afraid to breathe more deeply for fear of the possible release of pent-up tears, or feelings such as anger or sadness. Because of childhood and cultural training, they routinely hold their breath, swallow their feelings and soldier on. A lifetime habit of doing this creates unhealthy and unhappy patterns of dealing with stress. Undoing such habits is aided by a dedication to practicing some deep breathing techniques. With serious, chronic conditions, the help of a breath-work practitioner may be necessary, but most people can do a lot to help themselves. Here we describe the basic method taught in Come Alive courses at The Haven. This can be done alone or with a partner, to explore together. One person could observe the other, and provide encouragement and assistance when needed; then the partners could switch roles. Please note that this is only one of many different approaches to breathing. What is most important is your exploration of your own body and breath in your own way, so that you can learn for yourself what suits you.

To begin, choose a pleasant environment, preferably one offering fresh air; wear loose fitting, comfortable clothes. Lie on any firm surface (your living room rug, a firm bed) with your feet flat and hip distance apart, knees up and slightly apart, preferably without a pillow under your head. If you are uncomfortable lying down, try the process sitting up in a comfortable chair or on a pillow. You can have your eyes open or closed, whatever is best



for you. Open your mouth, wide and relaxed, and breathe. Breathe in deeply and let the air fall out. Let the breath flow gently like a river, without holding at either the top or the bottom. You might place your hands on your chest just below your clavicles on both sides and feel how much movement you can detect there. Concentrate your attention to breathing more deeply by expanding the range of movement of your upper chest.

Once you have succeeded in increasing the range of movement in your upper chest, place your hands on the sides of your chest and breathe in such a fashion that expands your chest to the sides and front. If you have accomplished this, you have taken a most important step towards breaking through some of your fixations. For a few minutes, let yourself go and relax. Check out how you feel throughout your body. Take note that this simple breathing exercise is handy for you to use whenever you are suffering from stress of any sort. Practice it several times a day, starting with maybe 8 or 10 minutes, all the while increasing your experience of 'letting go.'

Should feelings rise up within you during your practice, express them openly. You might have feelings of sadness, possibly without any apparent reason. Or you might experience some anger. Perhaps you will feel a sudden surge of well-being or joy. Whatever the emotion that occurs, feel it, experience it, and express it safely and responsibly by crying or shouting or laughing, or striking a pillow with your hand. Let it out! If you are with a partner, share the feeling and talk about it with your partner. Take note of whatever memories are stimulated; perhaps keep a journal for reference as you progress. Notice how many times that you tend to 'catch' or 'hold' your breath and each time, practice 'letting go.'

Sometimes, deep breathing will result in tingling feelings and sometimes numbness in various parts of your body. These tingling sensations are not dangerous; they are a signal that your body is 'waking up' and the energy

is flowing. If you are not too uncomfortable with these sensations, there is no problem with continuing with them. You might experience tension in your hands, or your lips might feel rigid and tense; this is evidence that you are reducing the carbon dioxide level in the blood. This is not dangerous either, but may be uncomfortable; quiet your breathing to reverse this process. If necessary breathe into and from a paper bag (not a plastic bag) and slow your breath down for a few minutes. You can restart your deep breathing when the discomfort passes. Sometimes there will be some minor discomfort (e.g., a dry mouth) associated with mouth breathing; in spite of this, we encourage people to continue on with deep breathing in order to increase their energy level.

Over a period of time of breathing exercises (varying with each person), you will likely begin to notice that your five senses (sight, touch, smell, taste and hearing) will feel fuller, sharper and more alive. While you are breathing deeply, try to feel how much more expansive your inner world can become. Enjoy whatever experiences are offered to you by Mother Nature.

Should you become interested in furthering and deepening your experience of yourself through breathing, we would advise you to seek the professional help of a body worker or someone trained in Reichian breathing. We also recommend that you investigate books written by Alexander Lowen on the subject of bioenergetics. There are also numerous books on techniques of breathing; one we like is Nancy Zi's helpful book, *The Art of Breathing*. You might also explore some of the courses offered by The Haven Institute, many of which incorporate the principles and practices explained above.

Through breathing work, you can expect not only to feel more of yourself, but also more connected with yourself and others. In breathing sessions, your fixations and physical tightnesses can let go. You can expect to feel freer, growing as you did when you were a child!