

Every *Breath* Counts

Maximizing our breathing potential through respiration

BY LAWRENCE BISCONTINI, MA

"To the degree that your breathing is limited and unconscious is the degree that your life is limited and unconscious." So goes an ancient Indian saying. As fitness classes with and without equipment come and go, the only real common thread that connects all fitness types and disciplines is the breath. Truly, all class participants unite in that they engage in breathing, even though every other aspect of a class could differ. Paradoxically, breathing continues to be one of the least-addressed disciplines of group fitness (Nyklíček). To be sure, while cues like "keep breathing," and "don't forget to breathe" permeate many an instructor's lexicon, rare is the class that focuses exclusively on breathing. Certified professionals are responsible for maintaining safety and for creating appropriate exercise prescriptions, but they rarely dedicate enough time to show clients how conscious breathing techniques can empower their workouts and lives.

As we explore unique breathing techniques, try to stand or lie supine comfortably, preferably with the stomach empty. While sitting is a comfortable position, having the hips in flexion actually can inhibit the full breathing mechanism, since full diaphragmatic movement can be restricted because the diaphragm shares some attachments with some hip flexors (Boyd-Wilson). Have tissues nearby in case you need them.

Although many breathing techniques are available, the options are finite. One can breathe through the nose exclusively, through the mouth exclusively, or in combination with those two. When the nose is involved, one or both nostrils, called "nares," can be used in individuals without a head cold or deviated septum.

Perhaps the most common breathing technique is nose breathing. Yogis in India have long referred to the nose as a source of respiration, stating the mouth's purpose is for feeding and communication. Of yogic pranayama, or breathing techniques, perhaps the most ubiquitous is ujjayi, used to bring awareness to the breath, improve concentration, and actually warm the body a few degrees Fahrenheit when practiced appropriately for longer than 5 minutes (Ospina).

Try This: Ujjayi, as in Yoga (India)

Get a small mirror and hold it in one hand. Sit comfortably upright without using the back of a chair. Holding the mirror a few inches in front of your mouth, inhale through the nose deeply and comfortably. Exhale through the mouth to fog up the mirror. Notice how the breath both *sounds and feels* in the back of the throat. Do this for three more repetitions. Next, put down the mirror and close your mouth. Continue inhaling and exhaling, but now exclusively through the nose, making the same sound in the back of the throat as if the mirror were still there. Notice how mindfully you must concentrate to be able to accomplish this technique.

Uses: Use this breathing technique to center yourself, to increase concentration, to bring focus to a workout, and even to increase awareness and the slowing down to some strength moves, as you are able. Because the air travels so far in this technique, between the nares and the bronchioles in the lungs, its passage helps to increase core temperature a few degrees Fahrenheit after 5 minutes of practice (Farhi).

Sometimes breathing becomes more labored, intense and faster, and the mouth needs to get involved because it allows more air to get into the lungs in a shorter amount of time as intensity increases. Opening the mouth and using it for respiration sometimes is appropriate, but not being aware of the moment this happens deprives the individual of another way to connect to the breath. Gregg Cook, instructor at Equinox clubs and G Series Fit Team member based in New York City, starts his cycling classes with a gentle notice of the breath when intensity is low. "Usually everyone can breathe through the nose in the first song before we increase our intensity. I just want them to stay conscious of the moment when they have to open their mouths later, working at a higher intensity." Keeping an overall awareness of breath can induce a deeper sense of control, never having to "catch one's breath" if one always keeps awareness of it.

Try This: Complete Exhalation, as in "forced expiration" from Pilates (Germany and USA)

Place your right hand, fingers spread open, over your chest so that the thumb points toward the throat and the smallest finger points to (or touches) the belly button. Place your left hand just below this area, fingers spread open, touching the left thumb to the navel where the smallest finger of the right hand finishes. Inhale through the nose and exhale through the mouth as it opens naturally. For some, emphasizing a sound like a prolonged "shhhh," "ahhhh," or "chhhh" on the exhalation helps coordinate breathing with concentration. Without forcing the breath into any unnatural movement, inhale and exhale more slowly. Notice the feeling under the right and left hand. When you inhale, try to connect with the diaphragm moving downward under the left hand, feeling it rise. Toward the second half of the inhalation, notice how the inhalation moves to a more superior cavity as the lungs expand, raising the right hand. As you exhale, try to do the opposite action, emptying the upper chest area first, finishing with the lower belly. As you start to exhale, notice how the right hand over the lungs starts to lower first as the lungs begin to empty, and the last thing you feel is the left hand returning to its original, low position between the pelvis' ASIS bones.

Uses: The forced expiration breathing helps exercisers generate more force with concentric contractions (even when practiced quickly), helps exercisers work at higher intensities

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to process oxygen/carbon-dioxide exchange more quickly, and helps prolong the exhalation during certain exercises such as Pilates (Rydeard, Grossman).

Pursed Lip Breathing: as in T'ai Chi (China)

Another breathing technique comes from China in the ancient disciplines of T'ai Chi. Though this technique definitely helps balance "chi," or energy, in the body during the practice of T'ai Chi, the technique offers benefits for many who are not practicing this softer martial art.

Try This:

Pursed lip breathing involves inhaling through the nose and exhaling through the mouth, and the lips are only partly opened, forming pursed lips. This technique helps to regulate strength and control movements without going too fast. Breathing should be mindful and slow, but there is no emphasis on when to inhale and exhale; it should flow freely. Finally, the tongue is placed at the palate, just behind the top teeth, and remains there with the slightest possible pressure for the remainder of the practice. This helps stimulate neck flexors, which contribute to upper-neck and head posture and sort of gives the tongue a fixed "insertion" point to anchor it and improve posture, balance and concentration. In the practice, anchoring the tongue in this way also joins the many meridians of energy in the body in one central place, called the "bai hwei" (pronounced "bye way"). No sound should be heard during inhalation or exhalation.

Uses: The American Lung Association affirms that this technique can decrease the sensation of hot flashes, can assist asthmatics in any stage of an asthma attack, and can improve oxygen flow to the brain (www.webmd.com/lung/copd/features/breathing-copd). In addition, this technique can also improve balance stability at the ankles, reduce neck tension, improve neck flexor strength, align the meridian pathways of energy in the body, and even contribute to better gait (Chek).

T'ai Chi pursed lip breathing can help exercisers remain comfortable while engaged in supine core strengthening exercises when the head is unsupported, assist in standing balance and gait, and help strength exercisers slow down their breathing and contractions.

Other Techniques

To be sure, other breathing techniques exist. Reverse breathing involves inhaling through the nose and exhaling through the mouth. Alternate nostril breathing involves breathing through

one nare exclusively for a set amount of breaths. Laughing involves simultaneous nose and mouth inhalation and exhalation, respectively.

The Benefits

Using just the three common breathing techniques explored here not only can deepen one's sense of relaxation, but can also transfer to the fitness environment where the breath can heighten one's total workout experience by enhancing focus, visualization, the relaxation response and even intensity (Germer). AF

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