

She's the woman behind THE health fad of 2017. But...

Can you really boost your brain just by deep breathing?

Breath of fresh air: Rebecca Dennis, transformational breathing expert

by Louise Atkinson

AMID the buzz swirling around the biggest health and beauty trends for 2017, one — transformational breathing — appears to be pushing itself to the fore. This meditative breathing method is *huge* in the U.S. and is fast spreading across Europe.

There's so much excitement that Vogue magazine is calling it 'the new yoga' and the latest way to beat anxiety. Though it might sound like hot air, apparently, this is nothing like ordinary breathing.

The idea is that, done properly, a few minutes of regular, meditative breathwork every day can induce a powerful state of calm, lower blood pressure, sharpen your thinking, improve your health and even keep you looking and feeling young.

Now a new book by Britain's leading transformational breath coach, Rebecca Dennis, is bringing the practice into the mainstream with simple exercises anyone can do at any time. No joss sticks necessary, no whale music or nettle tea — just inhale and exhale properly. That's it.

There's no doubt I'm going through a time of change in my life and on a relentless daily battle against the creeping ravages of age. Peri-menopause for me isn't about hot flushes and night sweats, but pockets of anxiety that swell out of nowhere and build to a maelstrom melded with a low mood and an inability to hold two thoughts in my head at once.

Could better breathing help?

I'm all up for trying something new, but, ahem, I already know how to breathe. I'm actually quite good at it. My speciality is the 'huff and puff' that rises from deep in my chest when I realize my three teenage children and my husband are secretly nestling their mobile phones in their laps at meal times despite my 'no texting at the table' ban.

I'm also adept at the 'sharp intake of breath' when the bill for the boys' school ski trip comes in, and I can hold my breath for minutes if it means I can get in and out of one of their bedrooms without being intoxicated by clouds of pungent deodorant.

My day is peppered with sighs. It's become an involuntary punctuation that signals the completion of a tricky task, the arrival of a torturous email, the shortening of an already impossible deadline.

Added to all that, I have a deeply ingrained cynicism for all things 'woo-woo'.

With my husband's not entirely encouraging words ('mumbo' and 'jumbo') ringing in my ears, I book a 90-minute one-to-one with Rebecca Dennis. She charges £125, but group sessions are cheaper at £55 for an intense three hours.

I'm shown into a studio on the top floor of a London yoga centre. We sit side by side on a futon on the floor, while Rebecca explains the principles.

Proper breathing involves the tummy and the chest (both of which should expand as we inhale and contract as we exhale), but most of us only use a third of our respiratory systems.

Fear, sadness and worry can make breathing short and tight and over time these thought patterns are caught in a loop.

SHE says shallow breathing sends messages to the brain we are in 'fight or flight' survival mode and this spikes levels of stress hormones (cortisol and adrenaline), which can lead to poor digestion, chronic anxiety and a weak immune system.

In correcting these bad habits, we can release the tensions that might be tied up in our subconscious and return to a happier state.

Perhaps noticing my scepticism, she adds: 'Think of it like taking your breath to the gym for an MoT. Being here is about learning to use it fully to your advantage.'

As I lie down, Rebecca asks what I'd like to achieve from this session and I'm flummoxed. World peace?

Eternal youth? I plump for 'I'd like to be more relaxed'.

She explains the breathing technique: you inhale slowly through your mouth in a way that makes your belly and chest rise, then puff out a short exhalation, and immediately inhale again. The inhalation should be twice as long as the exhalation.

Meanwhile, Rebecca pushes down on acupressure points on my belly, chest, legs, shoulders and jaw to check for and release tension.

The breathing is counter-intuitive. Rebecca has to remind me to open my mouth wider, to use the base of my tummy not just the top part under my ribs, to stop pausing and start my next breath straight after the first. Very quickly my mouth feels

dry and my brain is frazzled. As I get into a rhythm my mind starts to drift ('How long have I got to do this for?'), but each time, Rebecca gently urges me, with a whisper and a prod, to focus on the breathing.

Three or four times during the session she instructs me to stop and clench my fists and pummel my hands and feet on to the mattress while making an 'ahhhh' sound.

At first it feels ridiculous, but I'm guessing it's a tension reliever because when we resume the breathing practice again she says 'better'. Throughout the process, Rebecca whispers key 'affirmations', such as 'I let go of any tension and worries' and 'I love and accept myself'.

Bizarrely, some strike a chord and I feel my bottom lip quiver. That's strange. I don't feel sad and I'm not the sort to well up in public.

After an hour I am allowed to return to normal breathing. My hands and arms are tingling and I feel drained, but calm. Ordinary breathing seems absurdly easy.

At the end, Rebecca tells me I've done well, but my pattern of breathing indicates hidden pain and she

urges me to return for more sessions. She says I should worry less about others and be kinder to myself. For some reason an image of my mother comes into my mind and without warning, I burst into tears.

My mother died of cancer when she was 52. I was 21 and it's a deep sadness I've learned to live with. But this year I turned 52 and the coincidence isn't lost on my subconscious.

REBECA hugs me and tells me I've been brave. She says my face looks clearer. I glance in the mirror and see only blotchy, tear-streaked cheeks. I'm shattered. The next day I feel clearer and content.

There isn't hard science to support the transformational breathing ethos, but I suspect the true power lies in the way it provides a long, guided meditation session.

Neuroscientists have conducted brain scan studies to prove meditation creates positive changes in the brain, boosting immunity and decreasing pain and stress.

Logically, learning to breathe fully and deeply has got to be a good thing for your body, too. A study from Harvard University reveals people who meditate daily age more slowly than the rest of us.

Rebecca says I have 'much to work on' and I book a second session. My brittle defence mechanisms might have served me well over the years, but I think I'm happy to shed a bit more emotional baggage, especially if I end up looking and feeling younger in the process.

■ *AND Breathe by Rebecca Dennis (Orion, £14.99). Visit transformationalbreath.co.uk for more information.*

Is it just ME?

Or is the office whip-round excruciating?

ONE of the benefits of being self-employed, along with the fact I'm unlikely to sack, bully or sexually harass myself, is that I've been freed from the social and financial demands of office life.

Is there anything more annoying than being compelled to stump up for wedding presents, retirement gifts, teas, coffees or donations to a 'charity challenge' for co-workers you may not actually like?

Yes: being forced to buy them drinks and cakes and listen to them drone on about their tedious lives, even though all you have in common is a place of work.

A survey of white-collar workers found that the cost of keeping our workmates sweet tots up to £1,000 a year, or £40,000 over a career.

During my years of office toil, I'd have happily handed over a grand to get out of having to think of something witty to write in the 45th birthday card for Dorothy in accounts. ('Sorry your life is so tragic?' 'It's been a

There's nothing more annoying than stumping up for co-workers you don't like

pleasure working 350ft away from you again this year?' 'You make me feel so much better about myself?')

Just as we've grown accustomed to the idea that work should be 'fulfilling' rather than something to be endured in exchange for cash, so we've come to think of our colleagues as friends.

Actually, having a chum at work is a bonus rather than the natural state of things, but bosses foster the culture of matiness to get us to work more productively as a team.

I first realised how dodgy all this was more than 20 years ago when the entire 300-odd staff in my then workplace were morally blackmailed, through peer pressure, to stump up £20 each for a retiring senior colleague. He then invited precisely ten people to his leaving do.

Never mind the camaraderie, the chumminess of office culture is a con, and I'm glad to have stepped out of its clammy, costly embrace.

Above all, I'm glad to be free of Dorothy in accounts.

Nick Curtis

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DESIGNER SCENT
HAVE a cosy evening in with Tom Dixon's Fire candle, selfridges.com



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BAKE up a storm with this Morphy Richards mixer, achica.com



RED LIGHT
ADD colour to your home, madeindesign.co.uk

Styling: LIZ HEMMINGS