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The use of Deep Breathing in stress management

Deep breathing infuses the blood with extra oxygen and also stimulates the body to release tranquilizing endorphins. It is one of the simplest yet most effective stress management techniques. You can do it anywhere, anytime, and it becomes even more effective with practice.

Breathing is important for two reasons. It is the only means to supply our bodies and its various organs with the supply of oxygen which is vital for our survival. The second function of breathing is that it is one means to get rid of waste products and toxins from the body.

Why Is Oxygen So Vital?

Oxygen is the most vital nutrient for our bodies. It is essential for the integrity of the brain, nerves, glands and internal organs. We can do without food for weeks and without water for days, but without oxygen, we will die within a few minutes. If the brain does not get proper supply of this essential nutrient, it will result in the degradation of all vital organs in the body.

The brain requires more oxygen than any other organ. If it doesn't get enough, the result is mental sluggishness, negative thoughts and depression and, eventually, vision and hearing decline. Old people and those whose arteries are clogged often become senile and vague because oxygen to the brain is reduced. They get irritated very quickly. Poor oxygen supply affects all parts of the body. The oxygen supply is reduced to all parts of the body as we get older due to poor lifestyle. Many people need reading glasses and suffer hearing decline in old age.

When an acute circulation blockage deprives the heart of oxygen, a heart attack is the result. If this occurs to the brain, the result is a stroke.

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Thus, oxygen is very critical to our well-being, and any effort to increase the supply of oxygen to our body and especially to the brain will pay rich dividends. Yogis realized the vital importance of an adequate oxygen supply thousands of years ago. They developed and perfected various breathing techniques. These breathing exercises are particularly important for people who have sedentary jobs and spend most of the day in offices. Their brains are oxygen starved and their bodies are just 'getting by'. They feel tired, nervous and irritable and are not very productive. On top of that, they sleep badly at night, so they get a bad start to the next day continuing the cycle. This situation also lowers their immune system, making them susceptible to catching colds, flu and other 'bugs'.

Oxygen Purifies the Blood Stream

One of the major secrets of vitality and rejuvenation is a purified blood stream. The quickest and most effective way to purify the blood stream is by taking in extra supplies of oxygen from the air we breathe. By purifying the blood stream, every part of the body benefits, as well as the mind. Your complexion will become clearer and brighter and wrinkles will begin to fade away. In short, rejuvenation will start to occur.

Importance of Healthy Breathing

We know how to breathe. It is something that occurs to us automatically, spontaneously, naturally. We are breathing even when we are not aware of it. So it seems foolish to think that one can be told how to breathe. Yet, one's breathing becomes modified and restricted in various ways, not just momentarily, but habitually. We develop unhealthy habits without being aware of it. We tend to assume positions (slouched positions) that diminishes lung capacities and take shortened breaths. We also live in social conditions that is not good for the health of our respiratory system.

Improper breathing produces diminished mental ability. The corollary is true also. *It is known that mental tensions produce restricted breathing.*

A normally sedentary person, when confronted with a perplexing problem, tends to lean forward, draw his arms together, and bend his head down. All these body postures results in reduced lung capacity. The more intense the concentration, the more tense the muscles become. The muscles in the arms, neck and chest contract. The muscles that move the thorax and control inhalation and muscular tenseness clamp down and restrict

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the exhalation. The breaths become shorter and shorter. After an extended period of intense focusing, the whole system seems to be frozen in a certain posture.

We become fatigued from the decreased circulation of the blood and from the decreased availability of oxygen for the blood because we have almost stopped breathing. As our duties, responsibilities and their attendant problems become more demanding, we develop habits of forgetting to breathe.

What's Wrong With The Way We Breathe?

Our breathing is too shallow and too quick. We are not taking in sufficient oxygen and we are not eliminating sufficient carbon dioxide. As a result, our bodies are oxygen starved, and a toxic build-up occurs. Every cell in the body requires oxygen and our level of vitality is just a product of the health of all the cells.

Why Is Our Breath Fast and Shallow?

There are several reasons for this. The major reasons are:

- We are in a hurry most of the time. Our movements and breathing follow this pattern.
- The increasing stress of modern living makes us breathe more quickly and less deeply.
- We get too emotional too easily. We get excited easily, angry easily, and most of the rest of the time we suffer from anxiety due to worry. These negative emotional states affect the rate of breathing, causing it to be fast and shallow.
- Modern technology and automation reduces our need for physical activity. There is less need to breathe deeply, so we develop the shallow breathing habit.
- We are working indoors more and more. This increases our exposure to pollution. As a result, the body instinctively inhales less air to protect itself from pollution. The body just takes in enough air to tick over.

The Effects of Shallow Breathing

- Reduced vitality, since oxygen is essential for the production of energy in the body.
- Increased disease. Our resistance to disease is reduced, since oxygen is essential for healthy cells. This means we catch more colds and develop other ailments more easily. Lack of sufficient oxygen to the cells is a major contributing factor in cancer, heart disease and strokes.

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With our 'normal' sedentary way of living, we only use about one tenth of our total lung capacity. This is sufficient to survive and just tick over, but not sufficient for a high vitality level, long life and high resistance to disease.

The ancient yogis knew the importance of correct breathing and developed techniques not only to increase health and life span, but also to attain superconscious states.

Summary: Benefits of Deep Breathing

Let's summarise the benefits of deep breathing. Deep breathing produces the following benefits:

1. Improvement in the quality of the blood due to its increased oxygenation in the lungs. This aids in the elimination of toxins from the system.
2. Increase in the digestion and assimilation of food. The digestive organs such as the stomach receive more oxygen, and hence operates more efficiently. The digestion is further enhanced by the fact that the food is oxygenated more.
3. Improvement in the health of the nervous system, including the brain, spinal cord, nerve centers and nerves. This is due again to the increased oxygenation and hence nourishment of the nervous system. This improves the health of the whole body, since the nervous system communicates to all parts of the body.
4. Rejuvenation of the glands, especially the pituitary and pineal glands. The brain has a special affinity for oxygen, requiring three times more oxygen than does the rest of the body. This has far-reaching effects on our well being.
5. Rejuvenation of the skin. The skin becomes smoother and a reduction of facial wrinkles occurs.
6. The movements of the diaphragm during the deep breathing exercise massage the abdominal organs - the stomach, small intestine, liver and pancreas. The upper movement of the diaphragm also massages the heart. This stimulates the blood circulation in these organs.
7. The lungs become healthy and powerful, a good insurance against respiratory problems.
8. Deep, slow, yoga breathing reduces the work load for the heart. The result is a more efficient, stronger heart that operates better and lasts longer. It also mean reduced blood pressure and less heart disease.
9. Deep, slow breathing assists in weight control. If you are overweight, the extra oxygen burns up the excess fat more efficiently. If you are underweight, the extra

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oxygen feeds the starving tissues and glands. In other words, yoga tends to produce the ideal weight for you.

10. Relaxation of the mind and body. Slow, deep, rhythmic breathing causes a reflex stimulation of the parasympathetic nervous system, which results in a reduction in the heart rate and relaxation of the muscles. These two factors cause a reflex relaxation of the mind, since the mind and body are very interdependent. In addition, oxygenation of the brain tends to normalize brain function, reducing excessive anxiety levels.

The breathing exercises cause an increase in the elasticity of the lungs and rib cage. This creates an increased breathing capacity all day, not just during the actual exercise period. This means all the above benefits also occur all day.

Your First Deep Breath

Deep breathing can be accomplished sitting down on a chair with your spine straight or standing up with your spine held straight.

First check your posture. The spine should be straight, the head erect, hands on knees, mouth closed. Now concentrate on the pharyngeal space at the back wall of your mouth and, slightly contracting its muscles, begin to draw in the air through that space as if you were using a suction pump. Do it slowly and steadily, letting the pumping sound be clearly heard. Don't use the nostrils; remember that they remain inactive during the entire respiration process. When inhaling let your ribs expand sideways like an accordion—beginning with the lower ones, of course. Remember the chest and shoulders should remain motionless. The entire inhalation should be done gently and effortlessly. When it has been completed pause for a second or two, holding the breath. Then slowly begin breathing out. The exhalation is usually not as passive as the inhalation. You use a slight, a very slight, pressure to push the air out—although it feels as though you pressed it against the throat like a hydraulic press. The upper ribs are now contracted first, the nostrils remain inactive and the chest and shoulders motionless. At the end of the exhalation, pull in the stomach a little so as to push out all the air.

Congratulations! You have just taken your first deep breath.

Do not try to take too full a breath at once. Start by breathing to the count of four. Then hold the breath, counting to two, and start slowly exhaling, again to the count of four. Breathing in and out to an equal number of beats is called rhythmic breathing. You allow

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four beats to fill your lungs, two to retain the breath, and four to breathe out. The respiration should be timed in such a way that at the end of the four beats you have completed the exhalation. Don't just stop at the end of the count when there is still air to be expelled. You should adjust your breathing to the timing. Repeat, but do not take more than 5 or 6 deep breaths at one time during the first week. You shouldn't do more even if you are enjoying it.

Be careful not to overdo the breathing, especially inhalation, as this may lead to unpleasant results such as dizziness, nausea, headaches, even fainting spells due to hyperventilation caused by a sudden, excessive intake of oxygen. By practicing complete breathing, you will be able to enlarge the lung capacity so that, after practice, you can inhale more air than you did before. But this increased capacity should come gradually rather than by force. By repeating such a complete breathing too often or too rapidly in succession, you may absorb too much oxygen and become dizzy. Slower, deeper breathing not only stimulates the lungs into healthier action, and brings more of the body muscles into play, but it has the effect of calming the nerves. Although other factors must be taken into consideration, the slower your respiration rate the calmer you feel. You can deliberately reduce this rate for beneficial effect. However, you can maintain this only if you breathe more deeply.

A complete breath involves the following steps:

- Inhale slowly until your lungs are filled to capacity. Some recommend that you begin with abdominal breathing, gradually move into middle breathing, and finish filling the lungs with high breathing.
- A pause, short or long, should occur at the end of inhalation. This, too, should not be forced at first, though deliberate experiments with extending this pause play an important part in successful yogic practice.
- Exhale, also slowly, smoothly and completely. Again, some recommend beginning exhalation with high breathing, proceeding gradually to middle breathing, and ending with abdominal breathing and use of abdominal muscles to expel all air from the lungs.
- Another pause, short or long, should occur at the end of exhalation. This too should not be forced at first, though this pause may prove to be even more significant than the first as a stage in which to seek and find a kind of spiritual quiescence that can be most powerful in its relaxing effects.