

The new way to boost your brain: why I hired a 'breath coach'

You might not think you need someone to teach you how to breathe, but **Bridget Harrison** says a fashionable new technique has had profound effects on her

I am lying on the floor with one hand on my belly, which I am trying to inflate like a balloon as I breathe in. I inhale through my mouth, try to send the air right down to my abdomen, exhale, then repeat. "Now connect each breath, like a wave," instructs Aimee Hartley, my breath coach. I won't lie — it's hard work. It's not like the nice bit at the end of a yoga class when you just lie there and breathe.

An hour later it's a different story. After getting the hang of breathing this way, I don't know where the time has gone. I feel as if I have been in another state — at times almost asleep, then suddenly overcome by emotion, during which Hartley told me to drum my feet and shout "ahahahaha" to let it all out.

I emerge a little dazed to find that a striking sense of calm has descended upon me. All those worries suddenly feel less insurmountable. It's an amazing feeling that stays with me for several weeks.

Right now there is a big buzz about the power of "conscious-connected breathing", also known as Transformational Breath, which is a breathing technique that doesn't come as part of a yoga or meditation practice, but as the central event. Advocates say that it helps with everything from anxiety and sleep issues to PTSD. American *Vogue* has called breathing the "new yoga".

"We take some 20,000 breaths a day, but

A daily two-minute breathing exercise

- Prop yourself up on the bed at a semi-reclined angle so that 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, a few inches below the navel. Relax the jaw, open the mouth wide, and take a deep inhalation through the mouth. The belly should rise like a balloon. Exhale through the mouth with a quick, gentle sigh.
- Focus on the inhale and the exhale. Inhalation should be twice as long as the exhalation. Exhalation should be quiet and relaxed, like a soft sigh. Your mouth may feel dry at first.
- Keep the breath "connected", so no pauses between breaths, and coming in and out like a wave motion. Repeat for 1-2 mins and notice any physical sensations in the body.
- Rest for 1 min as you return to a normal pattern, breathing through the nose. Do this every morning to feel calmer and more focused.

Rebecca Dennis

most of us barely notice how we do it," says Hartley, a certified breath coach who runs one-to-one sessions (£125 for 90 minutes) and workshops called The Breathing Room in east London and the City. "But by changing the way we breathe, we can have a powerful effect, not only on our physical wellbeing, but on our mental and emotional state too."

At the foundation of all breath work, Hartley explains, is the idea that the way we inhale and exhale sends a message to our brain about what kind of state we should be in: relaxed, or tense and ready for danger. That when we breathe to our optimum — that's really filling up our lungs and sending our breath right down into our bellies — we better serve our body systems by supplying them with more oxygen, and send the message to our brain that we are calm.

"Belly breathing for a prolonged period helps us to stimulate our parasympathetic nervous system," she says. "In this state our heart rate slows, our blood pressure lowers and our blood supply is directed to nurture our digestive and reproductive systems rather than our muscles and brains."

Crucially, says Hartley, when in this state our sympathetic nervous system — our "fight or flight" state — becomes less active. "This is the state that raises our heart rate, our blood pressure and respiratory rate, and is also responsible for releasing the stress hormones adrenaline and cortisol into our bodies."

Numerous studies show that deep breathing promotes calmness, and the relationship between the breath and good health has been promoted by eastern medicine for centuries. Yet the mechanics of how the breath links to the brain is only just beginning to be understood.

In December a team of neuroscientists at the Feinberg School of Medicine in the United States announced that they had discovered that the act of breathing in through the mouth creates electrical activity in the amygdala and hippocampus, which are the areas of the brain that affect emotional judgments and memory recall.

The neuroscientists found that when people were inhaling fast through their mouths, they were better able to identify a fearful face and make rapid decisions. "Our body's innate response to fear with faster breathing could have a positive impact

on brain function and result in faster response times to dangerous stimuli in the environment," says Christina Zelano, one of the researchers.

This may be beneficial in times of real danger, says Hartley. The problem is that most of us breathe in a rapid, short and shallow way for too much of the time, and we don't even realise we are doing it. "Thanks to tension we carry in those muscles that serve our respiratory system — our shoulders, neck, throat and intercostals — we tend to take air into our upper chest and no farther, and thus fail to take advantage of our full lung capacity. Seventy per cent of the people I see are fast, shallow, chest breathers."

It's a figure echoed by Dr Judith Kravitz, the founder of the Transformational Breath Foundation, who for the past 40 years has studied the way people breathe. In her experience, "Most people are only using about 25 to 30 per cent of their lung capacity." Today, says Hartley, we also suffer from what she terms "tech apnea". "We stop breathing altogether when glancing at texts,

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At times I'm almost asleep, then suddenly I'm overcome with emotion

emails and social-media feeds." And she's right. After she points this out, I notice how often I fleetingly hold my breath when reaching for my iPhone.

Breathing in a way that signals to our brain that we are in danger even when we are not causes us to release adrenaline and cortisol into our body when we don't need it, says Hartley. "The feeling is like having low-level anxiety all the time, but you may be so used to you think it is normal."

Breath coaches say that the prolonged "conscious-connected breathing" that you do in a one-to-one session or a workshop can also help you to release long-held tension and anger that your body may be storing on a subconscious level.

Rebecca Dennis, one of the UK's leading breath coaches, treats clients with a range of issues, including stress, depression, addiction, trauma, and abuse. She is the author of a new book on the subject called *And Breathe* and runs a popular breath clinic in central London, and workshops and retreats called Breathing Tree.

"We cling on to tension and stress long after the event that caused it and, as such, our body is like a biological recording of our past," she explains. "When working with 'conscious-connected breathing', we create a powerful energy circuit to help us to clear all those blockages."

Transformational Breathing sessions are often combined with acupressure and "body-mapping", which aims to identify and release tension. At some points during a session breathers are encouraged to shout out, stamp and let it all go. It's a hugely cathartic process.

"A good breath coach will identify where each of us holds tension and will help to release that during a breathing session," says Dennis. "It's like therapy without the talking."

She's also speaking from experience. She gave up a job in the music industry to retrain as a breathing coach after it helped her to overcome chronic depression. On medication for 15 years, she attempted to take her life nine years ago. Shortly afterwards she tried a Transformational Breath session with a friend.

"The first time I walked into a workshop, I did not know what to expect. I'll try to describe my first experience. I could feel every cell in my body letting go. I was crying and sweating. It was intense. I had no control and totally surrendered to the maelstrom of emotions and physical reactions. Afterwards I felt lighter and, for the first time in a very long time, I was full of hope. I also noticed I could make decisions more clearly and felt really positive."

My experience has been similar. Since my first session I regularly book in for some "breathing". I turned to it when agonising over a schooling decision for my child, and when wrestling with a job offer. Each time I emerge with the same powerful feeling of calm. Breathing doesn't make my decisions for me, but it helps me to feel that, whatever path I take, it will all be OK.

breathingtree.co.uk
And Breathe by Rebecca Dennis is published by Orion Spring, £14.99



Bridget Harrison with Aimee Hartley

KATIE WILSON FOR THE TIMES