

Quality Breathing Can Change Your Life

By Jennifer Buergermeister © 2006

Do we understand the importance of a simple breath? To breathe means to process the air in-and-out of the lungs. Breath maintains our life and wellbeing. Breathing is the utilizing of oxygen that comes in with each wave of the breath. If you are living, you are breathing, yet are you breathing correctly? Less obvious is the importance of the *quality* of one's breathing. That is, are you merely breathing on autopilot or are you consciously activating the diaphragm and expanding the lungs?

Respiration, the process of breathing, is the inhalation of oxygen into the chest and diaphragm and the exhalation of carbon dioxide. The inhalation is essential for the delivery of oxygen throughout the entire body. If one does not get enough oxygen to meet the body's energy demand, it will result in the reduction or cessation of cellular functioning, which results in a decline of health. Most of us have experienced circumstances that have brought awareness squarely on the breath—its shallowness, rapidness, or depth.

Think about the last time you were angry, frightened, or nervous. Your breath, more than likely, became short, rapid and shallow. That is, the inhale only went as far as the upper chest. You may have gasped, sighed relief, or exhaled a sob of grief. While exercising, the body requires more oxygen to meet the demands of muscle contraction. Oftentimes, during one's workout, the breath will be shallow, short, and rhythmic. By contrast, a yoga class promotes long, deep, rhythmic breathing—lung expansive and diaphragmatic respiration. The result is a state of calm and relaxation.

Diaphragmatic breathing focuses on lung expansion into the lower areas of the lung, which are often neglected and the location of trapped stale air. Fully exhaling the stale air from the basement of the lungs allows for the reinvigoration of new, fresh, oxygen-rich air to flood the capillaries and then to be delivered throughout the body. In addition, the organs receive a much welcomed massage from the activity of diaphragmatic breathing. This type of diaphragmatic breathing pushes the abdominal organs down and forward, boosting circulation and enhancing functionality of the organs within the abdominal cavity. Also, diaphragmatic breathing is a therapeutic tool for common health concerns, such as hypertension, a leading cause of heart disease. Furthermore, it promotes proper lymphatic propulsion and drainage within the body. Oxygen is what produces the energy to pump the lymph through the lymphatic vessels. Full, conscious breathing alleviates anxiety, which has been found to be a common denominator in mortality rates found in America.

I think we inherently know how important it is to breathe, but are we paying attention to how vital it is to do it properly? We are familiar with the phrases, “When you’re nervous, stop and take a deep breath” or “Before you react, take 10 deep breaths.” However, many do not know that breath is often referred to as spirit. The Latin word *spiritus* means breath. When we realize that breath is spirit, doesn’t it take on a whole new meaning for us to breathe? As a baby, we enter life with a first inhale, letting spirit enter into the body, and when we die we take our last exhale, where spirit leaves the body to continue on its journey.

The autonomic nervous system consists of two systems: sympathetic and parasympathetic. The two subsystems work together to regulate the body, including heart rate. The sympathetic system accelerates heart rate and the parasympathetic nervous system slows the heart rate down. Finding the quality of breath and learning to control the breath brings the parasympathetic nervous system into balance with the sympathetic nervous system. Balance is the key.

When the sympathetic nervous system is activated, heart rate increases and blood flow is restricted to the organs. Instead, blood is sent to the limbs to response to the fight or flight mechanism. Upper chest breathing caused by stress then triggers the sympathetic nervous system into overdrive.

The energy needed throughout physical activity to discharge accumulated energy during stress, if not met, will lead to anxiety. When this happens, anxiety is perpetuated by continuous arousal which usually results in states of irritability or even hyperventilation, adrenal exhaustion, and not to mention a lack of blood flow to the vital organs.

Studying the interrelationship between emotions, breath, and the autonomic nervous system could bring valuable insights to the prevention and treatment to a number of stress-related diseases.

Learning and practicing mindful meditation, pranayama, and proper diaphragmatic breathing , which expands the chest while contracting the abdominal muscles, are found to achieve the best results intended by the autonomic nervous system in the body.

To conclude, breathing is easy, but it may not be enough. Quality, conscientious breathing will provide many health benefits to our mind-bodies and prevent long-term cell and tissue damage. Learning to breathe properly may ultimately save *your* life.