

Wellness from Within - October 2005

Breathing with a purpose By Jennifer Powers

Take a deep breath. Good. Now take another, but this time follow the air as it flows into your body. Where did it go? Mostly to the chest? Abdomen? A combination of the two? Why does it matter?

The way we breathe plays a crucial part in determining how we feel, and how we feel often affects the way we breathe. So, let's say you were interested in getting in touch with your emotions, and (dare I say) controlling them, you might want to start with your breathing.

Self-observation will demonstrate how this works. The next time you feel stressed out, stop and notice where you direct your breath as you inhale. For many people under stress, it goes straight to the upper chest region. Although an instinctive "fight or flight" reaction, chest breathing can be counterproductive because it creates even more tension. Zohra Campbell, a chiropractor and yoga instructor at the Indigo Wellness Center, explains that "breathing to the chest causes the neck muscles to tighten and limits the amount of air we can physically take in, leading us to feel even more anxious. If you can get in touch with *abdominal* breathing you can be more grounded and focused on any situation at hand."

What? Breathe to the abdomen? And push my stomach out making it look bigger than it is? INDEED!

Abdominal breathing allows for greater air intake, and can actually slow down your breathing, triggering a rhythmic calming effect. Instant stress reduction! If that doesn't convince you, breathing abdominally may also improve your health. According to Dennis Lewis at authentic-breathing.com, "The downward and upward movements of the diaphragm, and the outward and inward movements of the belly help to massage all our internal organs. This 'internal massage' has a healthful influence on digestion, elimination, blood flow, and our ability to ward off bacterial and viral invaders".

To practice abdominal breathing, simply lie on your back and place your hand on your belly. Inhale and direct the breath towards your hand. If done correctly, your hand should rise and fall with each inhale and exhale. This might seem unnatural at first, but if practiced on a regular basis, it can become your natural breathing pattern. Overtime, you will discover the powerful influence breathing can have on the way you feel, think and react...even in the most stressful situations. Happy breathing!



Quotable Quote: "Smile, breathe and go slowly." –Thich Nhat Hanh