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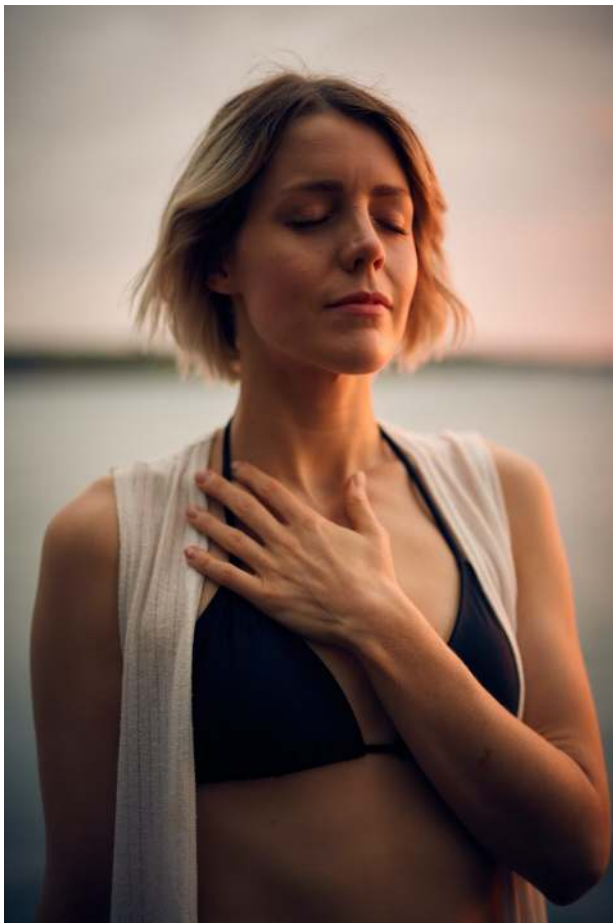
# **Breath Better – Feel Better!**

Conscious breathing may help  
with injury or stress

## Breathe Better – Feel Better!

*When you arise in the morning, think of what a precious privilege it is to be alive, to breathe, to think, to enjoy, to love – Marcus Aurelius*

When was the last time you noticed your breath – I mean consciously felt the sensation of your breath flow in, pause, flow out, pause, and repeat like an ocean wave? It is amazing that we can breathe thousands of times a day,



and perhaps never notice! And yet, within each breath is an innate potential to support our health and wellness.

In this article I want to briefly demonstrate a very practical breathing technique that may help alleviate the stress of injury or illness.

First, let me share my lifelong fascination with my own breath, and the benefits received from breathing better. My interest perhaps stems from being born a blue baby, with the umbilical cord wrapped tightly around my neck and the medical staff frantically running out of time and options to get me breathing.

## Breathe Better – Feel Better!

As a child, I fostered a strong connection with my breath, realizing it was somehow tied into all my physical, mental, and emotional sides. Growing up, my love for distance running gave me daily joy to feel my breath. Added to that was also an inherent interest in sitting calmly and noticing my breath in a totally different way. Thus, as a young adult, I added an interest in meditation, yoga, and tai chi to my quiver of breathwork, all of which continue today. At age 75 years, I can say unequivocally that consciously watching and using my breath has been one of the most valuable tools in my life, and especially when healing or distressed. It has also eliminated a lot of unnecessary daily thoughts.

### Breath: Our Silent Partner

It has been said that the last thing a fish discovers is water. Similarly, a silent, constant partner in our life is our breath, *more specifically the way we breathe*. And yet, we deny ourselves specific health and healing benefits by not being aware of our breathing.

Each time we breathe, 300 billion capillaries in the lungs wait to absorb life-giving oxygen that is transported to every cell in the body. Isn't that worth a little applause? At an average of 8-10 breaths per minute, one takes between 11-14,000 breaths daily. Unfortunately, many people breathe shallow and too often.



Deep breathing, however, is the best way to re-oxygenate the very blood we need for healing. It can also be a vital tool in focusing our healing efforts. In fact, science has shown that **lung capacity (the ability to breathe deeply) is the most accurate marker/predictor of health!**

Researchers have determined that breath awareness is widespread in faith traditions worldwide – because of the practice of repetition in prayer and meditation (including the use of beads to count repetitions). For example, the reciting of the Latin *Ave Maria* prayer (in the Roman Catholic tradition), or the yoga mantra *om mani padme om* (a mantra is a repeated phrase) used by several Eastern traditions, have been shown to slow the breath to a healthful six-per-minute rate.

***Slow, rhythmic breathing – about six breaths per minute – seems optimal.***

Slow, rhythmic breathing decreases breath rate, heart rate, brain wave activity, metabolism, blood pressure, and levels of the stress-response hormone, Cortisol, in the body. All of this is beneficent to bodily and mental wellness.

It is not necessary, however, to have a particular faith tradition or practice a form of prayer to affect the rhythm of your breath. Over 80% of all stimuli are taken in through our eyes. Simply closing one's eyes for a few minutes will have a noticeable effect on the body and breath, especially blood pressure, heart rate and brain wave activity.

## Box Breathing: Simple and Effective!

Perhaps the easiest conscious form of breathing is an ancient technique that today is often described as ***box breathing*** – the repeating pattern of inhaling slowly and deeply through your nose, pausing, exhaling through pursed lips (as if through a straw), or again through the nose, and pausing again (see **How to do it**, below).



**Note:** There are numerous specific forms of breathing techniques, mostly originating from the far East dating back thousands of years.

All, however, are a variation of simple box breathing through the nose, with similar health benefits.

The references at the end of this article will help you further in your inquiry.

*Almost all meditation techniques integrate breath, visualization, and repeating affirmations or mantras*

### How to Do It

1. Identify a timeframe to identify the four simple sequences (the “sides” of the “box”): 4 seconds, 6 seconds, or 8 seconds are most often used.
2. For example, let’s choose 6 seconds
3. DO THIS: inhale for 6 seconds, hold for 6 seconds, exhale for 6 seconds and then relax for 6 seconds before inhaling again – making a square pattern.

If you go around that box for a few minutes, you can really get yourself into a more focused and centered state of mind. Not only do you feel calm, but the quantity of thoughts you have will be lessened.

Practiced regularly, conscious breathing has been shown to calm the body by stimulating the parasympathetic nervous system (our "rest and digest" responses) which produces feelings of relaxation. It is no wonder that military training, highlighted by that of Navy Seals, has found tremendous value in conscious breathing techniques during stressful situations.

Conscious breathing is an invaluable tool when feeling stressed about anything: an injury, illness, or simply day-to-day life. In truth, however, the simple box technique of breathing is quickly discovered by many people to be challenging. Those who try this technique as part of a meditation practice know how difficult it is to keep the mind focused.

## Breathe Better – Feel Better!

The reason always seems to be a counter pull by the monkey-chatter in our mind – the constant outpouring of thoughts and inner voices. However, like anything, the more you practice a conscious breathing technique, the better you get and the more it can work.

### Breathe Better — Useful Tips!

I have used breath awareness for years whenever injured, ill, or stressed. In a nutshell, breathing better is preventative health maintenance, with no negative side effects (unlike prescriptive medicines).

On the next page are some practical techniques that are certain to help you.



## Breathe Better – Feel Better!

- **Eyes closed.** If you can, close your eyes while watching your breath. Consider that over 80% of stimulus is first perceived through our eyes. Closing one's eyes, therefore, can decrease brain wave activity to calming, regenerating Alpha levels.
- **Light touch.** Gentle sensorimotor stimulus to the brain from the hands (as opposed to firm grasping) carries with it compassion and caring energy from the heart. Scientists have determined that our hands can act as a calming electromagnetic conduit for cellular regeneration. Place the palm or fingers of your hand, if possible, lightly on the location of your injury. Keep your hands relaxed, not tense or rigid. Researchers have determined that this simple form of therapeutic touch can lower brainwave activity into regenerative Alpha levels.
- **Visualization.** Vividly imagine your injury knitting itself back to health. Another strategy is to imagine a cool blue or white light enveloping the injured area, revolving around it, permeating it, healing it. Visualization can create a biofeedback loop; many people use biofeedback daily to reduce pain, discomfort, and tension.
- **Affirmation.** A short healing affirmation (*example: My knee is healed and strong*) or prayer gives repeated hope and faith that what we are doing is beneficial. Always make sure your affirmation is **positive, free of doubt, short enough as to be easily repetitive, and visualized in the present as if it were already obtained.**



## Breathe Better – Feel Better!

- **Integration.** Try to consciously integrate breathing into your daily activities, if not just for a few moments or minutes. Our breath is always with us, so we can consciously infuse watching it at times throughout the day. It may be as simple as monitoring your breath when at a stop light, while waiting in line, riding on a bus, sitting in a favorite spot, walking, or whenever.

When injured, sick, or ill, we often believe that we must limit our activities while recovering. However, research evidence has shown that the exact opposite is necessary for optimal recovery: stay active and move within your capability! Watch your breath to calm your energy, whenever you want or can.

Additionally, try to take a few moments to consciously breathe whenever you use a remedy or medication. Whether you take an oral herbal remedy, or rub in a penetrating salve, use any of the above techniques to help center and calm your mind.



## Be Kind to Yourself

Remember, you take thousands of breaths daily. You also naturally have thousands of thoughts each day. You will notice that once you integrate conscious breathing into your daily life, the act becomes a small form of haven to retreat to when desired. Watching your breath will replace many of those chattering thoughts.

You will also notice that, as simple as it is, watching one's breath takes FOCUS! You may even discover that you cannot keep focus on more than a few breaths before your mind is off again with chattering thoughts.

That is okay – don't beat yourself up!

Remember, there are numerous other benefits to breathing better than just mental focus, but it sure does help, AND you will get better the more you do it. **Bottomline: be kind, positive, and loving of yourself!**



### Summary

**Let's be real:** not all injuries can be successfully or fully healed. Not all pain can be fully reduced. We may have to accept certain limitations in our lifestyle, including incomplete healing. However, if we can approach our healthcare with a healthy dose of optimism, dedication, increased knowledge, and openness to varied healing approaches, such as breathing better, we will know that we tried our very best. In that sense, we will have invested, in a loving way, in the quality of our life for which we should never feel ashamed, no matter the outcome.

Above all, with mindful attention, we will have discovered our breath as a key healing ally and a silent friend who has accompanied us throughout life, from birth to that moment of expiration.

### References

Curious about the optimal healing benefits of breathing better? Below are three excellent resources. I would highly recommend James Nestor's bestselling book as perhaps the best unbiased, historical overview of the value of breathing better, complete with practical instructions and applications.

## Breathe Better – Feel Better!

If you desire to go deep, both literally and figuratively, the infamous and popular Wim Hof method is certain to pique your interest. Finally, Mark Divine gives you fascinating insights into mind control and breathwork, from a military preparation viewpoint and its application to everyday life.

[Breath: The New Science of a Lost Art](#) by James Nestor

[Unbeatable Mind: Forge Resiliency and Mental Toughness to Succeed at an Elite Level](#) (Third Edition) by Mark Divine

[The Wim Hof Method: Activate Your Full Human Potential](#) by Wim Hof

