

Proper Respiration Is Trickier Than You Think

By Julie Deardorff | Tribune health and fitness reporter | June 2005

Chicago's Cathy Harvey gets up at 5 nearly every morning to breathe. She inhales and exhales all night, of course. And during the next 24 hours, she'll instinctively take in about 20,000 sips of air. Yet Harvey; a 31-year-old corporate executive assistant, believes the secret to good health is literally right under her nose. Conscious breathing clears her foggy head, fends off lethargy and is her favorite elixir to modern-day stresses.

Part healing technique, part performance enhancer, breathwork has been used throughout the world to help victims of trauma, torture, and disaster, as well as addicts and athletes. Now; fueled by the popularity of Eastern traditions such as yoga and tai chi, breath awareness is gaining acceptance in the West as a tool for maintaining good health. "Conscious breathing breaks up the habit patterns coded in the body and emotions," said Shakta Kaur, a Kundalini yoga teacher in Chicago who leads "Breathwalk" classes, which synchronize breathing and walking. "You end up transforming yourself, actually changing your body chemistry."

Increasingly; science offers support for her claims. Still, although breathing is so basic and essential that it happens whether we're knocked unconscious or fall asleep, most people do it wrong. Less than 10 percent of the population breathes efficiently; according to chronic-pain specialist Ingrid Bacci, author of "Effortless Pain Relief" (Free Press, \$24), which explores the link between pain and breath patterns.

It's not that we never knew how; Infants begin life with enviable diaphragmatic breathing technique. On the inhalation, a baby's tiny chest and abdomen naturally expand and round as air rushes in. On the exhalation, the diaphragm relaxes and the chest contracts. Then life interferes. Stress builds, and children learn to take shallow breaths into the top portion of the lungs or hold their breath altogether. Instead of drinking in a deep belly breath, they clench or tighten their stomachs during the inhalation. "It's those times of intense emotion or trauma that cause children to learn to hold their breath," said hypnotherapist Sharon Penchina, co-author of "I Take a DEEEP Breath" (Imagine, \$12.95), a children's book designed to encourage proper breathing. "That type of shallow breathing gets associated with anxiety or nervousness."

Stunted or improper breathing also is what some people believe causes everything from depression to chronic fatigue. The body is designed to breathe in oxygen, which replenishes the cells, and to breathe out waste products such as carbon dioxide. Belly breathing uses the diaphragm, which allows the body to take in the most oxygen and release the most carbon dioxide. But when the breath is shallow or held, the level of carbon dioxide in the blood rises. This throws the body into a mild state of alarm, and encourages an adrenalin reaction that increases anxiety, said psychologist Gay Hendricks, who has been teaching breathing techniques for three decades.

Harvey; who felt unusually stressed in college, reconnected with her breath when she attended an Art of Living Foundation workshop in Missouri. The international humanitarian group, founded by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, has taught breathing techniques, yoga and meditation to more than 4 million people throughout the world, including those traumatized by the September 11th terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and victims of the Asian tsunami last December.

An Energy Boost

"It's amazing what controlling your breathing does," said Harvey; who noticed her energy level skyrocketed after taking the classes. "It lifts spirits, enlightens you, let's you see things in the here and now."

The six-day workshops, which are offered regularly in the Chicago area in English, Spanish and Polish, focus on specific breathing rhythms from the 5,000-year-old yogic traditions. The classes are based on the belief that all emotions are linked with a different breathing pattern and that altering the pattern can change your state of mind. "You can't just say; 'I'm not going to be angry' when you're really angry or talk yourself out of depression," said Tanuja Limaye, an international Art of Living teacher. "But you can breathe it out of your system." A simple starting point is to pay attention to the breath for several minutes. When the mind starts to wander back to your wallet that was recently stolen or your elderly father's health, force it back to your breath. "Whether you're in seated meditation, yoga or taking a test, if you shift your attention to your breath, you immediately shift out of anxiety;" said Yoga-view yoga instructor Quinn Kearney. Other techniques, which can affect the body in different ways, involve counting inhalations and exhalations, silently repeating mantras, incorporating hand gestures or even curling the tongue into a U shape, while inhaling.

In the Kundalini and Hatha yoga tradition, pinching off the right nostril and breathing in through the left will have a calming effect and lower blood pressure, said Kaur, who runs the studio Kundalini Yoga in the Loop. Breathing in through the right nostril can be energizing. And alternate nostril breathing, can result in emotional balance, especially after a period of intense stress.

Lila Nagarajan, who teaches creative writing at Columbia College, said she sleeps better after having learned breathing techniques though several Art of Living workshops. She has fewer headaches and neckaches and doesn't get as angry about trivial matters as she used to. "It's almost as though we have to relearn how to breathe and then practice and practice, like with any sport, until we get really good at it," she said. Three decades ago, many medical doctors would have scoffed at the idea. In the 1970s, when integrative medicine guru Dr. Andrew Weil spoke of using the breath as a bridge to connect the mind and the body; the medical community reacted with skepticism and even hostility

Easing What Ails You

Now the FDA approves breath training as a recognized treatment for hypertension and more than 1,000 studies show it relieves anxiety; depression and chronic fatigue without drugs, said Gay Hendricks, also creator of "The Breathing Box," a kit that includes a DVD, a CD, a 48-page guidebook and flashcards. "Even for people with bad lung disease, bronchitis, end stage emphysema and asthma, the mere effect of focusing on a basic body function like breathing can be restorative," said Michael Silver, a specialist in pulmonary and critical care at Rush University Medical Center. Still, Hendricks said that even without the studies, breath work would have caught on. "When people notice a positive effect of something, they don't need scientific verification," he said. "It's also a reaction against pharmaceuticals. People want to take more responsibility for themselves, and they're seeking out more natural means."

It won't happen overnight. Hendricks estimates that with 10 minutes of daily practice, it takes about 1 to 3 months of conscious, consistent focus until breathwork starts to work its magic. But once it kicks in, advocates say; be ready for your life to change in profound ways. "You have to be careful because breathing is a powerful thing," said Harvey, who sometimes sneaks into the bathroom for a few deep breaths. But when you breathe correctly and mindfully, Harvey said, "things begin to roll off you instead of sinking in and grinding. You just let stuff go"