

Waiting to Inhale:

The Next Breath You Take May Be Your First

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Invisible enemies, bad breathing habits may trigger a variety of short-term and chronic health complaints, or be the source of recurring fatigue and anxiety without anyone ever knowing the wiser.

Much like food that's absorbed by our intestines, the air we inhale is processed by alveoli sacks in our lungs and its nutrients deposited into the bloodstream. Oxygen is essential to maintaining tissues and cells. In fact, its presence is so critical that the you need to inhale about 25,000 times each day just to keep everything in the pink.

Yet a surprising number of Americans are shallow breathers who inhale only with their chests and ignore the diaphragm. In even worse shape are those who don't exert the muscles beyond their throats, while a choice few individuals have the opposite problem - inhaling more air than they breathe out.

While you may not notice it now, your bad breathing habits can catch up with you as you age. Our lungs generally slow down over time, which translates into a decrease of oxygen intake. Since the respiratory system is responsible for eliminating 70% of the body's metabolic waste, it also follows that poisonous gases will spend more time inside our capillaries as the years go by.

On the up side, researchers suggest most Americans are not using the lower third of their lungs when they breathe. With a little instruction, it may be possible to bring all those unused alveoli sacks back online when

you need them.

Breathing exercises are common in pain management. Many eastern mystical traditions consider the air we breathe to be synonymous with *prana*, or life sustaining energy. Even the martial arts integrate breathwork into their training regimens.

But despite so much circumstantial evidence, you're not likely to find breathing therapy high on anyone's to-do list here in the West.

Barbara Benagh writes in the *Yoga Journal* that if you place one hand on your chest and the other below your rib cage, then take a few breaths, you can get an idea of how well you process your oxygen. (Lie down for best results.)

Normal breathing means inhaling through the nose as you contract your diaphragm, which is tucked just beneath your chest cavity and causes your lungs to expand. In layman's terms, it's referred to as breathing into your stomach.

As soon as you stop inhaling, your diaphragm should relax on its own and your rib cage recoil inward, allowing carbon dioxide and other gases to exit the same way the oxygen came in.

Another bad habit to watch for is the telltale "catch" between inhaling and exhaling. If you find yourself holding your breath for a moment before your expiration, this may indicate a crimp in the natural flow of things.

To gauge the amount of time you spend inhaling and then exhaling, count the seconds for each, then compare them. If you're not spending slightly more time

on your exhalation, you may be overbreathing.

Of course, even if you breathe normally most of the time, there can be occasions when the process is thrown off-kilter, causing a variety of ill effects. People who have trouble relaxing, dwell on their problems or who repress their feelings are likely to have tense muscles. The tension obstructs the diaphragm and chest cavity, restricting normal respiratory activity.

Fortunately, more and more natural health disciplines are now incorporating "breathwork" as part of their formal regimens. If you think your method of breathing could use some tweaking, here's a few different approaches to consider.

Yoga

While most yoga classes of thirty years ago paid scant attention to breathwork, all that changed when Patthabi Jois brought ashtanga yoga to the United States back in the nineties.

Originally developed by Sri Krishnamacharya, the discipline was intended for teenage boys and involved a more aerobic version of yoga than had formerly been taught.

Today you'll find courses all over town that teach ashtanga yoga, - also called "flow" yoga or vinyasa yoga - and its popularity continues to spread.

Katchie Ananda, co-owner of Yoga Sangha (yogasangha.com) in San Francisco's Mission dis-

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trict, says her instructors teach a Bois technique known as Ujjayi Pranayama. Pranayama exercises address the voluntary aspect of breathing. The goal is to calm your mind to allow a freer flow.

“Because you can consciously alter your breathing pattern, you can also alter your entire consciousness,” Ananda points out. She notes that it’s sometimes easier to work on stress and emotional problems via breathwork than more traditional forms of psychotherapy.

Invariably, she gets reports back from class members who tell her that “everything becomes a little more quiet inside” as soon as they start breathing into their poses.

“With a little bit of practice you realize that you’re really not your thoughts,” she explains. And it’s those thoughts, she says, which can often lead to poor health by disrupting normal aspiration.

Note: While taking a few deep breaths never hurt anyone, experts caution that re-training yourself to breathe without professional oversight can cause injury.

Qigong

Developed in China, millions of people regularly practice qigong around the world as a method for reducing stress and maintaining optimum health.

Qigong is historically connected to martial arts training and the eastern concept of chi energy, but is also used by acupuncturists and other health care specialists to help patients deal with a variety of common ailments, including fatigue, anxiety and headaches. Diaphragmic breathing, which is taught by Qigong practitioners, is considered essential to stress reduction.

Unfortunately, the discipline is not as widely taught in the United States as yoga, so some research is usually required in order to find a qualified practitioner. You can learn qigong by taking classes or under the supervision of a health care provider.

Holotropic Breathwork

Holotropic Breathwork, according to its official website, “combines accelerated breathing with evocative music in a special set and setting. With the eyes closed and lying on a mat, each person uses their own breath and the music in the room to enter a non-ordinary state of consciousness. This state activates the natural inner healing process of the individual’s psyche, bringing him or her a particular set of internal experiences.”

The discipline is a central part of the School of Transpersonal Psychology, co-founded by Stanislav Grof, whose training site is based in Mill Valley. His group is conducting a weekend seminar on breathwork in San Francisco beginning January 12th.

For more information contact (415) 383 – 8779 or workshop@holotropic.com.

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