

How to Keep Your Workout from Hurting You

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PART FIVE: BREATHING

Step into a gym and you'll hear the rhythmic, pneumatic chorus of cardio machines – treadmill, stair climber, stationary bike, and so forth. They hum, whir, wheeze, and huff like bellows as they contrive a facsimile of forward movement and a crude, clockwork approximation of variety. The contrast between our breathing and the machines' apparent respiration starkly demonstrates the difference between the versatility and nuance of human movement and the impoverished image of it that exercise machines provide.

I begin by underscoring this contrast not because I am entirely opposed to exercise machines, but because my goal in this and all my other essays is to help you go beyond the idea of body as machine to experience your body as your self. Enriching your understanding of breathing will provide you a particularly powerful means to make your workouts as rich as any other part of your life.

Your breathing is as exquisitely varied as your thoughts and feelings, and finely attuned to your moment-to-moment living. It's not only the bottom line for being alive, it's also intrinsic to every other process you carry out – every action, emotion, and act of communication. So on the one hand, intentional involvement in your breathing allows you to explore your experience and expand your potential. And on the other hand, breathing is durably instinctive and automatic, because it's too important depend on your remembering to do it. You can tap into it consciously to facilitate endurance, power, relaxation, self-knowledge, and reportedly even enlightenment, but you can also do it exquisitely well when you ignore it.

This twofold potential of your breathing to be both involuntary, like the function of your organs, and voluntary, like the function of the muscles that walk or kickbox or tango as you choose, has led many to call it the doorway between the conscious and the unconscious, or (anachronistically) between body and mind. By looking at how you breathe and how you might work with your breath in relaxation, stretching, cardiovascular exercise, and strength training, you can experience each in a more vivid, satisfying, and beneficial way.

Because there is so much detail involved, I've broken this essay up into four sections – one for each activity -- which I'll send out one at a time in the coming months. The first section, below, is the one most on my mind over the holidays: relaxation.

Relaxation

Deep Breathing

You have no doubt been told that deep breathing is relaxing. But contrast the strong breathing of cardiovascular exercise or strength training with the light, soft way people breathe when asleep, and you'll see this doesn't quite capture reality. My guess is that the belief about deep breathing developed in part from the observation that people constrain their breathing when tense, and in part from the confusion of breathing with your diaphragm -- the breathing muscle deepest in your body -- with taking large breaths.

Breathing that's allowed to be naturally appropriate to whatever you're doing is relaxing in its own way, and if you bring your awareness to it without interfering, it's even more so. Strong breathing coordinated with strong movement during exercise powers your muscles, organizes you for effort, and helps you shed stress as though it were sweat rolling off your skin. The light, soft breathing that naturally occurs when you sleep gently delivers the modest amount of oxygen your body needs at rest, without any excess effort or stimulation.

In repose, deep breaths would deliver more oxygen than still muscles and a leisurely heartbeat require, so sleepers, meditators, and those truly at rest don't do it. Just thinking of doing something, though, is enough to expand your breathing to meet the anticipated demand. You witnessed this the last time you knew a nearby sleeper had awakened by the suddenly larger breath he drew. And when you lie wide awake in bed at night with your mind focused on tomorrow's tasks, your energetic breathing supplies enough oxygen for you to jump into action in an instant.

Not only does your activity (or idea of it) shape your breathing -- the reverse is also true. To invite relaxation or slumber, you can invite your breathing to soften like in sleep. Read on for one way to do that. If, on the other hand, you would like to feel more awake, take big breaths.

Belly Breathing

Insights from the *Sounder Sleep System*[™], a set of gentle movements coordinated with breathing to reduce stress and improve sleep, have allowed me to correct a couple of popular misconceptions about breathing when I teach. The belief that deep breathing is relaxing, above, is one. Another is that stressed breathing is chest breathing, while relaxed breathing is belly breathing.

There's a germ of truth to this; lifting your chest and flattening your belly to inhale and then doing the opposite to exhale is called paradoxical breathing. Because it stiffens the muscles of your torso to withstand strong forces and helps you use the last, top bit of your lungs to take in extra air, we do it in physically or emotionally stressful situations. If you deliberately breathe this way, you'll jumpstart your fight-or-flight response and likely begin to feel somewhat anxious. I have met a few people over the years who breathe this way on a regular basis, but not many.

By far the majority of regular people experiencing ordinarily stressful lives restrict their breathing in the opposite way, by chronically contracting their chest muscles so only their abdomen can move when they breathe. Despite the fact that this is technically belly breathing, it is not at all relaxed. I suspect that the fact that many people's stress involves sitting at a computer with rounded back and depressed chest makes this even more common. In any case, the sternum of a chronically stressed person (and this is most of us) often feels as cold and immobile as stone.

A gentle, non-invasive encouragement for the chest and intercostal muscles (between the ribs) to soften brings an easy movement to the chest and abdomen simultaneously. Very different from the aggressive lift of the sternum and flattening of the belly in paradoxical breathing, it's more like the gentle swelling of ebbtide waves in a sheltered cove. The water gently rises everywhere, then gently falls. A sense of relaxation threads through the scene like a comforting breeze.

Relaxed breathing, in the words of Michael Krugman, developer of the *Sounder Sleep System*[™], is "light, easy, soft, and slow." Without the restriction of tense muscles from emotional stress or the high demand for oxygen from physical activity, every part of your torso, including your chest, back, sides, belly, and pelvic floor, can gently expand to allow each breath in and just as gently allow it to depart, and you don't need to make any particular effort to breathe, or move any single part of yourself very much to make it happen.

As any experienced meditator knows, merely paying attention to what you do changes it even if you don't intend to change. What's more, that change is generally for the better because paying attention allows you to notice more of what you feel, so your brain's automatic efforts to keep you alive and help you thrive are better informed and thus more effective. So the best way to relax is not to try to relax, but simply to give yourself the time and space and means to experience yourself -- especially how you're breathing -- and let your innate wisdom take care of the rest.

To experience this, try a simple version of a *Sounder Sleep*[™] technique called "Breath Surfing." Lie down and place your hands on your chest or belly or somewhere in between lightly enough that you can feel any tiny bit of movement there as you breathe, and then just give yourself some time to experience the movement you feel. Keep your hands as soft and relaxed as possible so they'll be sensitive enough to feel delicate movements of your breath. Shortly, your breathing will soften and you'll begin to feel more relaxed. Take a break with your hands resting comfortably near your sides for a number of breaths to notice the effects of what you've done. Then move your hands somewhere else and again gently feel for your breath. Continue this process for as long as you'd like; after a few cycles you'll feel distinctly more relaxed than when you started.

Beyond Relaxation

In addition to encouraging relaxation, somatic traditions including yoga, tai chi, chi gong, Sufi practices, and so forth have breathing exercises to cultivate mindfulness, health, and personal development. If you're interested in learning more, *The Science of Breath*, by Swami Rama, Rudolph Ballentine, MD, and Alan Hymes, MD, is an excellent place to start, and there are many other books on the subject as well. There is of course no substitute for in-person training; you can seek out any number of teachers steeped in long traditions for guidance. Find a tradition that appeals to you and then look for a teacher.

I've experienced the profound effects of a variety of methods myself, but my expertise is in movement and exercise, so I can't explain spiritual traditions in their own terms. As part of the undertaking to live fully, however, I can't imagine not spending at least a little time exploring what is possible for you through your breathing.

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