

THE CENTER for CLINICAL MASSAGE

Ken Laymon

The power of breath

Breathe better and feel better

You can live a week without water, a month without food, but only a few minutes without oxygen. You can't generate energy in your body without oxygen. And many people equate energy with life itself. Energy is essential for your physical and emotional health. Thinking, moving, sensing, digesting and every other function require energy.

Muscling your breath

Breathing involves the chest, abdominal and back muscles, and the diaphragm, a bell-shaped muscle that separates the chest from the abdomen. The diaphragm is the primary muscle of respiration, but many people don't use it efficiently. Instead, people often overuse the muscles around the ribs to inhale. But these muscles don't push fresh air into the lower lungs the way the diaphragm is designed to do. If the lower lungs don't receive enough air,

the body cells don't get enough oxygen. In addition, when people overuse the chest and back muscles to breathe, muscle tightness increases in those areas, which can lead to chronic tension and pain.

Poor posture, muscle weakness, lung disease and even lack of understanding of the breathing process can contribute to inefficient breathing.

Releasing your breath

Through observation and bodywork to your upper body, your practitioner can help evaluate your breathing habits. She or he can apply techniques to release trigger points and tight muscles that restrict the breath, and demonstrate better breathing habits. When you improve your breathing habits, you can increase your energy and mental clarity, and decrease tension and pain.



Practicing breathing exercises can help you become more aware of your tension and help you let it go.



Bodywork can help release tension that restricts your breath.

Tuning in with bodywork

Increase your awareness and let go of tension

In addition to helping you tune into your breathing, massage and bodywork can enhance your awareness of tension in your body, which may be the first step in releasing it.

At some point in your life, for example, you may have tightened your muscles after an experience of grief or fear. Over time, these constricted muscles may have dulled the awareness of pain, or blocked the flow of energy or breath in the body. This may have led to even more tension and pain.

When muscle tension is released, you can observe what it feels like to relax, and then work toward consciously creating that feeling in between bodywork sessions. In your everyday life, practicing breathing exercises is a great way to build awareness, relax and let go of tension.

Breathing exercises

Reduce stress and breathe easier

A natural rhythm of breathing includes inhalation, exhalation and resting. You can learn to observe and improve this rhythm. Some questions to ask yourself are: What's longer, your inhalation or your exhalation? Can you rest between cycles? Do you feel strain when you breathe naturally?

Observe your breath. When you are stressed, your breath may be fast and shallow. If you are tired, you may have an irregular, slow cycle with yawning as an attempt to increase oxygen coming in. When calm, the breath is usually regular and relaxed.

Try these for better breathing

Practice breathing exercises when you wake up or when you get in bed at night. By practicing regularly, over time you can learn to notice when your breathing changes in response to stress, exercise, moods and rest. This can help you develop easy, rhythmic breathing.

- a. Sit or lie comfortably with closed eyes and observe the breath. Use no effort. Notice the quality of the breath and how it moves in the torso.
- b. Place one hand beneath your navel and one under or on your tailbone and notice the movement in these areas.



To practice abdominal breathing, rest your hands on your belly and breathe slowly and deeply.

- c. Place your hands on each side of the lower ribs. Observe your breath. Now cross your arms, placing each hand under the opposite armpit. Feel the breath come and go. Then release your arms and observe any changes in your breathing.
- d. Now you are ready to try abdominal breathing. Rest your hands lightly on your stomach. Slowly and deeply inhale through your nose, pushing the hands outwards. Then slowly exhale, squeezing the belly tight. Practice four inhales and exhales.



In the future, let's hope for a TV commercial that says, "Stay in touch with your feelings, keep in touch with a loved one, be treated by a massage therapist, and be well."
—Bernie S. Siegel, MD, author of *Love, Medicine and Miracles*