

Ep #22: Better Breathing



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With Your Host

Susi Hatley

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You're listening to *From Pain to Possibility* with Susi Hately. You will hear Susi's best ideas on how to reduce or even eradicate your pain and learn how to listen to your body when it whispers so you don't have to hear it scream. And now here's your host, Susi Hately.

With this episode of *From Pain to Possibility* I want to dig into the mechanics of breathing and I want to share a little bit about my own journey into breathing and the yoga practice and then share an exercise that you can explore.

When I did my teacher training, we talked a lot about pranayama. Shortly after getting my teacher training, I went over to India and I studied with a yoga therapist who was also a physician. When we went into the shala there there were probably six to nine different yoga halls that were just filled to the brim with local people who were looking for yoga as a way to support them with whatever condition they had. Whoever came in, whatever condition that they had they were given yoga as a therapeutic modality.

I was really stunned after my teacher training and all the focus that was on pranayama in my teacher training to be in India and to learn from the teachers there that most of their clientele, most of their students were not ready for pranayama. When I asked more deeply, they just simply said they weren't ready.

As I watched and sat for the six or eight weeks that I was there I started to get an understanding that there needed to be a good mechanical basis, a good understanding of one's awareness of what their breath is before they can even get into pranayama. What I understood then about pranayama is it really – this is going to sound funny, it really wasn't about breath, although it is, it's not really about breath. It's more about the subtle energy that our breathing practice can take us to.

So, without really truly knowing about breathing you can't really get to that subtle place, not effectively anyway. When I came back from that training I had a bit of a different mindset and I took some of the exercises that I had

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learned in teacher training and that I was collecting from a variety of different sources and I started to utilize them as awareness techniques of really introducing someone to their breathing.

What I quickly saw is the relationship between their body and their breathing. Now, with my kinesiology background, my understanding of movement, my understanding of myofascial dynamics I really started to see that impact. Now, what was really interesting is I would have people who had not disclosed that they had a lung condition of sorts, typically an asthma, come back to me after a 5- or 6- or 8-week session and tell me about how their flow meter readings had improved from these variety of simple things I was doing from simple breathing exercises, understanding movement awareness and how those two related.

Now, at the time I wasn't really sure what a flow meter reading was and I quickly learned that what it was or what it is is it's a device that measures how well your lungs are able to expel air. What I didn't know is that these clients of mine were even doing that. That they weren't disclosing to me that they even had an asthma and in some case an allergy scenario that was impacting their breathing.

It wasn't until they came back to me and said, "All this stuff is really improving the physiology of my breath." It really stunned me at the time and I still remember that period of time in my career where I remember thinking, "Man, all I'm really doing is providing an awareness of breath and awareness of movement and helping people really claim that as their own."

So, it really started to sit with me that a lot of the change that I could enable in someone's respiration was really through what I call the mechanical pump, that being their body. Said another way, before a breath is breath it's air sitting in front of our face and then vacuum changes, pressure changes happen and that air comes into our nose or our mouth and then enters into the respiratory system and then comes out.

But what has such an impact is what happens between those ribs. How well do the intercostal muscles and some of the other connective tissue in

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around those ribs help expand the ribs to even enable that air to come in. We have so much focus on the diaphragm, which don't get me wrong is the primary breathing muscle, but when we look at how the ribs function or the abdomen or the pelvic floor or even the back when there is limitation in those myofascial structures that can impact the amount of breath that can come in or rather the amount of air that can come in as breath.

When we become more supple that changes how it is that we breathe. Then people can start to really experience the relative impact of their life on their body on their breath. So when their stress or when their load goes up they can feel that as a shift in their body, maybe their body becoming like a felt sense of being tense or being tight or maybe when they're out for a run and they start to feel themselves getting short of breath and they start to use secondary breathing muscles up by their neck or their upper shoulder area to get more air in there just becomes this greater awareness of how their environment or how their activity is impacting the way that they're breathing.

But the impact is through their body and when they start to recognize this relationship of their body on their breathing their breathing can fundamentally change. But here's what's really cool. As they recognize that fundamental change, they also see the relationship to their state of being and that is when things really start to change. Because when you start to recognize this triad between your body and your breathing and your state of being now you can really begin to downregulate your nervous system. Now you can really start to relax. Now you can see how your body and your breath impact your ability to digest food, to digest emotions, to not just get a sleep, but to have a restful sleep.

It becomes very, very powerful. It comes with a starting place of really understanding how your body relates to your breathing, how your body and your breathing relate to your state of being. When you can get that fundamental foundational awareness you can change so much. With that, let's actually get into an exercise that you can explore.

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So, we'll start by just setting a baseline and noticing what is. Because in order to change anything we need to know the reality of what is now. We need to have that baseline to know where we are. What I'd like you to do is find a comfortable position and that could be in sitting, it might be in standing, it might be in laying down, you choose. Find something that's comfortable and then take a moment and notice if you can be 15 or even 20% more comfortable and take a moment and maybe press pause on this episode and see what happens.

Okay, so now before we actually get into the exercises, I want you to first make a pact to yourself that if you start to notice any increasing tension in your body or around your eyes or in your tongue or anywhere else, if you start to feel lightheaded then to just stop the exercise completely. If you've got questions about any of it, by all means send us a note to health@functionalsynergy.com.

To set the baseline simply notice yourself breathing. Notice the inhale coming in and notice the exhale going out. Notice if either phase inhale or exhale is longer or shorter than the other. So is the inhale longer than the exhale or is it shorter than the exhale? Are they equal? Do they feel smooth or ratcheted? Do they feel full or empty? Thin or warm or cool? What other words might you describe or use to describe your breathing? This comes into more of a felt sense of how it actually feels.

Now, you might have other words than the ones I just offered so simply take a moment and just notice the quality of your breath. It can be on the inhale or on the exhale or both, but get an idea of what this initial baseline is now. You can take as much time as you'd like with this so if you feel like I'm moving into this next exercise too soon then just press pause.

The exercise we're going to move into next is called inhale, pause, inhale. To prepare for it simply sit or stand or lie down in a comfortable position and pay attention to your normal natural breathing. To begin the practice we'll start on the inhale. So, what will happen is you'll fully exhale and then when you're ready you'll inhale halfway and a take a momentary pause and

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then inhale the rest of the way, and then fully exhale. Then you'll repeat that again.

Inhale halfway, take a momentary pause, and then inhale the rest of the way and fully exhale. Now, repeat that another five or six times keeping this really, really easy. After the fifth or the sixth time return to your natural breathing without a pause. Now, notice what it is that you feel.

Is there anything new or different with the inhale or exhale? How does your body or brain feel? How about your eyes or your jaw or your neck or your back? Anything else in your body that you're noticing that's different or that has shifted since doing this inhale, pause, inhale? Breathe normally and naturally.

When you're ready we'll begin the next part of this exercise which is exhale, pause, exhale. So, much like the inhale, pause, inhale sit, stand or lay down in a comfortable position and then breathe your normal, natural breath. Again, that practice will begin on the inhale. When you're ready, inhale fully and then begin your exhale. Halfway into your exhale pause momentarily and then exhale the rest of the way. Then inhale fully and then exhale halfway, pause momentarily, and exhale the rest of the way. Repeat the cycle five to six times keeping it easy.

Now, with this exhale, pause, exhale exercise typically people might experience of a fluttering off of the second half of the exhale. So, do your best to find where that center point is in that exhale. Repeat the cycle five to six times and when you're finished that fifth or sixth time return to your natural breathing without the pause and notice what it is that you feel. How did your body or brain feel? Your eyes, your jaw, your neck, your back? Anywhere else?

If you would like you can then do the third part of this exercise which is combining the two, inhale, pause, inhale, and exhale, pause, exhale. So, much like the other two finding a comfortable position, easy in sitting, standing, or laying down and when you're ready you'll inhale, pause,

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inhale, and then exhale, pause, exhale. Inhale, pause, inhale, exhale, pause, exhale.

So, the pause is still a momentary pause, you just combine these two phases together. Repeat the cycle five to six times keeping it easy and then when you finish that sixth time then return to your natural breath without pause and again notice what it is that you feel. What's now present?

You can then come back to your baseline and simply connect with the relative length of your inhale and exhale. Relative meaning is the inhale longer or shorter than the exhale or the exhale longer or shorter than the inhale. Has the quality of smoothness or ratchetedness, has that changed? Are there any other words you might use to describe the quality of your breathing or how this breathing now feels in your body or as a state of being? Has anything shifted?

These are exercises that you can do anywhere, any time. It's your secret for yourself just for yourself. You can practice them anytime and anywhere. If this practice, if the pelvic floor breathing practice really started to speak to you, if there's something inspirational for you around how your body, your breath, your being, and your brain all interrelate you are going to love The Mechanics of Breathing course. Registration is open now. You can email us at health@functionalsynergy.com. And we begin in January. So, send us a note. I would love to connect with you.