



## **9 SOMATIC BREATH TECHNIQUES**

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### **MILD Breath Interventions**

- 1. MINDFULNESS MEDITATION**
- 2. BREATH AWARENESS EXERCISE**
- 3. WALKING MEDITATION**

### **MODERATE Breath Interventions**

- 4. RESET BREATH**
- 5. THE RELAX AND RECENTER (4X4) BREATH**
- 6. COHERENT BREATHING**

### **INTENSIVE Breath Interventions**

- 7. BREATHWALK FOCUSING EXERCISE**
- 8. CONNECTED BREATHING – NOSTRIL**
- 9. CONNECTED BREATHING - MOUTH**

## **9 SOMATIC BREATH TECHNIQUES - DESCRIPTION**

The following pages include nine somatic breath techniques or exercises I have found to be extremely helpful in therapeutically supporting relaxation, mindfulness and establishing a healthy relationship between mind and body. By becoming more aware of what is happening in your body and your breath, you ultimately become more masterful with what is happening in your life. I have found the following exercises to be the most effective - the simple but powerful benefits of these practices cannot be overstated - the right one offered to the right client at the right time may not only change the nature of the therapy, but may also initiate a long-lasting change in your clients self-esteem, lifestyle, outlook and ability to emotionally and mentally regulate their lives.

Emerging from within the field of conscious breathing or breathwork, Somatic Breath Therapy was developed to meet the rising need to effectively work with people suffering from trauma, complex trauma and PTSD; by utilizing the breath therapeutically within a safe relational container, without the dogma or mind-altering goals often associated with 20<sup>th</sup> century breathwork.

The immediate and long-term results of doing Somatic Breath Therapy techniques are the improvement of conscious focal attention, an increase of energy, feeling less stressed or anxious, social resiliency, freedom of expression, and a higher connection to the Self as well as an overall sense of personal empowerment. All of these experiences can be accessed simply through the conscious use of the breath, and can give you the confidence and real possibility to think and live in ways you or your client may have never thought possible.

I've organized these somatic breathing exercises into three levels of delivery or approach: Mild, Moderate and Intensive, with the main goals being awareness, relaxation and integration. Obviously, before attempting to utilize any one of these exercises, it is necessary to make a clinical assessment based upon a client's attention ability, level of anxiety, ego strength, degree of regulation, etc. I have found, however, that if a client is able to manage most of the normal activities of life, the first three are readily accessible and teachable. Each one builds on the previous one, and is generally more engaging.

### **MILD Breath Interventions - AWARENESS**

These first three breath exercises involve simply observing the breath and how it moves in a natural rhythm according to what the body needs in the moment. The first is basic Mindfulness and involves simply sitting, the second involves observing the breath in the body in various positions, and the third is observing the breath while walking mindfully and slowly.

# **1. MINDFULNESS MEDITATION**

Adapted with permission from *Positive Psychology: Harnessing the Power of Happiness, Personal Strength, and Mindfulness*, a special health report published by Harvard Health Publications.

## **Mindfulness improves well-being:**

- Tap directly into nature's desire to keep you healthy (Human Homeostasis)
- Increase your capacity for mindfulness supports many attitudes that contribute to a satisfied life.
- Be mindful makes it easier to savor the pleasures in life as they occur, helps you become fully engaged in activities, and creates a greater capacity to deal with adverse events.
- Focus on the here and now, many people who practice mindfulness find that they are less likely to get caught up in worries about the future or regrets over the past, are less preoccupied with concerns about success and self-esteem, and are better able to form deep connections with others.

## **Mindfulness improves mental health**

In recent years, in large part through the efforts of Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn and his Mindfulness-Based-Stress-Reduction (MBSR) program (1), psychotherapists have turned to mindfulness meditation as an important element in the treatment of a number of problems, including:

- ADD/ADHD
- Substance abuse
- Eating and sleeping disorders
- Relationship conflicts
- Anxiety and depression disorders
- Obsessive-compulsive disorder

Most experts believe that mindfulness works, in part, by helping people to accept their experiences—including painful emotions—rather than react to them with aversion and avoidance. It's become increasingly common for mindfulness meditation to be combined with psychotherapy, especially cognitive behavioral therapy. This development makes good sense, since both meditation and cognitive behavioral therapy share the common goal of helping people gain perspective on irrational, maladaptive, and self-defeating thoughts.

## **Mindfulness Practice – How to Do It**

- A. There is more than one way to practice mindfulness, but the goal of most mindfulness techniques is to achieve a state of alert, focused relaxation by paying attention to thoughts and sensations without judgment, sometimes by simply paying attention to your breath. This allows the mind to refocus on the present moment. All mindfulness techniques are a form of meditative practice.
- B. Basic mindfulness practice: Sit quietly and focus on the gentle movement of your natural breathing, or on a word or "mantra" that you repeat silently. Allow thoughts to come and go without judgment and easily return your focus to the breath or mantra.
- C. Body sensations: notice subtle body sensations such as an image or tingling without judgment and let them pass. You might even notice each part of your body in succession from head to toe.
- D. Thoughts: notice that perhaps after a few moments, your mind begins to race with thoughts. Witness them, and accept them if you can. If they

consume a little more of your attention, you might also name them, "thinking, thinking, thinking." Notice how your attention will eventually return to the breath or the mantra.

- E. Sensory input: notice sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches. Name them as such, "sight", "sound", "smell", "taste", and "touch" without judgment and let them go...
- F. Emotions: allow emotions to be present without judgment. Witness them as best you can and if they become intense, practice a steady and relaxed naming of emotions: "joy," "anger", "frustration", etc. Accept the presence and textures of emotions and simply let them go, as you return your attention to your breath.
- G. Urges: see if you can cope with your cravings (addictive substances and behaviors) and allow them to pass. Notice how your body feels the craving as it enters. What does it really want? Witness the wish or the wanting of the craving and replace it with the certainty that it will subside in time. Then, gently return your attention back to your breathing.

## **2. BREATH AWARENESS EXERCISE**

Adapted from Donna Farhi's *Breathing Book* (2)

### **Short Practice**

- A. THE BREATHING BODY AT A GLANCE (Sitting or Lying Down) – use this as a check at regular points in your day. Take time to check in with your breathing, take a "body glance," now and at various times in your day, ask yourself the following questions:
  - *Where do you feel your breathing?*  
Can you feel where the movement of your breath originates? Notice where the areas you feel the movement; is it in your abdomen, chest or nostrils? Other areas? Are there areas where there is less or more movement than when I last checked in? How has the movement changed?
  - *What does your breathing feel like?*  
What is the quality of my breath? Shallow, rough, labored, jerky, rhythmic, smooth, and mechanical? Take note of what words or images arise to describe it. Has it changed since I last was aware of it? How?
  - *How can I bring consciousness to my breathing?* What would it feel like to take a few deep, relaxed breaths right now? Try it! Now, how do I feel?

### **Longer practice**

#### **B. IDENTIFYING THE DIAPHRAGM – USING THE CHILD'S POSE**

Shift your body position. The starting position for this exercise is sitting on your knees with your legs bent under you. Bend forward at the waist relaxing with the top of your head hanging over the floor or on a pillow; let your arms lay relaxed at your sides with your hands next to your hips – in yoga this is called the "Child's Pose". If it is hard to fully bend onto your knees, place a pillow between your thighs and calves, then place a pillow or *fold your arms* equally across your abdomen - then bend over. (You can also do this while sitting on a chair and bending over.)

Close your eyes. Relax your jaw, maybe even open your mouth. Scan your body. Focus your attention on the compression of your abdomen, and feel the area beneath the tip of your sternum to just above your pubic bone. Notice how even with the compression of this position moves slightly as you breathe in and out. Feel the swelling and settling sensation.

Now, see if you can take a deep breath. Do you feel any tightness 'inside' of the compression of your abdomen? If you are not sure you're holding tension, tense your abdominal muscles, pulling inward and upward for 5-7 seconds and then release. Breathe as fully as possible. Do it a few times until you can feel the difference. Now notice the natural movement expanding in all directions with the inhalation (including pressure against the back of the body). Notice how the exhalations recoil and let go with your weight and gravity.

Now bring your attention to the pelvic floor – the space from the pubic bone right through to the front to your tailbone in your back. Especially notice the perineum – the space from your genitals to the anal area. Check to see if you are holding tension here. If you are not sure, contract the buttocks, anus and pelvic floor for about 7 seconds and then let go. Breathe! Repeat this several times until you can tell the difference.

Notice how the pelvic floor moves as you breathe in and out. Can you feel the opening, broadening movements on the inhalations? Can you feel condensing, releasing movements on the exhalation? Notice that these areas open and retract with the breath, without any effort on your part. If you have difficulty feeling any or all of these movements, again let your jaw fall open so that the breath comes in and out of the mouth more freely. Feel the relationship between the pelvic floor and the subtle movements of your abdomen. Be patient – it takes a while for most people to actually feel these subtle movements.

### C. A DEEPER INQUIRY – LYING DOWN ON YOUR BACK

Now shift to lying down on a flat surface in a relaxed position with knees slightly bent to ease the lower back. Take 5 – 10 minutes to make this deeper inquiry, and if possible, you may want to have a friend witness, guide you and provide feedback throughout this process. Give yourself a minute or two to relax, take a couple of deep, cleansing breaths, then investigate each question and feel deeply into your body. After starting the inquiry, do not attempt to change the breath, just inquire and observe. Change happens naturally through the process.

- **Location of the Breath:** Where is the movement of the breath most noticeable? In the upper or lower part of the body?
- **Origin of the Breath:** Where does the movement of the breath begin? Is it in the belly or chest? Or both?
- **Frequency of Breath:** Is your breath fast, slow, or somewhere in between?
- **Phrasing of the Breath:** Is there a noticeable difference between the length of your inhalation and exhalation? Is one longer, and if so, which one? Are they equal?
- **Texture and Quality of the breath:** Is the texture of your breath smooth and even or is it jerky and uneven? If you could describe the quality of your breath what words would you use? Is it efforted, irregular, weak or billowy? What descriptive images arise?
- **Depth of the Breath:** Does the breath feel deep or shallow? Just observe. Now, take a deep breath from belly to chest, and notice again.
- **Surrender to the movement of breath.** How does your BODY want to breathe right now? Experiment.
- **Subtle Body Movements:** Now, see if you can notice the gentle movements in the sacrum, coccyx and lumbar spine area. See if you can feel how the tailbone gently arches away from the pubic bone on the inhalations. As the tailbone rocks back and forth, the sacrum also rocks subtly on the floor (You may need to be lying on a hard surface to feel this). As you inhale, the whole pelvis tends to rock slightly into an arch so that the lower back moves away from the floor. As you exhale, the whole pelvis tends to rock so that the

lower back flattens and lengthens on the ground. Remember, these are *very* gentle, subtle movements.

#### D. PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER - STILL BREATHING ON YOUR BACK

Now, still lying down on your back, feel the release any mental tension from focusing, and with a few conscious, deep breaths, let your entire body relax. Return your attention to an easy movement of belly while doing some slow full breaths. See if you can imagine a balloon in your lower belly that swells with every inhale, and easily relaxes with every exhale. Ideally, an open healthy breath smoothly rises up from the pubic bone/lower belly all the way to the upper chest, and then releases with the help of gravity as the respiratory muscles recoil, expelling air from the lungs.

Now, check your abdominal muscles. With your fingers gently pushed in at a perpendicular angle into your upper belly (solar plexus), slightly lift your head and see if the muscles under your fingers are contracting. Relax your head again. If your abdominal muscles are tensing, gently rotate the fingers in small circles and invite these muscles to relax! The primary muscle you should be using at this point to initiate the inhalation is the diaphragm - a two-lobed parachute-shaped muscle that is attached to your lower ribs. Again, imagine there is a balloon swelling in your lower belly as you begin your inhalation. Your abdominal muscles should only be contracting about 10% of the total belly movement.

Without too much effort, see if the expansion of the inhale easily rises from the belly to the chest and even to the upper chest, then smoothly transitions to exhalation and releases. When you gently close the gaps at the two transition points of the breath, this is what we call conscious, connected breathing.

*These movements you have just explored with the movement of the diaphragm in the abdomen, pelvic floor, and in the sacrum, coccyx, and lower back are the basic building blocks of a full, connected breathing session. The power of the initial breath process lies in awareness of the body's breath movement and in allowing these lower areas of the torso to open and release fully.*

### **3. WALKING MEDITATION**

There are many pathways up the mountain, and many pathways of doing walking meditation. One of my favorites is taught by Zen Master and teacher, Thich Naht Hanh. (See Note 3)

Here's the experience. After taking several moments of standing in one place and feeling your feet connected to the earth, you begin a slow and gentle walk, usually in harmony with your breathing. You lift one foot as you inhale and gently set that foot down as you exhale. The goal is not to get anywhere, but to BE where you are, to feel the movement in your body, your feet touching the earth, and the preciousness of every step you take. Walking meditation may be extremely slow, and yet it may be almost to the point of very brisk walking. Personally, I find in our hurried world that taking our time to move slowly, in a counter-clockwise or clockwise fashion around the perimeter of a moderate sized room, works the best.

In the Zen tradition, the left hand is placed in a gentle fist, and the right hand gently grasps that fist with the thumb on top; both hands are resting gently against the solar plexus. The neck and spine are vertical, arms are relaxed, the elbows tucked in, and the gaze is looking gently down approximately 1-2 meters in front of the feet. In a group, you are walking single file behind each other, perhaps sensing the

movement of those around you, but your focus is entirely upon the gentle movement of the breath and body on the earth.

Ideally, walking meditation is something that you do for about 20 minutes; but even doing it for five minutes can calm the mind and quiet the body. After gently moving each step with the breath and each breath with a step, slowly come into a standing still have posture. Notice how your body feels and takes several deep, integrative breaths...

### **MODERATE Breath Interventions - RELAXATION**

These next three exercises involve conscious movement of the breath while sitting, with most of the focus being on relaxing and re-centering the mind and body. The first one is a simple exercise you can do just one or two minutes. The second one is slightly more engaged, and is a perfect preparatory exercise for the last one, Coherent Breathing, a mind-body-breath focusing exercise that is one of the most simple yet powerful breathing exercises you can use to bring balance and harmony to the mind and body. It's the one I practice every day and get tremendous benefit from.

## **4. RESET BREATH**

One of my favorite breath exercises that for most people that clearly demonstrates the power of breath is what I call the "Reset Breath". Oftentimes, a client comes into my office in a high state of anxiety, perhaps due to our initial meeting or anxious from a recent event. In any case, the Reset Breath is designed to help a client get more somatically present and less stressed through experiencing a very simple body-breathing tool.

It improves focus, attention and well-being and helps to clear emotional static like taking an eraser to a chalkboard. This exercise helps to trigger restoration the oxygen/carbon dioxide ratio in the bloodstream as well as balance autonomic nervous system function. You can do it several times a day as you like – you will feel the benefits immediately.

### **Exercise**

Find a comfortable, seated position with your spine relatively straight but supported, and close your eyes. Take two to three full, cleansing breaths, in the nose and out the mouth, to release surface tension. Your exhalation should be relaxed and free, allowing gravity to take the air out of your lungs. For best results, don't blow or force the exhalation. The belly should be relaxed and unrestricted – give it a chance to hang out and be soft!

Place one hand on your lower belly, the other hand on your upper chest and take 10 full breaths without a pause at the top or bottom. Breath intentionally, not too slow and yet not forced. Feel the breath rise like a wave, starting in the lower belly and flowing up all the way to your upper chest. Depending upon the level of intensity that is needed, you can perform this exercise three ways, increasing in intensity with each one:

- A. In and out of the nose
- B. In the nose and out the mouth
- C. In and out of the mouth

With the last one, you might even slightly purse the lips (like whistling) when doing open-mouthed inhalation – this slight resistance exercises the diaphragm a little

more. Again, the effort is on the inhalation, the exhale should be relaxed and easy, not forced, as if you were letting out a sigh at the end of a long workday.

For the purposes of this exercise, count up to 10-12 breaths, and after the last one take one more full, deep inhale, as full as you can, and hold at the top for a count of 5-7. Then... LET IT GO. Exhale fully, relax your muscles, drop your hands to your lap and feel the release of all your tension, stress and toxins.

Witness how you feel. After a few moments, allow your breath to reenter your body and return to normal. Give yourself 30 seconds to a minute to allow this exercise to integrate. When you are ready open your eyes, smile and return your consciousness to your body.

\* Please Note: This exercise may make you feel lightheaded or dizzy, and is not appropriate for some people. Make sure you are sitting and your body is safe. Do not do this exercise while driving or operating heavy farm equipment. ☺ Again, you can slow down the effect by breathing in and out of the nose rather than the mouth, only doing 5 breaths, etc. – it makes it more manageable for people who tend to overbreathe and/or with extreme anxiety.

## **5. RELAX AND RECENTER (4X4) BREATH**

### **Introduction**

The Relax and Re-Center (4X4) Breath is an excellent tool not only for bringing attention into the body, opening up the diaphragm and getting present, but also can be used as a preparation for other breath techniques, such as Mindfulness, Walking Meditation and/or Coherent Breathing. The combination of these four breathing techniques together seems to provide an overall "systems check", supporting maximum relaxation and regulation of the body-mind connection. Therapeutically, this exercise may be used for the following things:

- Releasing surface emotional tension, stress and anxiousness
- Releasing distraction by getting present and aware of your body
- Preparing and engaging healthy diaphragmatic movement
- Self-sensing belly with chest breathing
- Relaxation through:
  - Mindfulness
  - Breath suspension or holding
  - Extending the exhalation
  - Engaging the vagal nerve cluster in the belly
- Re-centering through:
  - Consciously engaging external respiration
  - Aligning respiratory and circulatory functions
  - Creating coherence in various body systems
  - Supporting Heart Rate Variability (HRV)

There are four, back-to-back segments of this exercise, each one consisting of four repetitions of the breath – so a total of 16 breaths altogether. The first exercise is performed with nostril inhalation and mouth exhalation; the other three are nostril breaths only. The four parts are as follows:



1. SIGH
2. SQUEEZE
3. STOP
4. CENTER

Combined together and after a little practice, the 4X4 Breath exercise becomes like a smooth flow of "breath yoga" that opens up the respiratory system, releases stress, provides more oxygenation while supporting relaxation, circulation and Heart Rate Variability (HRV).

### **1. SIGH**

The first part of this four-part exercise we all know how to do! When stress hits, we all know how to take a big huge sigh! So, find a comfortable place to sit down with your spine straight but not rigid. Loosen any constricting belts or clothing, and make sure to silence your phones and eliminate any other distractions.

To prepare for a full deep inhalation: place one hand on your belly and one hand on your chest. As you breathe in your belly should swell outwards, as if there was a balloon in your lower abdomen that inflates as you start to breathe. Normally, the swelling of your belly is an indicator that you're using your diaphragmatic muscle, THE muscle in your body designed to do the bulk of external respiration. The swelling of your belly then rises like an ocean wave into your chest where the ribs expand, the whole upper torso expands and ends in a slight clavicular lift.

For now, however, just to make sure the inhalation starts in the belly and ends with some degree of expansion in the chest. As soon as you've reached full lung capacity, simply let go of the exhalation and make a long sustained sigh sound. Aaaahhhh...! Now, imagine as you fill your lungs with air you are gathering all the tension and stress in your mind and body; and then, as you let the exhale go, imagine releasing all that stress with the whooshing of the sound and the breath going out.

Repeat the SIGH four times...

### **2. SQUEEZE**

Continuing right after the last sigh, breathe in a full belly-chest breath through the nose filling your lungs completely. Without a pause at the top of the breath, simply let go of the exhalation, also out the nose. The first half of the exhalation is simply letting go with gravity and allowing the natural recoil of the respiratory muscles and tissues to push the air out of your lungs.

Here's where it gets interesting... About halfway through the exhalation, begin to slowly but firmly squeeze your abdomen, fully contracting your abdominal muscles as if you're trying to squeeze all the air out of both lungs. Try not to excessively force the squeeze, but maintain a steady pressure of muscle contraction until you can squeeze no longer. You may notice that the

final bit of exhalation takes several moments, so take your time to get all the air out.

Important: See if you maintain your straight spine posture throughout the entire exhalation; avoid the tendency to curl your body over. At the bottom of the squeeze, see if you can notice and feel the complete emptiness for just a brief moment.

In the next nanosecond, release all the muscle tension in your belly and chest. Your belly should flop outwards naturally pulling in air through the nostrils and engaging the diaphragm. As simultaneously as possible, at the maximum outward extension of the belly begin conscious inhalation into the abdomen, the midsection and into the chest for a full deep breath.

Again, without a pause at the top of the breath, fully let go and release the air during the first half of the exhalation, without any pause continue exhaling while slowly increasing your abdominal contraction into the *squeeze*. Like before, repeat this breath technique a total of four times...

[For advanced students and those who have comfortably adopted this exercise, you may want to add the following: as the abdominal muscles contract deeply into the squeeze you can *gently* engage two Hatha Yoga "locks", the "stomach lock" and the "root lock". First, imagine pulling your navel inward toward the spine. This is called *uddiyana bandha* or stomach lock, where the breath is exhaled and the abdomen is sucked inwards toward the spine.

Immediately after engaging the stomach lock, engage the root lock. The root lock, or *mula bandha*, is achieved through a gentle contraction of the perineum. The Sanskrit word *mula* refers to the root of a plant or tree. Here, *mula* indicates the base of the torso, the perineum, and it is associated with the muladhara chakra, lowest of the energy centers along the spine. The word *bandha* has many meanings, but in such as "block, obstruct, restrain, and lock." But it also translates as "bond, connect, put together, unite, combine, and join" In the yogic tradition, *mula bandha* is considered stabilizing and calming. It also enhances the energy of concentration...]

### **3. STOP**

Immediately following the last exhalation of the squeeze breath, again release all abdominal tension and let the belly flop open, but this time, start counting your inhalation to a count of four. Ideally, this next full inhalation is spread over the entire four count until your lungs are full.

Now, hold the breath to a counter four. Don't strain – simply fill your lungs fully and ease into a hold or STOP. After holding for this count of four, gently release the exhalation, but this time let it out in a slower, controlled fashion. [For advanced students you can use resistance or Ujjayi breath, a slight constriction of the glottis in the throat.] Exhale over the span of a count of eight. Do not constrict the abdomen or engage any of the locks; simply allow

the exhalation to flow from recoil and gravity until no more air seems to go out.

Once again, take a full, deep nostril inhalation to the count of four, hold again to the count of four, and exhale to the count of eight. Continue this breath for four cycles of inhalation and exhalation.

#### **4. CENTER**

After the last cycle of the stop breath, again engage your inhalation but *slow it down to a count of eight*. Let the inhalation be full and deep, rising from your belly to the top of your chest; then, make a smooth transition and slowly let your exhalation go out, also to a count a eight (just like the previous stop breath). Now you are breathing in and out in a circular fashion, counting to eight on the inhalation and eight on the exhalation.

This last cycle of the breath exercise, essentially, is Coherent Breathing. Ideally, the eight count is approximately 6 seconds in length, which means you can continue this slow, steady in and out of breath for as long as you would like, and you'll be doing Coherent Breathing.

For those of you not continuing on with Coherent Breathing let your eyes close (if they are closed already!) and simply allow your breath to come back to normal. Witness. Feel your body, notice your thoughts and feelings, and see if you can observe any changes in how you feel. Take a few moments to be with yourself, to be with your body, to feel centered within the room or the space around you.

Gently consider that this may be an ideal time to slide into mindfulness meditation, or into whatever form of meditation is comfortable for you. If not, when you're ready, gently return your attention back to your body, take a slightly deeper, fuller breath in, open your eyes and easily come back to the present moment.

## **6. COHERENT BREATHING**

### **Background:**

"Coherent Breathing is a breathing method that is claimed to facilitate circulation and autonomic nervous system balance. It involves breathing at the nominal rate of 5 breaths per minute with equal inhalation and exhalation (6 seconds on the inhale and 6 seconds on the exhale). It is claimed that 'Coherent Breathing' synchronizes a wave in the circulatory system called the 'Valsalva Wave', which naturally rises in the 'arterial tree' during exhalation and rises in the 'venous tree' during inhalation. The research of Coherent Breathing was facilitated by simple audible and visual pacing devices as well as with heart rate variability (HRV) and Valsalva Wave biofeedback instruments, wherein the breather learned to monitor their heart rate variability cycle, exhaling at peaks and inhaling at valleys."(Wikipedia)

Coherent breathing is an excellent way to attain ultimate relaxation within five minutes or less. It is a breath that is done through the nostrils, without breaks, e.g. no pauses at the top or the bottom of the breath Both the inhalation and the exhalation are approximately 6 seconds in length. Sitting in a comfortable position with the spine relatively straight seems to enhance the experience, and often times a

slightly closed glottis (sometimes called Resistance or Ujjayi Breath) helps to regulate the entire flow of the breath.

### **Exercise:**

There are a couple of great ways you can do Coherent Breathing on your own:

- A. Look at a second hand, or set a metronome or bell to ring every six seconds. Gently breathe in and breathe out at the start of each beat. Or, go to ticking second hand at this website: [http://www.coherence.com/coherence\\_clock.html](http://www.coherence.com/coherence_clock.html)
- B. You can also go to the [www.doasone.com](http://www.doasone.com) website and open up the "Universal Breathing Room", where you can hear the sound of someone breathing at approximately 5 breaths per minute. However, you will notice that the recorded breaths have pauses at the top and bottom - I recommend that you continue *to breathe through the pauses so there is no gap* at the bottom of the top of the breath.
- C. The book, "The Healing Power of the Breath" BY Richard P. Brown and Patricia L. Gerbarg has an excellent CD in the back that introduces, explains and guides you to do a number of variations of Coherent Breathing. (4)

### **INTENSIVE Breath Interventions - INTEGRATION**

These last three breathing exercises again involve the body in positions of walking, sitting and/or lying down. The first exercise requires an intensive focus of your attention while breathing, walking, focusing on a mantra, and moving your fingers of both hands. It's sort of like rubbing your belly and patting your head at the same time – it not only requires conscious attention but also proprioceptive awareness. The last two of this series are the foundational breathing techniques of Somatic Breath Therapy, conscious connected breathing in and out of the nose or mouth. Both are best performed therapeutically in the presence of a skilled practitioner, but after a series of guided sessions can be brought into your own regular practice at home as well.

## **7. BREATHWALK FOCUSING EXERCISE**

This exercise provides an opportunity to put breath, mindfulness, sound, body proprioception and movement all together. Practicing each component at a time and slowly adding the rest is strongly recommended. Its foundation comes from the Sikh tradition in India and is taken from the book, "Breathwalk" by Gurucharan Singh Khalsa and Yogi Bhajan (5). The benefit of walking consciously in tune with "stepped breathing" is powerful, but when combined with silently sounding a mantra as well as touching the tips of each finger on both hands, you provide an opportunity for a maximum shift of conscious/somatic and attention, with all the integrative benefits of performing all of these things at the same time.

- a. The exercise begins similarly as the Walking Meditation described above, taking a few moments to stand silently in one place, center and ground your self. Once the entire practice has been mastered, it is recommended that you perform it for about five minutes, and then take a three-minute break of simply walking, repeating that 5-3-5-3 minute strategy for as long as desired.
- b. Each inhalation and exhalation is divided into four segments, and you take a step forward on each one of those segments. One cycle, therefore, is eight steps: four steps on the inhalation in four steps on the exhalation.
- c. After mastering this for a minute or two, add a four-syllable sound and repeat it in your head, such as SA-TA-NA-MA, or, an affirmation supportive to your

client, like, "I-am-safe-now", on each of the four steps. Exhale the same way, similarly segmenting the exhalation into four segments, repeating the mantra once again over the four steps.

From the Sikh tradition, one explanation for the SA-TA-NA-MA mantra is: SA is infinity, the cosmos, or the beginning. TA is life and existence. NA is death or transformation, and finally MA is rebirth. Also, according to the late Yogi Bhajan this mantra has these additional benefits: SA evokes emotion and expansiveness; TA creates a feeling of transformation and strength; NA stimulates a sense of universal love; MA evokes the quality of communicativeness. Once you have mastered the 4-stepped-breath with walking, add the mantra or words and practice that for another few minutes. Take a break, and walk normally for a few minutes and let your body integrate what you have done thus far.

- d. Now, add the "Mantra on your fingertips", i.e. add movements to the fingers of both hands (called mudras). On the first one (SA), you press the thumb pad to the index finger pad, on the second one (TA), you press the thumb to the middle finger. On the third one (NA), touch the ring finger to the thumb, and finally on the fourth one (MA), press the little finger to the thumb pad. *Repeat the same finger press sequence on both hands AND on the inhale as well as the exhale.*

**So - here's what it looks like all together:** you are walking in an even paced manner, aligning your steps with segmented nostril breathing, four parts each on the inhale the exhale, gently swinging your arms and repeating a word or mantra quietly inside, while touching the pads of each finger to the pads of each thumb. Phew – this takes some practice! :-)

## **8. CONNECTED BREATHING - NOSTRIL**

Connected therapeutic breathing or, Somatic Breath Therapy is best facilitated by a trained, skilled practitioner, and can be offered one-on-one, or in groups. Once the tool is learned it can be practiced alone, reinforcing the empowering nature of this technique. This exercise is a gentle form that can be done with client either sitting in a chair or lying on their back, utilizing nostril breathing, i.e. breathing in and out of the nose.

1. Prepare your position:
  - a) Sit comfortably in a chair with your spine erect but not rigid. The important part is that there is spaciousness on the front side of your torso, in which your breath may be free to expand fully into the belly and chest, yet not be constricted by posture, i.e. loosen all belts! Place your feet flat upon the floor.
  - b) Lie down on your back, preferably with your head minimally supported on a pillow (the neck should be aligned comfortably with the rest of the spine), and your knees supported upon a pillow. You may also want to have a blanket draped over you.
2. Normally when you breathe there's a pause at the bottom of your breath and no pause at the top. In this case, in order to increase your awareness and the therapeutic potential of this breath exercise, gently close the gap at the bottom of the breath, i.e. eliminate any pause by starting the inhalation sooner than you're used to. Combined with no pause at the top, this is what is called a conscious, connected or circular breathing pattern.

3. Again, take a full, deep breath and then relax your exhale - let the exhalation simply drop out with gravity. It's not important to get all the air out of your lungs. Don't force it. In fact, most of the air will fall out of the lungs in 2 to 3 seconds. See if you can relax your jaw even though your mouth is closed. Continue breathing in and out of the nose without any pauses or gaps at the top or bottom of the breath.
4. After about 10 or 20 connected breaths, you should notice a shift in how you feel. You may start to feel lightheaded, begin to tingle and feel strange sensations. This is normal. This is a process called Activation (see description below), where the therapeutic benefit starts to kick in. For safety, and the purpose of this exercise, when you begin to notice Activation starting to occur, simply witness what you are feeling and let your breath return to your own normal breathing pattern.
5. Witness and reflect on what you have just experienced. See if you can simply watch and accept whatever thought, feeling or sensation may have arisen. To try not to make extra meaning out of them. You are safe - I don't know of anyone who's gotten hurt by breathing too much over a short period of time. Allow your breath to come back to normal, and you will notice that most of these thoughts, feelings or sensations will recede within a few minutes.

If you were to continue connected breathing in this way, under the expert supervision of a breath therapist, your state of Activation would increase, which would allow for a deeper experience, the movement of affective-somatic material and ultimately the process of integration to occur. In this state, long-term aspects of dysfunction and trauma held in the body-mind begin to surface and rebalance. A skilled practitioner would know how to monitor your breath and skillfully apply interventions to help you manage the process, which over time would help you to shape a new, healthier breathing pattern.

## **9. CONNECTED BREATHING - MOUTH**

Once again, Connected Breathing or, Somatic Breath Therapy is best facilitated by a trained, skilled practitioner, and can be offered one-on-one, or in groups. Once the tool is learned it can be practiced alone and become a part of your regular daily or weekly practice. This exercise is a more intentional form that it is best done lying down on a thick blanket or mat breathing in and out of the mouth, jaw and mouth relaxed, with an opening between the teeth approximately a 1/2 to 3/4 of an inch.

1. Lie comfortably on the floor. Gently place one hand on the lower belly and one hand on your chest. Begin to breathe in and out through your mouth with your jaw relaxed. Make sure your breath originates in your lower belly, rises like an ocean wave throughout the torso to the upper chest, and then is exhaled effortlessly. Imagine there is a balloon that swells in your lower belly and initiates the start of the open healthy breath. Breathing this way and through your mouth dramatically increases the amount of oxygen and energy coming into your body. KNOW that at any time if the sensations in your body begin to feel unmanageable, you can simply slow down the breath and your original state of physiology will soon return.
2. Take a full, deep breath and then relax your exhale - let the exhalation simply drop out with gravity. Again, don't force it. It's not important to get all the air out of your lungs. In fact, most of the year will fall out of the lungs in 2 to 3 seconds. See if you can relax your jaw even though your mouth is closed. Continue breathing in and out of the mouth without any pauses or gaps at the top or bottom of the breath.

3. After about 10 or 20 connected breaths, you should notice a shift in how you feel. You may start to feel lightheaded, begin to tingle and feel strange sensations. This is normal. Again, this is Activation\* (see description below), where the therapeutic benefit starts to kick in. For safety, and the purpose of this exercise, when you begin to notice activation starting to occur, simply witness what you are feeling and let your breath return to its own normal breathing pattern.
4. With expert help from a skilled and trained practitioner, you may continue breathing in and out of the mouth more deeply into the state of Activation. Keep checking that the mouth is open and the jaw is relaxed, and the breath is initiated in the lower belly (diaphragmatic) and rises smoothly and easily into the upper chest without any pauses at the top or bottom. See if you can also notice and feel how your rib cage expands laterally (side-to-side).
5. Breathing in this fashion not only increases the oxygen in the body, but also increases the energy and the ability of awareness to access suppressed emotions, memories, thoughts and events. By remembering to keep the breath connected throughout the entire process, especially while allowing the exhaled to be relaxed, suppressions from the body-mind naturally arise into the arena of awareness for movement, release and integration.
6. Always end the session with a long period (usually ¼ of the total session time) of relaxed breathing, i.e. where it might feel like the 'breath is breathing you' and you are able to receive the benefits of all the work you've done during the active breathing phase.
7. Again, with the help of the skilled facilitator you will also want to have some time to debrief the experience of the breathwork session, and perhaps received some additional coaching on how to maintain optimal Conscious Breathing in the future.

#### **Activation in Breathwork – Definition**

- A heightened state of energy in the body brought on by relaxed, connected breathing wherein rhythmic, animal-like breathing or the feeling of "being breathed" is experienced, often resulting in:
  - A "glazed look" across the face, esp. the eyes
  - Decreased mental or cognitive dominance to the point of a trance-like state of increased body-mind awareness, often leading to the threshold of non-ordinary states of reality
  - Changes in blood chemistry (alkalosis)
  - Changes in brainwave patterns (more and longer-wave alpha, sometimes leading to theta and/or delta during periods of "checking out" (see below)
  - Various bodily sensations such as: tingling, numbing, frozen muscles (tetany), feelings of hot/cold, disassociation, temporal/spatial disorientation, "heavy limbs", pressing of 'invisible hands', etc.
  - Increased suggestibility, emotional and/or touch sensitivity
  - Surfacing of past energetic/emotional suppressions that tend toward awareness, catharsis and integration
  - Surfacing of personality 'fragments', subconscious identities and/or disassociated energies
  - Periods of "yogic-sleep" or "checking out", i.e. cessation of breath often accompanied by myospasms, REM and a return to connected breathing
  - Euphoria and/or a deeper sense of connection to Spirit/Oneness

## **Conclusion**

By experimenting and working with these 9 Somatic Breath Exercises yourself, you will notice you'll be able to more easily teach your clients how to recover an open, healthy breath and perhaps, even an open, healthy life. Through your coaching and their self-monitoring of the respiratory movement within their bodies, your clients will gain several key benefits:

- Increased body awareness and ability for conscious focal attention
- An immediate doorway to mental/emotional regulation
- Discovery of conscious breathing as a natural response to stress
- Feeling empowered by knowing they can change how they breathe and feel
- Improved health from better oxygenation and associated body function

As the breath becomes more full and open, it will engage a natural healing process that peels back the layers of past limitations, old thinking and residual tensions held within the body-mind. It's your job as the practitioner to be aware of and to tend to whatever shows up during the session.

Over time, with practice and good breath coaching from you, your client's respiration will become more flexible and elastic, their diaphragmatic as well as lung capacity will gradually increase and there will be a noticeable expansion in capacity to relax, handle stress and live a more conscious and fulfilling life.

## **NOTES:**

- (1) <http://www.umassmed.edu/cfm/about-us/people/2-meet-our-faculty/kabat-zinn-profile>
- (2) Farhi, Donna (1996), *The Breathing Book: Good Health and Vitality Through Essential Breath Work*. New York: Henry Holt & Co.
- (3) The following link will take you to a beautiful poetic exposé of what he considers walking meditation to be. Simply scroll down and click on "From 'A Guide to Walking Meditation'" to read the article:  
<http://www.abuddhistlibrary.com/Buddhism/J%20-%20Navigation%20Pages%20and%20A%20List%20of%20Books/Navigation%20Pages/Thich%20Nhat%20Hanh.html>
- (4) Brown, Richard P. and Patricia L. Gerbarg (2012), *Healing Power of the Breath: Simple Techniques as a Way They to Reduce Stress and Anxiety, Enhance Concentration, and Balance Your Emotions*, NYC and London: Shambhala.
- (5) [https://books.google.com/books/about/Breathwalk.html?id=mn7eoOUTLkWC&printsec=frontcover&source=kp\\_read\\_button&hl=en#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.com/books/about/Breathwalk.html?id=mn7eoOUTLkWC&printsec=frontcover&source=kp_read_button&hl=en#v=onepage&q&f=false)