

Breathe Into Your Massage

Mindful Breathing Enhances Bodywork Benefits

Cathy Ulrich

During her massage, Elaine was having trouble relaxing, continually talking about all of the stressors in her life. I took a deep breath and asked her to do the same. Suddenly, her body relaxed and I finally felt her respond to the work I was doing. So, what shifted with that simple suggestion?

In The Moment

Elaine was thinking about the stresses in her life instead of where she was at the moment. She was in a safe space, receiving gentle, supportive bodywork. And yet she couldn't relax. By simply asking her to be mindful of her breath, she immediately felt her body and became present with me in that space.

control labor pain. By consciously breathing during contractions, they learn to shift the feeling of pain to just sensation.

Elaine came to see me because she had chronic pain in her foot, knee, and hip. Often chronic pain sets up as a vicious cycle of muscle tightness, impaired blood flow, and more pain, even in areas distant from the original problem. When I asked Elaine to send her breath to the foot, she changed her feeling of pain to simply sensation and this opened a door that allowed me to change the holding pattern in her tissue.

Of course she couldn't physically breathe into her foot, but the imagery of

A man cannot be comfortable without his own approval.

-Mark Twain



Mindful breathing brings an individual back into their body, facilitating presence and relaxation.

Many meditation traditions use the breath to quiet the mind. With mindful breathing, we're suddenly thrust into an awareness of our inner spaces and a feeling that we actually do live in a body.

Reduce Pain

One of the first things expectant mothers learn in natural childbirth classes is breathing techniques to help

sending warm, healing breath into her foot from the inside while I worked on it from the outside changed her relationship to the pain.

Try this simple technique yourself. As you tune into your breath, notice your body. Is there discomfort or pain?

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Breathe in, and think of filling your lungs with healing oxygen. Now breathe out, and imagine sending this warm, healing oxygen directly to the place that hurts. Continue gently breathing into the area for a few minutes. What does it feel like now?

Relieve Stress

When I worked with Elaine, I noticed that the more she talked about her stressful life, the shallower her breath became. She was breathing high in her chest in short, rapid breaths. Her mind had transported her back to her stressful life, even though she was in a place where she was supported and encouraged to take a break from that stress, putting her body into a fight-or-flight response.

One clear manifestation of this is rapid, shallow breathing. While stress can produce this breathing pattern, the good news is that we can consciously change the breathing pattern and reduce the stress. It works both ways.

As I asked Elaine to slow her breathing and take deeper breaths, the tension in her face softened. Her body relaxed on the table as if she were sinking into the padding. Her feet became warmer, a sure sign that her circulation had changed and that her nervous system had switched from fight or flight to the calming mode of rest and digest.

Try this for yourself. The next time you're feeling stressed, stop for a moment and notice how you're breathing. Is your breath high in your chest? Is it fast and shallow? Now, gently invite your breath to slow down. Start to pull breath into your lungs by letting your belly relax and expand as you inhale. Spend a few moments with yourself and your breath and look at the stressful situation again. Does it seem so bad now?

Your Massage

Receiving a massage does involve participation on the client's part. While the practitioner is the expert on the bodywork, the clients are the experts on their bodies. In our culture, the client/therapist relationship is often a check-your-body-at-the-door affair. But so much more can happen when the client works with the therapist.

The next time you go for a massage, try these suggestions to achieve mindful breathing and enhance the benefits of your session:

- As you settle onto the table, feel the weight of your body on the table and begin to notice your breath.

- Feel your breath moving of its own accord. Where is it most noticeable? Bring into the spaces that feel less full (without effort--just invite).

- When your therapist starts working, notice the pressure and rhythm. When your practitioner lets up on the pressure, breathe in. When she/he applies pressure, breathe out.

- If your practitioner comes to a tender area, pay special attention to your breath. Work with the tenderness on the exhale, imagining that you're

breathing out the pain.

- As your therapist works on different areas, imagine your breath moving there to meet her. Send your breath wherever she is working. Let her work on the outside, you work on the inside.

- Notice the changes as the massage progresses. Notice your thought patterns. Notice your comfort level. Notice your stress (and how it melts) as you send breath to the various areas of your body.

- When your session is complete and you sit up, notice how your breath feels. What do you notice about your body, the room, the light?

Why not use the lifegiving force of breath to make your next massage an even more beneficial experience. Just breathe.



Being actively aware of your breath during a massage enhances the benefits of your session.

Happiness is Contagious

Maybe mom was right. Research suggests that surrounding yourself with friends and family who are happy can actually increase your own happiness.

Scientists at Harvard University and the University of California, San Diego, found that emotions, particularly happiness, have a viral effect in how they spread from one person to another. For every happy person in your physical social network, you have a 9 percent chance of increasing your own happiness. The effect is more pronounced the closer someone is to you geographically, and it does not seem to include electronic communications. The study, "Dynamic Spread of Happiness in a Large Social Network," can be found online in the British Medical Journal (www.bmj.com).

This is especially good news considering the potential health benefits of happiness and positivity. A study published in *Stroke* magazine has indicated a "significant association"

between optimism and a reduced risk of stroke. This is in addition to studies that have linked optimism to a healthier immune system, faster wound healing, and a lower risk of heart disease. While the exact cause of the benefits is not clear, one theory is that optimistic people are more likely to take care of their health. In addition, there is hope that teaching optimism could become part of a preventative program for various conditions.

What's one way to get happy? Try massage! Exposure to stress, a contributing factor to unhappiness, over a long period of time can increase the rate of neural degeneration and increase the risk for Alzheimer's disease. Luckily, a study from Umea University in Sweden has shown that just five minutes of massage has the potential to lower stress, and 80 minutes of massage has a tremendously positive effect on stress levels. Get massage, get happy, and cheer up your friends and family!



Surrounding yourself with happy people is healthy!

Try This Breathing Exercise

Anne Williams

Do you ever find yourself unconsciously holding your breath when you're tense? This can cause tension to build in your body and may let the chest collapse, leading to misalignment.

Proper breathing provides oxygen to the muscles and body, helps you stay relaxed and centered, and even helps you maintain correct body alignment throughout your day.

You can also use breathwork as part of a stress-reduction program by following this progressive relaxation exercise.

1. Begin by lying in a comfortable position without crossing your arms or legs, and focus on your breathing to create a slow, deep pattern. Inhale through your nose while counting to 10 and expanding your abdomen. Hold the breath for one second, and exhale

through your nose on the count of 10. Inhale and exhale in this pattern five times.

2. Beginning with your head, tense your facial muscles as tightly as possible and count to five. Release the muscles completely, and sense the muscles feeling heavy and still. Work down your entire body, tensing muscle groups and then relaxing them. After the head, move to the neck, chest, arms and hands, abdomen, back, thighs and gluteals, lower legs, and feet.

3. After relaxing each set of muscles, mentally scan your body for any areas of remaining tension and ask those areas to relax completely.

4. Repeat the slow breathing exercise.

5. Gently begin to move your body to come out of the deeply relaxed state.

Try using progressive relaxation directly

before or after your sessions, directly before bed, or at any time during the day as a pick-me-up. Focus on taking full, deep, even, rhythmic breaths. With a little practice, you can become more aware of your own breathing patterns and use breathwork effectively as you move throughout your day.

*Men are born
with two eyes,
but only one
tongue, in order
that they should
see twice as
much as they
say.*

-Charles Caleb Colton

Dear Friends and Clients,
Thank you so very much for your continued dedication to yourselves and to bodywork. In gratitude, I am offering a free private yoga session when you book 4 massages. And as always, you receive a free massage when you refer 3 people. Your referral is your biggest compliment.

Love,
Crystal Dawn

Crystal Dawn Massage

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