

A BETTER WAY TO BREATHE

Sure, we know that a few deep breaths are your shortcut to instant calm, but as the rising trend of breathing studios promises a more long-term answer to anxiety, one stressed and sceptical WH staffer tries it out

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Everyone has a story,' says the petite blonde woman propping my head up with pillows. 'But here, you don't have to tell it.' To ears either side of a clinically anxious mind – all talked out by counselling – this is sweet music. I'm done with talking, but I still need help. It's been one month and 15 days since I last saw my blood-flooded, gasping reflection in the bathroom mirror having a panic attack. Quite a while, by my standards. But uncertainty, intense vigilance and the constant hum of anxiety remain, never quite allowing me to relax. So I've come to a 'breathwork' class that, at a cost of £90, aims to teach me how to breathe – you know, *properly* breathe – in an effort to achieve lasting calm.





Lake
placid

Breathwork studios are suddenly in operation nationwide. The one I'm trying is in a north London yoga studio that embodies what's been termed 'Now Age' wellness – think kundalini yoga, reiki healing and gong baths, served up to striving, strung-out twenty and thirty-somethings by bright-eyed Lululemon-sporting practitioners. The technique I'm learning – transformational breath (yes, I scoffed, too) – is different from traditional yogic breathing. The goal, I'm told, is to bring the breather face to face with their baggage and dislodge 'blockages' too deep to be probed by talk therapy. How exactly? 'By getting you to breathe continuously through your chest and belly, we're opening up the respiratory system to its full capacity,' explains Rebecca Dennis, my, er, trained 'transformational breath facilitator'. 'This enables you to let go of any past emotional or physical trauma you've been holding onto in your body.'

Yes, it sounds totally unscientific, but in fact the idea, which is common in eastern health practices, was popularised in the west by Harvard cardiologist Dr Herbert Benson in the 1970s. The claim is that the movement of the diaphragm massages other organs and encourages what Benson termed



'AS THE BREATH BEGINS TO FLOW, I FEEL AS THOUGH I'M SINKING'

'full oxygen exchange'. Meaning? More oxygen enters the body as more carbon dioxide leaves it, slowing the heart rate and stabilising blood pressure – two things that, as Benson noted, are the exact opposite of an anxious response.

FACT OR FICTION?

So, can your breath actually act like Cillit Bang for your emotional blockages? Predictably, the science is thin on the ground. But there is a wealth of research on breath and anxiety. A 2015 review of studies in the journal *Applied Psychophysiology and Biofeedback* concluded that slow, deep breathing techniques shift the nervous system from sympathetic to parasympathetic

(its rest and digest) mode. Meanwhile, ongoing research at the University of Southampton found that 20 minutes of yogic breathing, five times a week, reduced the physical and psychological symptoms of generalised anxiety disorder in patients who hadn't responded to common anxiety meds such as Prozac or Lyrica. Even the science backs up that breath, when deployed well, is mind-altering stuff.

But bad breathing? Well, that can really mess you up. 'When you're anxious, you end up breathing out more than you need to, which causes the levels of carbon dioxide in your blood to drop,' explains Professor Stephen Spiro, clinical adviser to the British Lung Foundation. And what happens next? 'The low CO₂ levels make the blood more alkaline, which acts as an alarm signal for the brain,' adds Dr Sunjeev Kamboj, a pharmacology expert at University College London.

Taken to the extreme, bad breathing can turn anxiety into a full-blown panic attack: as you start to breathe quicker, your body enters fight or flight mode. 'Your sympathetic nervous system is activated when the central nervous system detects that you feel under threat,' says Dr Kamboj. 'The threat is then relayed to the amygdala, the

BREATHING FOR BEGINNERS

Practise these conscious breathing exercises to get you through life's stress hotspots

1

ANXIOUS ALARM CALL

Woken up in a stress sweat? Lie face up with knees bent and your back at a 45° angle – prop yourself up with pillows. Open your mouth wide and take a deep breath. Exhale with a quick, soft sigh – your inhale should be twice the length of your exhale. Repeat for two minutes, without pausing.

2

PRE-MEETING JITTERS

With feet shoulder-width apart and knees slightly bent, place your hands on your lower abdomen and breathe through the mouth, expanding your diaphragm. Exhale quickly, making a 'ha' sound. Repeat for two minutes as loudly as you can without causing a scene.

3

AL-DESKO EMAIL PANIC

Can't bear to check the inbox? Place a thumb over your right nostril and exhale through the left for eight counts. Breathe in through the left nostril and hold for another eight. Now, repeat on the other side. Keep going up to 10 times – just make sure colleagues don't think you're rummaging around up there.



SAVE YOUR BREATH



brain's fear centre. What follows is a chain of biochemical events that trigger the adrenal glands to release adrenaline and cortisol, the body's stress hormone. Next, acid sensors in the brain pick up the pH imbalance, which in turn activate your panic responses.' Cue hyperventilation and tetany, that tingling-fingered sensation which often follows. Not a state you want to be in.

BREATHE AGAIN

And that's a situation I want to learn to avoid. So after checking my natural breathing rhythm (shallow, not reaching up to my chest or below my belly button; classic bad breathing), Dennis teaches me the technique: a two-beat inhale, going deep into my belly (similar in theory to the diaphragmatic breathing technique that Benson studied), then my chest, immediately followed by a short exhale. We practise the technique in chunks for the next 45 minutes as Dennis, with hands on my belly, guides me. 'Like an intense meditation, this breathing is designed to take you into an altered state,' says Dennis. 'Try not to fight what comes up.' Scary words to an anxious mind – still, I close my eyes.

Initially, my mind wanders and I laugh (out loud) at the ridiculous situation. I also struggle at first to breathe above my bra strap, the area where – so goes breathwork theory – the body holds on to fear we can't deal with. But as the breath begins to flow and the oxygen floods my brain, I feel as though I am sinking into a cocoon. Memories start popping up – ranging from images to full-on bodily sensations that I start to almost re-feel. It's decidedly odd.



Sea of calm

I WANT TO SOB BUT INSTEAD I LET OUT A FEW BLEATS AND KEEP BREATHING'

PANIC BREATH

After 20 minutes of my second breathing session (three are recommended), I feel familiar sensations coming on: the lump in my throat rises and I want to gasp. I do, a little, but with encouragement from Dennis, I continue to breathe hard into the restriction in my chest (hippy pseudo science aside, I really do feel a blockage there). My mind and body now recall a memory that seems very realistic, which

I haven't touched in six months of the therapy. I'm lying in hospital, my body weakened by severe, life-threatening septic shock and mind altered thanks to IV painkillers. I want to sob, but instead I let out a few bleats and keep breathing, until it fades back into a memory again.

For a moment I feel like I am building up to a panic attack, but as the session winds down I feel wholly safe – another world from the edgy misery of my post-anxiety hangovers. As for the memory, I'm now startlingly aware my student hospital stint was a watershed moment between latent nervousness and mental illness. Something I hadn't fully realised before.

So, 10 days after my final session, am I cured? Jumpiness, email terror and midweek nervous nosedives suggest not. But if not transformed, then informed. I know my breath much better now, and that I have the ability to evolve it from threat to ally.

*Rebecca Dennis's book **And Breathe** (Orion) is out 20 October*

5-MINUTE CALMERS

Simple ways to de-stress, without looking ridiculous



CHANGE YOUR SCREENSAVER

A study* found that just looking at photos of green spaces triggers the parasympathetic nervous system, which relaxes your body. Oh, and clear your desktop, too.



BIG YOURSELF UP

Anxiety can make you freeze and take longer on tasks. But research* suggests repeating your strengths can increase your problem-solving ability, even when stressed, which helps break the cycle. All together now: 'I'm bloody Beyoncé.'



MAKE A BREW

Green tea is a rich source of the amino acid L-theanine, which can lower cortisol levels for three hours*, giving you a chilled window of calm. In fact, just the act of taking a tea break will reduce anxiety by 25%* – so stick the kettle on.



PLUG IN

Music is a proven anxiety diffuser. Studies* say harmonious sounds and notes ascending from low to high are the most calming. Simon & Garfunkel? Sure. **WTF**

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