

Breath & Movement

Developed by The Center For Mind Body Medicine

I. Breath – “we are not taught how to breathe correctly”

Relaxation is the most basic of mind-body techniques. Learning to notice your breathing pattern and to be able to change it from tension producing to one of relaxation is a simple and crucial mind-body technique. Meditation and deep-breathing form the foundation for all the other techniques we are learning.

With the stress of daily life, many of us tend to breathe shallowly, which raises blood pressure and heart rate and increases anxiety. Deep breathing (either slowly in meditation or fast when dancing) improves your body's ability to bring in oxygen and release carbon dioxide. Deep breathing calms the mind and engages the body's natural relaxation response. Deep breathing also lowers blood pressure, slows heart rate and improves cardiac function. It is also useful for other stress-related conditions such as diabetes, intestinal problems, asthma, chronic pain, depression and anxiety. Breath is central to all of life. We can live for only a few minutes without breathing. Breath brings oxygen to our body which, along with food, gives us the fuel we need to produce energy. Breath affects how well we think, perform and feel.

Respiration is the only system of the body that is both automatic and voluntary. Breathing goes on without us having to think about it. But breathing also can be controlled. In the “soft belly” exercise that we've been doing, you are slowing the breath down so that you breathe a little bit more deeply. So breathing has this wonderful flexibility about it. It's always there, always available for use, and we can shape the kind of breathing that we do. As we shape our breath, as we regulate its depth or shallowness or its speed, we can also affect all the other functions in the body.

Breathing is responsive to emotional states and can also shape emotional states. When you're in stress, when you're experiencing a “fight or flight” response, breathing is shallow and rapid, and the sympathetic nervous system is stimulated. The body wants more oxygen to go to the large muscles, so it can either run away or fight. If you're ready for a fight or you're trying to run, you need this kind of rush of energy and adrenalin. On the other hand, slow deep breathing calms the sympathetic nervous system stimulation. The vagus nerve, which passes through the diaphragm, is part of the parasympathetic nervous system, that part of the autonomic nervous system that brings relaxation. When we breathe slowly and deeply, we stimulate the vagus nerve, and bring about relaxation.

II. Experiential Exercise: Awareness of the Breath

Just sit comfortably. Your eyes can be open, slightly opened and unfocused, “soft eyes,” or they can be closed. Notice the breath, going in through the nostrils and out through the nostrils, and notice the thoughts and feelings, the emotional feelings and the sensations, the bodily sensations that arise. You may be thinking about lunch, feeling your stomach rumble. Or you may be feeling pleased just to be sitting here. Noticing the thoughts, feelings and sensations....then slowly bring your attention back to the breath going in and out through the nose. Continue this process of breathing and noticing for few minutes....

Note: take few minutes to jot down anything significant and be prepared to share with your group on Wednesday. Think about the following:

- *Could you feel your attention focused at your nostrils?*
- *Were you able to “bring your mind back” to the nostrils?*
- *Could you feel the rest of your body relaxing as well?*
- *How did you feel afterwards? Did you notice any differences?*

III. Movement and Exercise

Breathing is crucial to every aspect of our life. Breathing begins at birth and ends with the end of life. In our early history, human beings were hunter-gatherers moving across the face of the earth. Exercise was as natural to them, as fundamental to their lives, as breathing. Now, living in a highly industrialized society where movement is constrained and constricted we have to recover this experience of movement to make it consciously a regular part of our life.

Running, jogging, dancing, weight-lifting, playing ball and swimming are generally described as aerobic exercises, which means they're oxygen consuming. Technically, a definition of an aerobic workout is raising the heartbeat to 70 to 80 percent of its maximum for 20 minutes at a time. Many studies have been done on aerobic exercise showing its effectiveness in helping to prevent and treat many illnesses.

There are other forms of exercise that may not reach the level of heart rate that's characteristic of an aerobic exercise but are still helpful. These include the exercises that come out of the Eastern healing traditions—Chinese Tai Chi, a moving meditation, and Qi Gong, a short form of meditation as well as the movements of Indian Hatha Yoga. These exercises promote flexibility and may increase aerobic capacity.

It is important to find the exercise that suits you. If you hate doing a particular exercise, it's not likely that you will do it. So find something you enjoy doing which fits with your lifestyle.

Breathing, exercise and movement can also be a part of our spiritual life. They've been used in virtually every spiritual and religious tradition. With exercise it's important that you do a form you like, that you do it regularly, and that you do it at least 4 or 5 times a week for 30 or 40 minutes each day.

Research says that exercise has a direct effect on physiology and is a powerful agent both in preventing and treating a number of major illnesses. It has been shown to improve mood, perhaps by increasing the levels of neurotransmitters in the brain... chemicals called peptides like serotonin and norepinephrine. These are the same chemicals that antidepressants are designed to increase. Physical exercise seems to increase the levels of these substances without any of the negative side effects of the antidepressants and, of course, without the expense. Exercise may also improve mood by increasing levels of endorphin—the morphine-like substances that our own bodies produce.

In Addition, exercise has been shown to reduce anxiety, improve mental functioning, prevent and treat coronary heart disease, diabetes, and osteoporosis, as well as improve the sense of well-being, appetite, and emotional and mental functioning in people who are being treated with cancer. However, if you have a physical limitation or illness you need to exercise in a way that takes care of your physical body. If you have concerns be sure to check with your doctor.

IV. Experiential Exercise: Chaotic Breathing & Dancing (demonstration only)

Stand with feet hip-width apart, knees slightly bent. Bend your arms at the elbows, keeping your hands in fists at armpit level. Then pump our arms up and down while breathing rapidly in and out through the nose, concentrating particularly on the exhalation.

Using your arms as bellows, move the breath deeply into the lungs and feel the chest expand with each inhalation. Breathe as fast as you can, making sure your breathing stays deep.

Do this without tensing your body and making sure your neck and shoulders stay relaxed.

Continue until you literally “become the breathing” allowing the breath to be chaotic - meaning not in a steady predictable way. Keep your eyes closed during the exercise, but know that if you feel you may lose their balance, you can open your eyes.

Start the music and begin chaotic breathing, after seven to eight minutes, stop the music and experience the energy for a few moments. Be aware. Breathe deeply. Notice your breath. Notice how your body feels...breathing deeply, relaxing.

Next, put on some easy music and when the music starts, let it move you. Let your body move however it wants.

V. Homework

Choose an exercise based on your individual capacity and needs. You can choose an aerobic exercise like swimming, running or jogging or a non-aerobic exercise like yoga, tai chi, or Qi gong. Just be sure to find one you enjoy, and try to do it four or five days a week and journal about your experience

Try to spend some time everyday in meditation. It helps to bring conscious awareness to the breath, which tends to cause the breathing to slow and deepen without effort. If you are doing quiet meditation, like “soft belly”, an awareness meditation or guided imagery, and want to add this active expressive meditation, it is best to do the active expressive one first and the quiet one second—or do them at different times.

With active expressive meditations as well as other forms of physical exercise, don’t do them when you’re getting ready to go to sleep. Do them when you want to raise your energy, at the beginning of the day, or when you want to change the energy, when you want to let go of, when you want to shake loose the cares of the day and come home to ease and peacefulness and being with your family.

