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DO YOU
HAVE TOO
MANY
FRIENDS?
DEFT AND DEFINITIVE
CULLING STRATEGIES

And... breathe

The secret of improved health and well-being? It's as easy as breathing in and out.

By Francesca White

You're doing it as you read this. Unconsciously, not thinking about it. Breathing, that is. See how easy it is? How naturally it comes? Now imagine we'd told you that by doing this everyday, run-of-the-mill thing that you could be happier. That you could stand taller and sleep sounder, that your blood pressure could plummet and your energy levels will skyrocket. That by mastering your inhale and finessing your exhale, you could become the most fabulous, successful, productive person you know. Wouldn't that be something worth looking into?

Proper breathing is on the short but punchy list of things that you should already be doing instinctively. You should say please and thank you, and you should hold open doors; you should look someone in the eye when you shake their hand, you shouldn't slump when you sit down. And you should breathe well. Why wouldn't you? Not doing so is utterly self-defeating. You're sort of killing yourself by not. Alan Dolan, otherwise known as the 'Breath Guru', agrees. 'You can survive without food and water for days. The world-record holder in free diving can hold his breath for something like nine minutes, but mere mortals can manage only a couple of minutes,' he says from his swanky Lanzarote pad, where he runs Breathing Space retreats (breathguru.com). 'We've got these amazing lungs, but we're not accessing them.'

Obviously, you already know how to breathe. We inhale approximately 20,000 times each day, meaning we rack up more than seven million lungfuls per year. The chances are you've got the hang of it by now. But to get you breathing *properly*, Caroline Kremer (carolinekremer.com) is a good person to know. If you lie on the table of her South Molton Street treatment room, she'll start by prodding, massaging and sort of 'rolling' tiny, focused points on your body. What she's doing is called the Bowen Technique: a series of movements that loosen the fascia – the web-like membrane of connective tissue that holds all your muscles, blood vessels and nerves in place – to help the body work as it should. And it's crucial for proper breathing. So she'll work away, lightly, with minimum pressure, for a couple of seconds – then she'll wander off for a bit. You, on the other hand, may lie there, enraged that you've been taken in by this conniving woman, seething that you've fallen for what seems like a load of nonsense, until – WHAM. You are practically comatose, out cold, drooling on the table.

To clarify: the Bowen Technique works on the principle that the body already knows how to reset itself – it just needs to remember how to do it. And it needs approximately 90 seconds to do so. This, readers, is when the magic happens. Your clever body

automatically, intuitively, works to realign itself, falling back into its natural, better position: realigning your shoulders, your hips, your ribs. What this does is open up your ribcage so there is space for the breath to get to work.

Ah yes, the breathing. Kremer is obsessed with exhalation – which should be even and slow, and it should take longer than you think too. Sounds weird when you think that proper breathing should focus on drawing air IN, right? But here's the method: putting your breath under pressure, forcing every last drop of stale air out of your lungs and emptying them fully, makes the next breath that you take incredibly easy and natural. Try it. Lie down (you can do it in bed before you've even got up for the morning!), with your arms by your sides, hands facing upwards. Inhale normally, through your nose, then (and this bit is crucial) exhale SLOWLY – making a hissing, snake-like noise as you go. If you sound like a deflating balloon, then you're doing it correctly. When you think that you can't push out a single bit more, when you feel your stomach tightening and your muscles screaming in protest, hold it – then BREATHE NATURALLY.

Straight away, your lungs fill with air, right up to your shoulders: great big lungfuls of delicious, fresh oxygen. There's no force behind it, no feeling of the breath getting 'stuck' halfway. It's like the most natural thing in the world. And the feeling? Euphoric. Like being on drugs, but without actually having to take drugs. Figuratively speaking, anyway. You can also do it with your arms crossed above your head or flung out to the side like an aeroplane.

Short-term highs aside, here's why you should take this breathing stuff on board. You will feel genuinely, tangibly better for doing it. You're toning your diaphragm (which you can't see, but it's good for it), and you're resetting your clavicle (so your neck muscles will relax and your spine will sit straighter). You're massaging your heart, getting the blood pumping properly and sending oxygen firing off around the body. Proper breathers report that jaw grinding ceases, digestion improves and they can concentrate for longer. And performance levels soar. (Kremer, who specialises in working with professional athletes, says that her triathletes consistently achieve better times.) You're boosting your immunity, and you're lowering your stress levels without having to sit on a therapist's sofa. Best of all, it's FREE.

It's also quick. (Kremer's technique takes 10 minutes to teach, tops.)

You can breathe better anywhere: in the car, in the shower, hunched over your desk, with your shoulders up around your ears – or at home, lying on your bed. So, you may have spent eight minutes reading this feature, and another three trying to fine-tune your hissing technique but – if you've paid attention – you'll have learnt something truly transformative. Try it and see. □

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