



A Breath of Fresh Air

Conscious Breathing During Your Bodywork Session

By Cindy Williams, LMT

Ever notice after a stressful circumstance that the body's innate response is to take a deep breath once the potential threat has passed? As soon as it is over, you might say, "Now, I can breathe a sigh of relief." Or, perhaps, you meet someone who is uplifting and enjoyable to be around; you might describe that person as "a breath of fresh air."

Breath not only gives life through delivering essential oxygen to the body's cells for fuel and removing carbon dioxide, it also restores the body and mind to a state of balance when stressful experiences "take our breath away."

BODYWORK AND BREATH

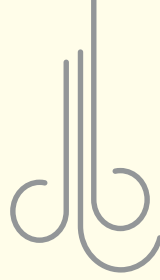
If you are alive, you experience stress. There is no way around it. Stress can show up in myriad ways, whether good stress

(first date, new job, travel) or bad stress (traffic, tight deadlines, losses). Either way, it's not easy to navigate, in large part due to the body's natural reactions designed to keep you safe no matter the nature of the stimulus. Fear, danger, and excitement are all perceived the same way on a physiological level. The sympathetic nervous system comes to our aid with responses that prepare us for action.

In and of themselves, stress responses are gifts, even if they don't necessarily feel that way in the midst of experiencing them. For example, shaking informs you that adrenaline is circulating throughout your body, providing energy should you need to stand up and face something—or turn and run away. Adrenaline tells the heart to speed up so that enough blood and oxygen can be pumped to the tissues, especially muscle tissue that is required to effectively move you to action. Heart rate and breathing also kick up a few notches to supply oxygen to the brain so you have better capacity for navigating the immediate threat, whether real or perceived. All these are good, right?

Well, maybe. The answer is yes, *unless* the stimuli are constant and not balanced with restoration and rejuvenation. It takes a lot of energy to maintain persistent action. Unfortunately, we live in a fast-paced world full of stimuli pelting us from every direction. Even without your conscious

Try This Exercise



The positive benefits you receive from a massage can be prolonged with very simple, daily breathing practice between sessions.



1. Get comfortable, either sitting in a chair with your feet in solid connection with the floor, or lie down on your back with your arms at your sides, palms facing up. Feel free to use a small rolled towel under the curve of your neck, as well as a pillow under your knees to create the most comfort possible. Close your eyes.
2. Start by not changing anything about your breathing. The first step to changing anything is to notice it as it currently is. What do you notice? When you inhale, where does the breath stop before turning around to be exhaled? In the chest? The abdomen? This could also be a good time to notice any slight shaking, sweating, elevated heart rate, clenching in the jaw, etc. Be in tune with your nervous system responses as they are right now.
3. Place both of your hands over the upper chest and clavicles. Feel the rise and fall of this area as you inhale and exhale. Do this for 3–5 rounds of breath.
4. Next, place your hands on each side of your rib cage, palms resting on the ribs and fingertips pointing toward each other (toward the midline of your body). Notice the expansion and contraction of your rib cage, front to back and side to side. How much movement is there? Breathe normally, simply observing without judgement, for another 3–5 breaths.
5. Place your hands over your abdomen. Notice it ebb and flow as well. Or, notice if it isn't moving much at all. This is common, so again, no judgement. Repeat for 3–5 rounds of breath.
6. Now, begin to choose your breath. Each time you inhale, envision drawing the breath deep into your belly, so your belly expands up into your hands. As you exhale, gently use your abdominal muscles to lightly squeeze the air back up and out of your nose. Practice this for 3–5 rounds of breath.
7. Return your palms to each side of your rib cage. As you inhale, expand the breath into your entire rib cage area. The ribs can expand front to back and side to side. Fill the vast space of your rib cage with life-giving air. Exhale, and use your rib cage (along with your abdominals) to gently press the air back out of your nose. Repeat for 3–5 breaths.
8. Finally, return your hands to the upper chest and clavicle area. As you continue directing your breath down into the fullness of your rib cage and belly, notice if anything has changed in the upper chest and neck. Does this area move less? More freely? With less tension? Observe for a final 3–5 rounds.
9. To bring the practice to completion, simply return your arms to your sides, palms face up, and notice your overall being. It is likely you have released thoughts about your day, what you have to do this week, what you didn't get done yesterday. You might feel calm, relaxed, and even sleepy. Or you might feel energized and rejuvenated, ready to get up and go again. Either way, through this simple exercise, you have used your breath to slow the heart rate, release muscle tension, and calm hyperactivity. The practice is so simple, yet so powerful. Bringing together the power of breath, presence, and therapeutic touch will induce a state of health and well-being, and restore vital physiological functions.



awareness of all these stimuli, your brain and body are aware and working hard to keep you safe and alive through all the twists, turns, and detours of life. How this translates into something worthy of your attention is when you begin to have unfavorable physical symptoms that negatively affect your health and well-being, such as agitation, anxiety, headaches, insomnia, neck and shoulder tension, and poor digestion.

Luckily, you have two powerful tools readily available to you: breath and bodywork. During stress, breath can be shallow, meaning that instead of inhaling deeply, which can be monitored by the expansion of the rib cage and belly, inhaling is limited to the upper chest and neck area; the purpose for this is efficiency. The brain seeks ways to accomplish tasks as efficiently as possible, and breathing during stress is no exception. Since you need blood and oxygen to get to the brain and body tissues as quickly as possible, hormones speed up your heart and breathing rates automatically, and your breath becomes short, quick, and shallow. When this pattern is repeated due to persistent stress, the muscles responsible for assisting in elevating your rib cage during breathing take on a more primary role. The result is overused and overstressed neck and upper chest muscles. Headaches, along with neck and shoulder tension, tend to shortly follow.

Some of the most profound massage sessions I have experienced as a massage therapist are with clients who consciously breathe during the session. Receiving massage and bodywork is an exceptional way to cultivate conscious, deep breathing, soften those overworked neck and shoulder muscles (and the domino effect into other parts of the body), and trigger the parasympathetic nervous system (the rest and digest state) to come forth and relieve the sympathetic nervous system of its guard duties—even if only for an hour. When I'm working with a client who is choosing to take deep breaths into the fullness of the rib cage and belly—front to back and side to side—and who is completely present with the relaxation of the experience, the muscles respond to touch and technique much more easily. It's like butter under a heat lamp! Clients report better sleep, better digestion, less tension, and a more peaceful mind-set after a massage using deep breathing as a healing tool.

BRING BALANCE TO THE BODY


At your next massage appointment, talk to your massage therapist about breath. Let her know you

Did You Know?

The lungs breathe in between 2,100 and 2,400 gallons of air each day—the amount needed to oxygenate the approximate 2,400 gallons of blood pumped through the heart each day.

Source: *National Geographic*

would like to incorporate conscious breathing into your session, and ask if she has any suggestions or, even better, if she is willing to take deep breaths with you. As a client, I find when my massage therapist breathes deeply and consciously, it facilitates staying in touch with my own breath.

A breath of fresh air is all it takes to bring balance back to your body and being, and to reduce the symptoms of chronic stress. It's an extraordinary and free “service” to add to your next massage or bodywork session, and it offers lasting results. And consequently, when you consciously choose breaths of fresh air, you become a breath of fresh air to everyone around you. 

Cindy Williams has served the massage profession as a practitioner, school administrator, instructor, curriculum developer, and mentor since 2000. She enjoys the challenge of blending structure with creative flow to provide balance in her classroom, bodywork practice, and life.

