

Breathing for Life

Are We Suffocating Ourselves?

By Sonia Osorio

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I didn't breathe during most of my 20s -- or at least I didn't breathe fully.

I had no idea my chronically tight shoulders, constricted intestines, insomnia and unyielding jaw tension were so closely related to my limited breath. To regain my health, I had to relearn how to breathe. And, though I still have to remind myself to do this from time to time, I understand how healthy breathing supports the body's ability to heal itself.

Breathing is a process still categorized as "unconscious" by most medical texts, yet many of us need to relearn how to breathe properly -- both consciously and fully. It is our unawareness of this life function that may sap us of life-giving energy.

Breathing involves the whole body, our whole being, in fact. The word "inspiration" comes from the Latin root "spiritus," meaning not only breath, but vitality, the animating principle, the soul. To breathe is not only to inspire, but to be inspired, to nourish our body and our spirit, to take into ourselves the vitality that is our birthright and to feel the creative energy that is our life force.

"Every breath is a sacrament, an essential ritual," says environmentalist David Suzuki in his book *The Sacred Balance*. "Air is a matrix that joins all life. As we imbibe this sacred element, we are physically linked to all our present biological relatives, countless generations that have preceded us and those that will follow.

"If breath is so essential, then why don't more of us do it correctly? Sure, we all know how to breathe, or rather, our bodies do. But breathing occurs on several levels. The autonomic function creates the basic urge to breathe -- something governed by our nervous system. But often even this essential function is reduced to a series of shallow breaths if we're stressed, tense or nervous -- the makings of a typical day in today's society. Over time, this becomes a learned pattern so that even when the stressful situation has long gone our body is still functioning in shallow-breath mode, taking in a fraction of what it needs to be fully nourished.

Old Mechanisms, Modern World

The shallow breathing pattern we often fall into is associated with the "fight-or-flight" response, when our body senses imminent danger or attack. Stress directly provokes this response: we feel under attack, though there's no direct predator, only an on-going feeling of having to "fight" or "flee" from the source of our stress. Since we don't confront our "attacker" or have the opportunity to feel safe from the perceived threat, our nervous system remains on constant alert, limiting our breath to help divert blood away from certain organs and into the muscles to prepare us for action. We are modern creatures reacting with age-old mechanisms to perceived threats.

On top of our biological responses, we get other messages, subtle and not-so-subtle, to hold our breath. We're told to "suck in our guts," we multitask without having time to "catch our breath," we're not expected to express too loudly and we learn to numb out what's raging through us. We're bombarded daily with demands from work, household and family. We have to process incessant input in the form of noise, visual stimuli, smells and pollution from all kinds of sources. Why would anybody in its right mind want to take all that in?

Don't Hold Your Breath

Breathing incorrectly for three minutes is enough to lower the amount of oxygen to the brain and heart by 30 percent. If this goes on for years, there's an increased risk for conditions ranging from chronic headaches, digestive disturbances and neck, back and shoulder pain, to more serious illnesses such as high blood pressure, heart disease, asthma and chronic fatigue. In fact, some experts estimate that improper breathing can be associated with 50 percent to 70 percent of all diseases.

Emotional reactions also affect our breath: fear, anger, sadness and low self-esteem can make us hold or limit our breathing patterns. However, breathing fully can have a positive effect by helping move these emotions through the body, instead of allowing them to constrict our breath, tighten our muscles, and affect other systems and organs in the body.

Replenishing Ourselves

"Every inspiration is an opportunity to resource and replenish ourselves," says Montreal musician and composer Étienne Larouche, who has worked with voice and breath since a young age. "As we inhale, we can release, so energy can come into the body, making our breath always available, without forcing."

We may not think of inhalation as release, as that is normally associated with exhalation. But, breathing fully is precisely about release -- release not only of tension, but of control. Conscious breathing is not about controlling the breath, but about increasing our awareness of the process. It should leave us feeling revived by allowing us to completely take in the oxygen we need to nourish our blood, muscles and brain as we inhale, and completely expel accumulated toxins and stress as we exhale.

Full, relaxed breathing can, among other things, improve our resistance to stress, lower blood pressure, improve sleep, ease pain, and help release muscular and emotional tension. And, it can calm and focus us. Studies have shown that when the breath is relaxed, brain-wave patterns change, the mind quiets and the body relaxes.

Conscious breathing is not only calming; it has distinct effects on our blood chemistry and immune system. Studies have shown that the level of white blood cells, related to our immune response, actually rise when we are in a calm, relaxed state. A recent study in the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* found that participants who used techniques such as breathing, muscle relaxation and visualization had a 26 percent to 39 percent increase in their immune response.

Such techniques have also been of benefit to pre- and post-surgery patients -- reducing anxiety and pain, improving recovery times and reducing length of hospital stays. Women who learn deep-breathing techniques and apply these during childbirth have shorter labor times, less complications during delivery and faster healing post-delivery.

Be Here Now

A Pennsylvania study examining brain-wave patterns demonstrated we can hold one thought for the length of one inhalation and exhalation, with each full breath, a new thought enters. This is one of the basic principles of meditation: single-focused attention, slow, full breath. Even a few minutes spent following our breath in this way -- breathe in, hold one thought, breathe out, release the thought -- can have dramatic changes on how we cope with stress and its effect on the body and the mind.

Beyond the physiological perks, there's an emotional and spiritual benefit to conscious breathing. We can use it to remind ourselves we are here now, in this body and in this moment, not ruminating about the past or worrying about the future. There's peace to be found in being present for ourselves: as we focus on our breath and our bodies, we can focus on our emotions, we can regain perspective and then take action from a place of calmness.

Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, who has written numerous books and lectured worldwide on meditation, peace and mindfulness, says: "Our breathing is the link between our body and our mind. Sometimes our mind is thinking one thing and our body is doing another, and mind and body are not unified. By concentrating on our breathing, we bring body and mind back together and become whole again. Conscious breathing is an important bridge."

It's a bridge many of us would benefit from crossing, a place of great perspective and of life-giving breath.

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