

Why You Shouldn't Remember To Breathe

When people get anxious or overly aware of their bodies, they often try to deliberately control their breathing. Since the mechanisms for measuring how much air we have in our lungs and bloodstream operate outside of conscious awareness, conscious, deliberate breathing is likely to be too fast and too much. Dr Claude Lum of Papworth Hospital has written a list of all the symptoms which can occur as a result of over-breathing:

CARDIAC: Tension; Missed beats ; Tachycardia; 'Angina'; Atypical chest pain; Dull precordial or lower costal ache; Vasomotor instability

PSYCHIC: Anxiety; Phobic states; 'Unreal' feelings; Depersonalisation; Hallucinations; Fear of insanity; Panic attacks

GASTRO-INTESTINAL: Dysphagia; Dry throat; Flatulence/belching; Aerophagy; Upper abdominal distress; Globus

NEUROLOGICAL: Dizziness; Faintness; Visual disturbance; Migrainous headache; Numbness Paraesthesiae - limbs, face etc.; Intolerance of bright lights/loud noise; Pseudo multiple sclerosis

RESPIRATORY; Irritable cough; 'Asthma'; Tight Chest; Excessive sighing/yawning

MUSCULAR: Cramps; Diffuse/localised myalgia; Tremors/coarse twitches; (Rarely) Tetany

GENERAL: Weakness; Exhaustion; Lack of concentration - memory; Sleep disturbance; Nightmares; Emotional sweating (Axillae / palms)

Anxious clients often report peculiar symptoms which they fear may be a sign of serious disease. I sometimes ask them to breathe faster than normal. They almost invariably begin to experience an increase in their sensations.

Many people imagine that air is drawn into the lungs as a result of the rib cage being expanded through the use of the muscles between the ribs and the raising of the shoulders. In fact, most of the suction effect is caused by the diaphragm. The diaphragm is a sheet of muscle shaped like an upturned dinner plate which sits beneath the lungs. As it flattens, so air is drawn in. Comfortable, relaxed breathing should involve relatively little movement of the upper chest.

Ideas about "taking a deep breath" and "filling your lungs" compound people's confusion about breathing. If you feel anxious, the best thing to do is to take a long, slow breath out, not in. This empties the lungs of carbon dioxide leaving them ready to absorb the oxygen in the next inward breath.

Breathing should be a natural, automatic process and not something one thinks about. The more you think about it, the less comfortable you will be.

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Responses to this article are warmly welcomed.

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