

Mindful Breathing and The Full Breath—An Introduction Paula Derry

Background:

Mindful breathing is an important part of mindfulness practice. You may be interested in mindful breathing in order to relax or to feel less stress or to be more alert. Mindful breathing is also a key form of meditation. You may want to become more sensitive to your inner bodily experience or your inner self. You may sense subtle energy flows. Your interests may change as you practice.

A full, relaxed breath reflects a relaxed mind and body. Conversely, breathwork, including a full relaxed breath, helps to create a relaxed body and mind.

For most of us, a full breath is not what we habitually do. It is developed over time. Mindful breathing is one way to approach this.

The whole body participates in a full breath. The chest, diaphragm, and abdomen all move. Movement is 360 degrees: For example, when inhaling the chest expands in the front, sides, and back. The upper and lower chest move, as does the spine. The neck, head, and limbs may begin moving as the whole body relaxes. We may come to feel the breath filling the whole body on the inhale and contracting on the exhale.

If, for example our shoulders are tense, which prevents the upper chest from expanding with the inbreath, one approach would be to massage those muscles to make them relax. But in mindful breathing, instead, the key is relaxation through awareness, movement, and an invitation to let go.

When I learned tennis, my teacher started by pitching balls directly to me. At first, this allowed me to focus my attention on how I was holding the racket and how my arm needed to move. Soon, I could move my arm as it needed to go without having to concentrate my attention on the shape of my swing. I then concentrated on including my whole body, not just my arm, in a swing. When this became natural, my teacher made an abrupt change: He stopped throwing balls directly to me, I had to watch where the ball was going and run to where I needed to be. At a certain point, I stopped consciously directing my attention, and simply kept my eye on the ball and let my mind/body do its thing.

Analogously, you may start breathwork by consciously directing your attention to concentrate on, for example, the sensations you experience when you breath in and out. Later, you may simply notice your sensations, paying attention in a more relaxed manner. In some exercises, imagery is used to help create an experience, and later you may have the experience without the imagery. You may focus on one part of the breath or another in a given exercise, for example relaxing the abdomen or opening up the

chest or letting the arms move spontaneously; the parts will come together over time. New and different experiences, previously unexpected, may emerge, as you become increasingly aware of your body and mind as you breathe.

Unlike learning tennis, in breathwork my goal is not mastering my game. Mindful attention to whatever is happening is always possible, is the key to relaxing and developing a full breath, and is at the heart of the magic of breathwork.

Mindful Breathwork Exercises:

Here are some breathwork exercises to begin with. You could do any one or a combination of them, whatever appeals to you.

Mindful breathing exercises typically begin with instructions to relax your body. For any of these, sit or lay down so that you are comfortable.

- 1) As you breathe, just notice your inbreath and outbreath. Don't try to change anything. Don't try to breathe more deeply than you naturally are breathing. Just notice. Where in your body do you feel your inbreath? Where in your body do you feel your outbreath? For example, in your nostrils, head, chest, or somewhere else? Is your breath the same or different each time?
- 2) Count as you inhale. Then count as you exhale. Don't try to breathe more deeply than you naturally are breathing. Just notice. Without changing your breathing in any other way, slow your exhale a bit. For example, if you count to 5 on your inhale, slow your exhale to a count of 6 or 7.
- 3) As you inhale, feel your diaphragm relax and drop and your stomach expand and rise. As you exhale, feel your diaphragm rise and your abdomen relax. You can direct your attention to consciously relaxing your diaphragm and abdomen, but only as much as is comfortable, don't force.
- 4) As you inhale, feel your chest area expand on the front, back and sides and your shoulders rise. As you exhale, feel your chest area relax in the front, back, and sides and your shoulders drop. You can direct your attention to consciously relaxing your chest, but only as much as is comfortable, don't force.
- 5) Combine 3) and 4).