

## BREATHWORK

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## OUTPOST EXCHANGE

About six years ago Gaylon Fox's legs started to stiffen and become painful, making it progressively more difficult to do his job. He looked to various medical doctors and even visited the Mayo Clinic to find out what was happening to his body. The diagnosis was an unusual condition that classified him essentially as a paraplegic, but without nerve damage. He eventually had to retire because he couldn't walk around job sites any more.

Fox worked with a number of physical therapists to try to ease his condition, without significant relief. Then about a year ago he started working with the therapists at Orlandu Therapies in Mequon, where he was taught an amazing technique that has greatly impacted his health for the better: breathing.

"At first I said, 'What's so important about breathing?' And then they showed me. I was startled at the effect. The difference is amazing!" Fox shared his story in a phone interview from his home while taking a break from his latest passion of baking bread. Before Orlandu, Fox feared he would deteriorate to the point of being in a wheelchair. So far he has managed to get around with just the aid of a walker. "I like to cook. I can walk around my kitchen and do what I need to do." On this day, the 60-year-old Fox was trying out a new recipe for Portuguese corn bread. "The program has changed my life and the breathing is a big part of that," he said.

Before he started his therapy and breathing exercises, he couldn't navigate steps. "Now I can handle them," he said proudly. He also reports that his "jumpy legs" are gone. "My neurologist at the Medical College of Wisconsin who I've been working with for five years is amazed" at the progress.

"I was breathing like everyone else—with my chest, not my diaphragm," he explained. "That's the wrong way!" he exclaimed. When he learned to breathe differently, his body responded by relaxing. "It's a subtle thing. If you're not doing it right, you probably don't even know. If someone shows you how to do it, thank them," he said.

Breathing is something we all do, between 15,000 and 25,000 times a day, in fact. How can it be that an act so simple and so natural needs to be learned?

"We've learned how *not* to breathe and to how to hold our bodies in chronically tense ways" stated Jim Morningstar, Ph.D. He is the founder and director of the Milwaukee-based Transformations Incorporated as well as the School of Spiritual Psychology, which is one of the major centers for training breathworkers in the U.S. He is considered a pioneer in the integration of psychotherapy with such techniques as breathwork and bioenergetics and his passion shows as he talks in his office about breathwork. Wispy-haired and gentle, he often closes his eyes, as if visualizing the words he speaks.

“Many of us hold our breath, even when there is no imminent danger. Living this way becomes a chronic state. We don’t realize how much we’re holding ourselves on red alert.” Morningstar points out that some of our in-bred self-protection mechanisms involve restricting the breath but that most people don’t need to be worried about a threat of danger at all times. Yet, they’re breathing like danger is imminent.

You may not necessarily feel particularly panicked or fearful or even stressed right now. But take a moment to become aware of your breath. Before you change it, and without judging it, take note of whether or not you actually *were* breathing. Where was the breath: in your chest, throat, belly? Was it fast or slow? Shallow or deep? What does your breath do when you’re angry, nervous, stressed? How about when you’re sitting at your desk, watching TV or driving? Experts say the quality of your breath is a good indicator of your emotional state and what’s going on in your life.

For Fox, the chronic physical pain, plus perhaps the emotional fear of his uncertain future, caused him to unwittingly restrict his breathing. Now when he focuses on it and breathes differently, his body relaxes and lets go of the tension and, therefore, the pain.

He still gets stiff, but he can release the pain and stiffness faster now; before it used to take him half a day to find relief. “If I’m sitting like in a car, I get stiff. But when I breathe with my diaphragm, it loosens up faster and I can move again,” he reported. “I can do more and more things better.” Fox confesses that it’s hard to break old patterns and that he’s not a perfect breather; like most people, he only becomes aware of his breath when he becomes uncomfortable. “Then I sit and breathe and I become more relaxed and loosen up.”

“With pain and chronic stress, people chest breathe,” said Holly Haebig, an occupational therapist at Orlanu Therapies and one of Fox’s therapists. “We hold tension in our bellies, and if the belly is tight, we breathe shallowly,” she explained in an interview over lunch. Such a habit may be the result of an old issue that is no longer even relevant. Ironically, however, by continuing to breathe in such a way, it perpetuates a feeling of stress or anxiety in the body...which may beget more stress and anxiety. Can you see a pattern forming?

Physiologically, breathing is important. At the very least, breath keeps us alive. But if done right, it does so much more. Dennis Lewis, author of [The Tao of Natural Breathing: For Health, Well-Being and Inner Growth](#) explains the mechanics of deep breathing on his Authentic Breathing Resources website: “When we breathe, the surface of our diaphragm generally moves downward as we inhale and upward as we exhale. When we breathe fully and deeply, the diaphragm moves farther down into the abdomen and our lungs are able to expand more completely into the chest cavity. This means more oxygen is taken in and more carbon dioxide is released with each breath...

“In deep, abdominal breathing, the downward and upward movements of the diaphragm, combined with the outward and inward movements of the belly, ribcage and lower back, help to massage and detoxify our inner organs, promote blood flow and peristalsis and pump the lymph more efficiently through our lymphatic system. The lymphatic system, which is an important part of our immune system, has no pump other than muscular movements, including the movements of breathing.”

Lewis also explains that a “slower, deeper breathing, combined with the rhythmical pumping of our diaphragm, abdomen and belly, helps turn on our parasympathetic nervous system—our ‘relaxation response.’ Such breathing helps to harmonize our nervous system and reduce the amount of stress in our lives.”

Is your breath doing all that for you? Take this quick test to determine where you breathe. Place your left hand on your chest and your right hand on your lower belly. Take a breath. Which hand moved first? If it was your left, you are a chest breather.

“Breathing oxygenates the system. It’s food. It’s what we nurture ourselves with. If you’re chronically under-nurturing yourself [with shallow breathing] you’re not only under-nourishing yourself, but also reinforcing the messages of, ‘There’s not enough for me,’ and ‘I have no reserves,’ etceteras,” Morningstar explained.

Scientific studies done on various advanced yogis document all kinds of super-human feats accomplished through breath control, including reducing the heart rate to imperceptible levels and being buried alive for days at a time with no marked change in heart rate. While most of us don’t aspire to such extremes, many of us would like to be able to feel our best, handle stress better and have greater mental clarity and energy. These attributes are the promise breathwork holds.

As a generic term, breathwork is about using conscious breathing for a particular healing intention. There are myriad schools of thought on breath and even more techniques. There are exercises to energize, exercises to relax, exercises to release and exercises to heal and transform. “A good breathworker knows a variety of techniques,” Morningstar says. Because breathwork is not a one-size-fits-all modality nor a panacea for all that ails us, or even an appropriate technique for everyone, it’s best viewed as one tool in the practitioners’s tool kit. Some types of breathwork may go more naturally with certain types of therapies. For instance, a massage therapist may use breathwork to help the client relax, while a psychotherapist may use it to release trauma.

Haebig distinguishes her breathwork style, calling it “breath awareness.” She works with clients on the muscular tension level, helping them to become aware of their breath without judging it, and how to use it to affect change.

Like Fox, 40-year-old Sara\* from Brookfield lives with chronic pain. Hit by a truck while walking nearly 10 years ago, she has learned from Haebig to tune into her breath, to use it as a mirror to understand what it’s reflecting and what to do to change her current state. “I didn’t realize that because of my pain I was holding my body so tight and not breathing.” Through awareness she is able to recognize when her body begins to shut down and to literally take a breather. Once not able to sit through a movie due to her pain, Sara recently returned from a ski trip. She attributes her success in part to the breath awareness techniques. “It all goes better if I pause and ask myself: ‘Am I breathing?’ It’s really so simple. Just being aware of how I stop breathing...I realize I am hardly taking a breath! I stop and visualize breathing down to my toes, or up and down my spine. It works.”

“The bottom line is, when you tune into your breath, you get a whole bunch of information on your emotional, physical and mental state,” Haebig said. “But if you never stop to tune in, you don’t know how you feel.”

Haebig offers some of life’s more annoying moments—being stuck in traffic or waiting in line—as ideal times to check in on breath, see what’s it’s doing to the body and practice a little deep breathing. “You have a choice: you can either be pissed, or notice your body, relax and let it go. Don’t take it on in your body. Awareness, awareness, awareness.”

Deep breathing isn’t only to relax. Haebig suggests taking quicker, fuller breaths to energize the body, rather than reaching for a cup of coffee to get perked up. “We can be upright and engaged in life and still be soft in the body,” she observed.

Energetic and lively, Haebig beams as she discusses what is clearly a favorite topic. “I’m passionate about connecting people with their breath because it’s available all the time and it’s free of charge,” she enthused.

“Breathwork” as a brand name is sometimes also known as Rebirthing (although many practitioners shy away from that New Age-y moniker). Morningstar and others emphasize that, despite the name, rebirthing is not about trying to get a client to re-experience their birth, or to “take” the client anywhere for that matter. Rather, it’s about becoming more fully alive through conscious breath.

For a few, the encounter literally is re-experiencing their birth, although Morningstar says it’s relatively rare; the more common experience is a subtle releasing that creates a more figurative “rebirth” of the self.

Rebirthing Breathwork, as Morningstar likes to call it, is usually undertaken with a coach who guides the client, but does not direct or force an agenda. The techniques are often active and can be intense, as Rebirthing Breathwork looks at the whole person--physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually--and it often highlights uncomfortable feelings.

The primary emotion behind people shutting down is fear of some form. Fear of being hurt through relationships or physical danger, pain, or fear of failure, for example. “Most people come in with no awareness of fear, just that something’s not working,” Morningstar said. But he points out that most people stopped breathing because they encountered something that was scary or hurtful and they shutdown to protect themselves. Many of us may unconsciously choose to breathe less because it has a numbing effect. If we don’t feel tension, or stress, or fear, or hurt, then we can keep going.

“Through the breath we are now going back to that thing that is scary or fearful. It can be on a physical level, like a car crash, or an emotional level, such as a lover who left. It’s a person’s choice whether to deal with the issue and release it,” Morningstar said. He also states that the body will self-regulate and not take a person further than he or she is ready to go. As the body lets go of the tension, it allows the breath to become fuller, more nourishing and revitalizing.

Although the release feels good, and a person might hold themselves differently afterwards, that may be temporary. Unlearning old patterns and remembering to incorporate new breathing patterns on a daily basis or thinking to use the tools when faced with conflict, stress or crisis is more difficult than one might realize. “The Rebirthing rhythm is something I can teach in 30 seconds,” Morningstar said. “Applying it and sustaining it can take years.”

As a clinical psychologist, Morningstar works with his clients to look at the thoughts that create the tension and to learn new thought patterns as well as breathing techniques. “You can tell someone to relax and breathe...but that doesn’t train them how to operate when the sympathetic nervous system [the fight or flight mechanism] is evoked. I do training for all situations in life, not just for when a person gets the chance to lie down and breathe.”

Even though breath is an involuntary function, to achieve maximum benefit it needs to be practiced.

Steven La Plant does marketing communications and freelance writing for clients around the globe. He became intrigued with Rebirthing Breathwork in 1996 as a way to release stored tension. He found success working with Morningstar. “The first time can be subtle or like fireworks. For me, it was fireworks,” he recounted. “It’s an incredible releasing that’s permanent.” As he continued the work, he found it led to a higher and higher energy level that he was able to maintain longer and longer and an overall heightened sense of well-being. He practices on an ongoing basis to keep “moving forward in my development. It’s helped me be more effective in all aspects of my life,” he stated. La Plant is so passionate about the work he’s studying to become a certified breathworker through the School of Spiritual Psychology.

La Plant’s technique, like many others, is simple: sitting or lying in a comfortable position he focuses on creating a connected breath that has no stops or breaks or holds at the top or bottom. “When the breath is connected, the energy flow highlights where there’s tension in the body. The less you breathe, the less energy there is flowing in the body. You become unaware of where your body is tense. By breathing shallowly we learn we can modulate how much we feel. Because of stress and uncomfortable feelings, we cut off our breath to keep the discomfort out of our consciousness. The connected breathing ups the awareness,” he explained.

It doesn’t always have to be some major trauma that’s affected our breath. A simple illustration of how we literally choke off our feelings is at a tear-jerker movie. To keep from blubbering out loud, many people swallow their tears, gulp down their sorrow, stuff the feelings inside. That’s a perfect example of stifling the feelings, and thus, the breath, to stop the emotion so we don’t embarrass ourselves in the theater. The goal with breathwork is to learn to experience emotions such as sadness without tightening the body.

Check back in with your breath. At various intervals throughout the day, take a moment to become conscious of this unconscious act. What does it tell you? Take a deep breath or two. Do you feel different? “Every human can improve on their vitality by learning to breathe fully,” Morningstar promised.

\* Sara requested that her last name not be used.