Three Things You Need To Know About Breathing...

And How to Do It

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Breathing is the foundation for making the behavioral changes necessary to move out of pain and strain. One reason for this is the emotional component to physical challenges.

Your breath changes immediately and automatically with every activity, thought and emotion. Pain, strain and tension, in particular, imply compromised breathing. Once you become aware of your breath patterns, in both unpleasant and pleasant situations, the more presence and control you will feel.

Let's start with some breathing knowledge that will be helpful to you.

Life on Earth begins with a breath and ends with a breath. Thus breathing is a magical innate gift that happens all the time. The number of normal breaths that you do not control is actually quite startling. *The average respiratory rate by age is as follows:

Age	Average respiratory rate
Infant (birth-1 year)	30-60 breaths per minute
Toddlers (1-3 years)	24-40 breaths per minute
Preschooler (3-6 years)	22-34 breaths per minute
School-age (6-12 years)	18-30 breaths per minute
Adolescent (12-18 years)	12-16 breaths per minute
Adults	15-20 breaths per minute
Seniors (67-101 years)	16-25 breaths per minute

When multiplied out, the average number of times the lungs and diaphragm move per day is 17,280 - 23,040. This is a lot of bodily functioning and processing that happens naturally. Once you turn your attention to how your breathing and how you can change that pattern, your daily living can shift significantly.

To understand how to enhance your natural breathing pattern, these three aspects are the starting point. Five normal breath patterns. Four anatomical parts of the breathing process. Three methods of practice breathing.

Five Normal Breath Patterns

- ***Easy breathing*** - This happens in resting, meditating and sleeping, when the physical body is at rest. A familiar example is baby's breath -- silky smooth, effortless. When you are resting, you can feel this regular and even some movement in the abdominal area.

- ***Non-focused breathing*** - This happens in mentally focused times like when working at the computer, talking on the telephone, or even watching television. This is a relatively shallow breath you may notice in your mid-chest.

- ***Forced breathing*** - This happens in high physical energy times as in rigorous exercising, running, or sexual activity. This deep, quick breath, like panting, is very noticeable in the entire rib cage, and has a heady feeling.

- ***Disrupted breathing*** - This happens in emotional times and varies with the emotion. For example, anger and frustration bring "dry," quick breaths, while loss and disappointment bring "wet," heavy breaths.

- ***Focused breathing*** - This happens in awareness with practice. For example, athletes in training, deep sea divers, and yoga practitioners all focus on their breathing patterns to increase their capacities for mental and physical enhancement, whether slow or quick patterns.

Four Anatomical Parts of the Breathing Process

- ***Lungs*** - Like pouring water into a pitcher, air fills your lungs from the bottom to the top. The bottom of the pitcher is at the low ribs level and the top of the pitcher is at the first rib/collar bone level. Breathing is rounded and expands the lungs to the front, sides, and back of the rib cage, not just to the front. Note: the lungs are above the belly.

- ***Diaphragm*** - Envision the cap of a large mushroom to help you understand the action of the diaphragm muscle and the belly. The top of the "mushroom" is just beneath the heart; the rim of the "mushroom" is the around rim of the low rib cage. As you inhale, the diaphragm contracts, moving toward the feet. It presses the belly organs down and out. As you exhale, the diaphragm relaxes and moves toward the head, "sucking" the belly organs back in and up.

- ***Rib cage*** - Two images can help here. First: Envision a fish's gills to help you understand the movement of the ribs. As the fish gills flair out in breathing, so do the ribs. On the inhalation, the lower ribs "flair" to the sides first, which initiates breathing. On the exhalation, the lower ribs release from the sides first. Second: envision a barrel to help you understand the role of the rib cage. Like a barrel, the rib cage provides a stable, open space in which the lungs can move freely.

On both the inhale and exhale, the rib cage is to stay more barrel-like, lifted and open throughout breathing. What it does not do primarily is move up and down with each breath.

- ***Nose and Trachea***- Simply, the nasal passages and the trachea are for breathing, inhaling and exhaling. Two nostrils are lined with hairs for filtering and with mucous for cleansing and warming. Trachea is a single round hollow tube which completes the passageway to the lungs. The volume and rhythm between the heart and lungs is regulated with nostril breathing. It is not inaccurate or inappropriate to mouth breath.

Three Methods of Practice Breathing

- ***Breath awareness*** - Becoming familiar with the four parts of the breath cycle is invaluable: inhalation, pause, exhalation, pause. Keeping these questions in mind will be helpful: Can you feel each part? How do they feel for you? Where do you feel the action of each part in your nostrils, chest, and/or belly? Become familiar with the four-part breath awareness in the natural, gentle flow of inhaling and exhaling is the Easy Breathing pattern, as in baby's breathing. Each part of the breath has a distinct action, rhythm and purpose. Do not change them, do not control them...just be with them. This awareness takes practice.

- ***Breath rhythm*** - Breath speed and frequency change with every movement and non-movement you make. Each of the four parts are affected. While in Easy Breathing pattern, feel the rhythm of each of the four parts, the length of each, the speed of each. Maintain awareness of the inhaling, pausing, exhaling, and pausing, take a deeper inhalation and feel how each part changes rhythm. Add a deeper exhalation and again feel how the four parts change rhythm. Practice one at a time to become familiar with how each part functions.

- ***Focused breathing*** - A sensation of not breathing is a feeling many people have when in strain, pain and tension. Know that the body is still breathing, but it certainly is compromised and not efficient. Your new practice is to take longer and deeper breaths through the nostrils, keeping your rib cage lifted, rounded and open, with little sense of it descending. As you lengthen the inhalation and the exhalation, feel the rhythm they make as partners, keeping it smooth and even. Gradually the lengths of the inhalation and exhalation are to become more and more even for control practice. This requires a lot of focus, not a lot of effort. Eventually changing the rhythm so the exhalation is longer begins a different sense of relaxation. Note: If you become lightheaded or short of breath, you are using too much effort. If this happens, rest into Easy Breathing before beginning again.

There are many focused breath practices that are more complicated which you can read about in books and online. The recommendation is to study them with a live teacher when you are ready to do more.

Here are the main points covered above:

#1 Focus on your breathing.

#2 Breathe through your nostrils rather than your mouth.

#3 Pause (not hold) between the inhalation and exhalation.

#4 Keep your rib cage more lifted and rounded than not throughout breathing cycles.

#5 Keep breathing in a smooth and even rhythm.

The key to having less pain, strain and tension and to improving the quality of your life is to remain aware of your breathing.

* Sources for these numbers include: http://www.health.ny.gov/professionals/ems/pdf/assmttools.pdf; http://medicalcenter.osu.edu/patientcare/healthcare_services/emergency_services/non_-traumatic_emergencies/vital_signs/Pages/index.aspx; and http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1496225/.