

Breathe Right! The Mind/Body link

Depression and unmanaged stress have emerged as the costliest risk factors in determining medical expenditures. According to the American Institute of Stress, 70 to 90 percent of all doctor visits are stress related. This is an official proclamation, a formal statement. In order to be fully functional in today's society, the necessity to meditate is becoming increasingly important. It can become part of life, like eating, sleeping and working out! We live in the information age. There is so much information, our circuits easily overload. We need all the extra 'head space' we can create. Can you relate? This country is full of compulsive thinkers. Meditation is the art of no thought. One who is enlightened can remain fully present, continuously. Long-term meditation practice can change our perspective on the importance of thinking. Just like fitness, stillness takes practice. Excessive thought is like excess body fat, it does not serve us. Meditation practice halts the over-active mind. Creating the body chemistry we desire takes about as much time and focused attention as it does to remind our self about stillness, our most primary, natural state.

Here is my pitch. We can combine the two. Here is how.

Breathe Right!

We do not use our lungs and diaphragm at their fullest capacity. Cardiovascular fitness is attained when we learn to utilize our heart and lungs efficiently. Most of us do not. Most of us breathe through the upper-most lobes of the lungs, never even accessing the blood rich, oxygen rich, lower lobes of the lungs. This is because we don't breathe correctly. Learn this now! Utilize it for the rest of your breathing career!

Many people begin their fitness routine thinking it is going to be hard. It can actually be a very pleasurable experience. Quite often we fall into a 'no pain no gain mentality' and send our bodies into fight or flight mode. At least that's how our body interprets it! It's called a 'sympathetic' response and the body adapts accordingly: the stress response. There are many physiological responses involved in the stress reaction, and they don't assist us with endurance, efficiency and effectiveness in life. A sympathetic response is from distress; A parasympathetic response is considered eustress. It is a stress that we introduce to the body that is constructive, instead of destructive.

Deep diaphragmatic nasal breathing: The nose has three purposes...blowing, smelling and breathing. Should you accept this mission, the nose will become the primary apparatus through which you breathe. For secondary oxygen intake supplementation, you may utilize the mouth, but only for supplementation. 5 things happen when you breathe through the nose: Filtration, Circulation, Thermal Regulation, Hydration, Olfactory Nerve Stimulation. None of these occur when you breathe through your mouth. The quality of oxygen delivery to our lungs increases dramatically when we nose breathe, due to the 5 reasons above. The blood rich lower lobes of the lungs become saturated as well, not just the chest and thoracic regions. We utilize a muscle designed for breathing called the diaphragm. It pulls oxygen down into the base of the lungs and fills them like water filling a glass.

The Parasympathetic Response - The Eye of the Hurricane.

The body does not interpret work as stressful when we breathe through our nose. When we learn to utilize our abdominal musculature and diaphragm during exhale of the breath, it creates within us, a calming effect. This is a profound thing to learn. Our experience during c-v exercise changes in an amazing way. We learn to stay in the eye of the hurricane. We begin to utilize efficiently our entire lung capacity, our breathing rate decreases to about 15 to 20 breaths per minute, our working heart rate drops, and we begin to realize that we create similar output, at a lower level of perceived exertion. We get to the end of a long workout feeling amazing and the body, not having perceived any over-stress recovers very quickly.

The Zone.

This is a profound and powerful technique for accessing 'the Zone'. The mechanics of this technique happen in the brain. The 7th Cranial nerve is known as the Vagus nerve. It is located in the base of our lungs and is stimulated when we contract the abdominal musculature and the diaphragm, as we exhale. This has the parasympathetic effect of calming the mind. The left and right hemispheres of the brain become synchronized. This action has been studied extensively with monks and accomplished practitioners of meditation. This technique enables all of us to experience the zone, or a meditative state. In yoga this technique is called ujjayi pranayama breathing. When we practice this technique on a long bike ride, we actually experience this very healing, representation of meditative practice. Fitness does not need to be stressful. It can be restful.

My personal experience of Mind-Body Breathing.

I learned this breathing technique from John Douillard who wrote a book called "Body, Mind and Sport". In the book he explained his pilgrimage to India where he learned about Ayur Vedic medicine. John was a competitive tri-athlete and he applied what he learned to his athletics.

This technique was originally something I utilized to help me through a battle with depression and anxiety. It has been a springboard and has led me into a very dedicated meditation practice of my own. The by-product of the stillness achieved while practicing this technique out side, is a heightened sensory experience. My mind slows. I find myself more present, enjoying nature and the overall experience much more! The technique helped me heal myself. Depression and anxiety are no longer on the map.

Summer of 2009

I put the practice under the microscope this summer when I took part in The Bicycle Tour of Colorado. I did the 7-day tour utilizing the nose breathing technique. I had a wonderful experience. In fact I had quite the mystical experience. I averaged over 17 miles per hour for the tour, riding mostly alone. My perceived exertion stayed very low while riding and each day I recovered quickly, leaving me ready for the next day.

My goal was to observe how much I could ramp up my performance during the tour, but my experience is enhanced in every-day enjoyment of the technique while I'm just out playing. With the help of a breathe-right nasal strip, I use the technique while running, hiking, skate skiing, biking, and tackle whatever I'm doing with as much intensity as I want. What changes is the experience I have. It is much more enjoyable and I don't over-stress my body, so I recover very quickly. The nose acts like a governor...you have to breathe more slowly and deeply. Practicing this will seem like it is slowing you down at first, everything new takes time to master but each time you practice, you will experience a break-through of some sort. I cannot imagine a more powerful gift. It will enhance your experience, improve your health and it can keep a person off meds, like it does for me.

When Chris Grotefend is not a permanent fixture helping people at the Durango Sports Club, he is out there, somewhere in the San Juan Mountains tripping on his own brain juice.