

Breathing Peace Into Your Life



Let's talk a little about breath... is there a more vital - yet underrated - bodily process? At the beginning and end of life, there is so much focus on breath. Think of a newborn taking their first breath of life, or an elder taking their last. In a medical emergency, one of the first questions asked is: "Are they breathing?"

What happens in between birth and death? During our day-to-day lives, there is so little focus on breath. It's not uncommon to not be aware of your breath or breathing pattern. I remember asking a friend whether they predominantly breathe into their belly, solar plexus or upper chest. She looked at me confounded and said: "I really don't know." It was a question she had never been asked or thought to ask herself.

I often see clients who are having a really hard time and are experiencing significant emotional/physical/mental pain and anxiety. One of the first things we work on is their breathing, including practical breath-focussed tools they can use in their everyday life. Why do I focus on breathing? Because breath is the one thing you always have with you, regardless of where you are, what you're doing or what's happening in your life.

I once had a friend who was experiencing family relationship issues, which triggered past feelings of disempowerment. To deal with these unwanted emotions, she amassed a spiritual smorgasbord of things to help her: books, crystals, Rescue Remedy (spray and pastilles!), essential oils and affirmation cards. It got to the point where she felt she couldn't leave her house without having completed her daily rituals or taking her very large 'Mary Poppins' handbag with her. Did these spiritual aids make her feel empowered, or were they inadvertently creating yet another layer of stress and anxiety?

This does not dismiss the power, beauty or benefit of such things. But these things are external to you (i.e. they rely on you needing to remember to take it, do it, carry it with you or buy it in the first place). Whenever we externalise our sense of power, we become disconnected from our inner source of power and our body's innate wisdom, which relies on nothing but our acknowledgement of it.

When we have a strong connection to ourselves, we can still buy these things (personally, I love essential oils and crystals) but the intention or motivating force behind it has shifted from fear, or even desperation, to wonderful-to-haves. In other words: they don't give you a sense of power, they just amplify the sense of power, peace and connection you already have. I recently had a client who passionately exclaimed, "Why aren't we learning this (conscious breathing) in schools?" He had just experienced a profound shift during our session; he was accessing painful past memories

and releasing suppressed emotions, yet throughout the whole process he felt a deep sense of peace and safety.

That is the power of conscious breathing. Breathing will ground you in the present and provide a centre of calm within you: "It's like an anchor in the midst of an emotional storm." (Dr Russ Harris)

Fortunately, things are starting to change on the school-front. For example, the primary aim of the Breathe Project, an independent health initiative, is to have a simple breathing technique embedded into all Australian primary and secondary schools for three minutes each day.

Unsurprisingly, taking a beautiful, expansive breath triggers a cascade of beneficial physiological changes in the body. Many of us can feel and sense this 'Aha' breath moment, but here are the facts behind the feeling:

Upper chest breathing triggers the **sympathetic nervous system**, which is responsible for the 'flight or fight' response, causing a spike in adrenal and cortisol, intensifying feelings of stress and anxiety. Deep, relaxed breathing, on the other hand, activates the **parasympathetic nervous system**, which is responsible for the body's 'rest and digest' function. Relaxed breathing also stimulates the vagus nerve, reducing the heart-rate and having a calming effect on the entire body.

The following is a quick breathing practice you can do anywhere, anytime: Place your hand/s on your lower belly and breathe into your hands for three breaths, repeat this process with your hands on your solar plexus, and then finish with your hands on your upper chest. This focuses your mind, and you can repeat as often as you like. Waiting in a queue can be the perfect opportunity for some conscious breathing!

A really helpful tip: the times you feel the *least* inclined, or most resistant, to focussing on your breath, are the times in which you would benefit the *most* from practising conscious breathing. If you've ever watched the rise and fall of a baby's chest, or the delicate fading breath of a loved one who's passing over, then you'll know what I mean when I say it all comes down to breath.

Whether you are going for a job interview, visiting a 'challenging' relative, experiencing acute pain, running late for an appointment or simply making dinner, there is no life situation in which you will not benefit from connecting with your breath.

Once you become aware of the power of your breath, you can literally breathe peace into your life.

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