



WE TAKE 20,000 BREATHS A DAY. YET, MOST OF US ARE DOING IT WRONG. LEARNING TO BREATHE PROPERLY MAY JUST TRANSFORM YOUR LIFE, SAYS REBECCA NEWMAN

Photography **Ruwan Wijesooriya**

A challenge of motherhood I had not expected was postnatal depression. I'd never been depressed, and I didn't think I ever would be. Around the birth of my baby, Luke, last spring, things were hard. On a bad day I felt sucked underwater, struggling for air. It's getting better, but it has evolved into a less-stifling but persistent anxiety: if the baby gets sick then maybe I won't do a good job on this story and then... Throughout this time, I've noticed in myself a kind of breathlessness. I feel the air getting stuck at the top of my chest, as though I don't deserve to take in more of the oxygen around me. It was, therefore, with some excitement that I started to read about the restorative power of better breathing.

It sounds so simple. While resting, on average adults breathe about 12-20 times per minute, yet many of us might be doing it ineffectively'. Advocates, including Lena Dunham, Karlie Kloss and a host of medical experts, believe that a minute of regular, mindful breathwork can bring calm, lower blood pressure, greater mental acuity, better health and help improve fitness. Apple, Fitbit and newcomer Vinaya have created breathing apps to encourage regular practise. 'If I had to limit advice on healthier living to one tip, it would be [learning] how to breathe correctly,' says LA-based medical specialist Dr Andrew Weil.

So I book in to see Transformational Breath (TB) facilitator Rebecca Dennis (yes, that job actually exists). I arrive at her London studio armed with loose trousers and moderate expectations. I've tried meditations where the focus is breathing in and out, but my mind wanders. And anyway, who wants to be the creepy yoga person with the ostentatiously groaning exhale?

Dennis radiates calm, all big grins and glowing skin. It is hard to see her as the person she describes in her recent book, *And Breathe: The Complete Guide To Conscious Breathing*, so beaten down by years of depression that she attempted suicide. She says breathing is what brought her back. 'As babies, we breathe deeply from our belly,' she tells me. 'But most adults breathe with just their chest. Often this is down to stress – we feel too busy to breathe, and get by on half-breaths.' These shallow breaths send messages to our brain that we're in a 'flight or fight' survival mode, spiking levels of the primary stress hormones, cortisol and adrenaline, and leading to health complaints, such as poor digestion, anxiety, and impaired immunity. TB is designed to take you back to breathing deep, diaphragmatic breaths, to improve both physical and mental health. By strengthening your diaphragm, it can also give you a flatter stomach, though frankly these days I'd settle for a more even blood pressure. When Dennis asks what I'd like to achieve in the session I answer, 'Serenity.'

Lying on the floor, I follow her instructions to open my mouth wide and breathe in for two counts then immediately out in a 'rolling' breath. It requires full focus: I can't think about anything else, and soon I feel a peculiar tingling in my hands. As I breathe, Dennis massages acupressure points on my body to release tension and whispers encouragement. As the tingling gets stronger, my body seems to float; I'm gleeful, teary. It is a peculiarly emotional journey, and when we finish I feel oddly, deeply renewed. I had not expected this at all from simply breathing in and out.

Who, I ask Dennis, will benefit from it? She reels off satisfied clients: a CEO with panic attacks, a lady with fertility issues (who, on learning TB, became pregnant), a boxer who improved his fighting skills. 'Anyone,' she says. 'This is why there is a surging interest in breathwork, because so many people are stressed.'

Belief that breathing is good for you has, of course, been around for centuries. Buddha, for example, stated that mindful breathing 'developed and repeatedly practised, is of great fruit, great benefit.' He left instruction on breath meditation in a text, the Anapanasati Sutta.

Following on from Buddhism, some branches of yoga are more focused on breathing. In Kundalini yoga, energetic breathwork – pranayama in Sanskrit – is the bridge between the mind and body. 'Breathing makes you immediately calmer and connected,' says Maya Fiennes, the yoga teacher whom Elle Macpherson dubs inspirational. In Kundalini yoga, breath techniques are used to arouse the Kundalini energy said to rest coiled round the base of the spine, like a serpent. 'Your breath brings your Kundalini energy from the lower chakras and bursting up through the crown of your head.'

I'm still not convinced about chakras, so I look up Dr Emma Seppälä, a Stanford University-based psychologist. Her TEDx Talk, *Breathing Happiness*, refers to a study that found not only do emotions have their own breathing patterns (anger summons

short, fast breaths, while happiness is associated with long inhalations and exhalations), but also that if you breathe according to the pattern associated with anger, or calm, or happiness, you'll trigger that emotion. 'It's revolutionary,' says Seppälä. 'We can change how we feel using our breath!' She's right: it transpires, should your friend's dog pee on your suede boots, deep breaths can transmute the most murderous intent (trust me).

Seppälä set up a yogic breathing workshop for Iraq combat veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Exercises included ujjayi (victorious) breathing, a slow breath where you consciously experience the breath touching the throat, and bhastrika (bellows) breathing, where air is rapidly inhaled and forcefully exhaled. 'After six days, veterans who said they had felt "dead" since returning from Iraq said they felt alive again,' says Seppälä. 'Several studies suggest yogic breathing has immediate positive effects on psychological wellbeing, blood pressure and heart rate,' Seppälä continues. 'By activating the parasympathetic nervous system, in charge of "resting and digesting", breathing can train the body to be calmer.' If it can work on ex-soldiers, then surely it could work for me.

But yogic breathing can also make a big difference when working out; once you've practised 'learning to breathe' through your nose, it might be a good idea to apply the technique to exercise, as oxygen and carbon dioxide are thought to be best exchanged nasally^{***}. On the in-breath, the diaphragm contracts, expanding the lungs and drawing air through the nose. It's then pulled through the windpipe into the lungs' tiny air chambers. The oxygenated blood flows to the heart and is pumped around the body enabling cellular respiration (needed for most cellular activity). More oxygen in and more CO₂ out equals more energy generated.

But it's not all science. During sex, conscious breathing can heighten intimacy if you synchronise your breath with your lover's. In resistance training, breathing can be used as a way to hold the torso correctly. 'Exhalation engages the core, which supports the spine, reducing chance of injury,' says Neil Dimmock, Head of Fitness at Ten Health & Fitness. Breathwork can also give us better control and focus, according to Michael Townsend Williams in his book, *Do Breathe: Calm Your Mind, Find Focus, Get Stuff Done*. Townsend was an advertising producer who was 'managing an alcohol addiction that imperfectly masked a life out of control.' He reached a nadir when his brother died falling from his apartment

balcony, but his salvation was breathwork. The book explains how using the breath as an anchor can improve our focus, flow and productivity. 'Awareness of our breath enables us to get in the zone to do our best work,' he tells me. The response to the book was so strong, Townsend Williams launched an app, Breathe Sync, with Lululemon, designed to 'help us all breathe a bit better.' He notes, 'So many different people enjoyed *Do Breathe*, from entrepreneurs to someone who bought a copy for a friend who was breathless because of lung cancer, who told me the book kept her going until the very end.'

Breathing is free. And you can begin to practise it properly just about anywhere. I do it at work, in the stationery cupboard. I swear it makes a difference to how much I achieve in a day. You can even do it on the tube or in the checkout line. It might just transform your life. ■

HOW TO BREATHE

by Rebecca Dennis,
transformational
breathing guru

Prop yourself up on a bed with pillows behind you, so your chest is higher than your legs.

Make sure you are warm and comfortable, and that your head and neck are supported.

Place your hands on your lower abdomen.

Relax your jaw and widely open your mouth. Take a deep inhalation – your belly should rise like a balloon – and exhale with a quick sigh.

Stay present: inhalation should be twice as long as the exhalation, which should be quiet like a soft sigh.

Keep the breath connected with no pauses. Repeat for 1-2 minutes. Rest for one minute as you return to a normal breathing pattern.