

Breathwork as a Viable Tool for Self Exploration

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Breathwork is one of the newly emerging modalities in the growing field of Energy Medicine. Over the past 25 years there has been an explosion in the blending of ancient breathing techniques for health and awareness with contemporary therapeutic processes for healing. The result has been the evolution of powerful and incisive healing and consciousness changing methods which have contributed to advances in medical and psychological areas. .

Breathwork reinforces a new paradigm in the field of professional counseling-whole brain learning. It accesses the parasympathetic and the sympathetic nervous system and bridges both brain hemispheres accessing the functions of the brain stem, limbic system and cerebral cortex. It therefore reaches deeper levels of human motivation and behavioral control. Incorporating breathwork into counseling takes us to the intersection of science and art.

Breathwork is the modern day term for a system using the breath combined with a variety of supportive techniques to mobilize our bodies, minds and spirits for spontaneous healing. Therapeutic Breathwork is the loving interaction, focused application and healing possibilities of conscious connected breathing held within the sacred container of a therapeutic relationship.

One thing all living things have in common is the act of breathing. At birth we take our first inhalation and at our final moment, the last exhalation. The ancient Greek word for breath is ‘pneuma’ which means spirit. The breath is at the very core of our being and is intrinsic to our existence as living beings. Our breath is the connecting thread that joins us and connects each one of us to every living creature on our planet.

Three components of Therapeutic Breathwork have been identified. Body-mind therapy, personal development and spiritual experience are all approaches which may be the primary focus of any session, yet all three seem to comprise the full scope of facilitating Therapeutic Breathwork.

The first component addresses the journey from restricted breathing to open breathing, from physical dis-ease to ease, from personal dysfunction to function. As a tool for personal development, Therapeutic Breathwork aims to uplift the body, mind and spirit of the individual towards new levels of awareness and creative expression. Clients are encouraged to explore new levels of self awareness, purposefulness and interpersonal communication in relationship.

One thing that makes breathwork a powerful modality is that it is utilized and guided by a self-regulating, biological mechanism: the human respiratory system. Breathwork can not only enhance the human breathing system with conscious intent, but also seeks to engage the intelligence within the breath to escort or lead the process.

With our breath we connect our consciousness to our unconscious thoughts feelings and emotions and to that part of ourselves we might call our spirit or inner self. Since breathing is both voluntary and involuntary, we can bridge these aspects by consciously breathing deeply contrary to our normal state of contracted breathing with the mind and thoughts continually active. Deep breathing slows our thought processes

and allows us to go beyond those thoughts to a, “deeper knowing”.

When we breath deeply we oxygenate our cells and tissues releasing stored memories and feelings. The breath has been seen as a bridge between the conscious and unconscious realms. Deep breathing has been used to access higher levels of awareness that are not available in our ordinary state of awareness. The breath is our key to reconnecting with aspects of our life from which we have become disengaged from whether they be emotional, physical or spiritual. When we are cut off from parts of ourselves we loose the ability to experience those things in life which nourish our souls. Being close to nature and feelings of love and gratitude help us to experience a deeper sense of meaning and fulfillment in our lives..

Carl Jung, a post-Freudian and founder of analytical psychology who believed in understanding the psyche through exploring dreams, art, mythology world religion and philosophy described a part of our psyche that he called the, “collective unconscious” where he believed that all stored memories and experiences resided. He believed that archetypal images and memories also resided in the collective unconscious that were also ancestral, karmic and phylogenetic memories.

The categories of experience that may emerge during a breathwork session as addressed by Dr. Stanislov Grof, founder of Holotropic Breathwork and at the forefront of the breathwork movement are sensory, biographical, perinatal and transpersonal which corresponds to Jung’s notion of the, ”collective unconscious”. An individual may experience emotional feelings, physical sensations, past memories, pre-birth memories, and spiritual experiences. For each person the experience is personal and unique. One person’s experience may be peaceful and physically relaxing while another experiences deep psychological healing, and another spiritual transformation.

One of the key aspects of the session is the practice of circular breathing. This type of breathing is different from breathing in the normal state in that it is connected, slightly more rapid and circular with no pauses between in and out breath. Some research has shown that a natural byproduct of circular breathing is activation of longer brainwave patterns normally found during times of sleep and deep relaxation. States that are reached have been referred to as non-ordinary states of consciousness and often appear to transcend the normal state of awareness.

While non-ordinary states of consciousness are important to our everyday functioning they are equally as valuable since they give us the opportunity to extend our experience beyond the limitation of the three-dimensional reality. They repeatedly remind us of our inner lives and draw us into spiritual awareness.

Evocative music facilitates the release of emotions and the healing of the past. In a typical breath session, the body is relaxed and then wordless music begins. The sounds may progress from deep cultural drumming and chanting into melodies that bring up story lines from the subconscious. Later on the music becomes emotionally or romantically evocative to open the heart. This is followed by spiritual music which has an uplifting effect and can possibly activate spiritual feelings.

These one to one and a half hour sessions are free associational journeys that activate the psyche and bring into conscious awareness any aspects of the past that must be remembered and healed. They let us imagine aspects of the future, as the human imagination-one of our most valuable soul powers acts as a bridge between the conscious and unconscious minds, between our past and our future. Together with inspiration and

intuition the individual can access insights into their lives and emotions that facilitate deeper levels of healing.

Sessions can be experienced individually or in groups. In group sessions, the breather-sitter dyad is a valuable aspect of the experience to enhance the feeling of safety and support as a safe container is created for the breath experience. Breathwork in groups is extremely powerful since participants tend to facilitate each other's experience and sense of connectedness with others. Day long sessions offer an opportunity for sharing about emotionally significant aspects of our lives, as well as, the opportunity to learn to use art, music, writing and other creative outlets for healing.

Newly emerging schools have begun to create agreed upon principles, ethics and training standards for professional breathwork facilitators. Breathwork is being used in the field of mental health to treat panic attacks, anxiety, depression and a variety of mental health disorders and emotional trauma not reached by more contemporary cognitive therapies. Breathwork can help to reach underlying limiting beliefs and habitual patterns held in place by negative conditioning which has contributed to it's success with the treatment of addictions.

As a tool for self exploration, Breathwork can assist us to go deeper into the self to reexamine, reevaluate, release and integrate. The process can be utilized to aid the participant's spiritual journey as deeper meaning and insights are revealed and integrated. Personal development and spiritual awareness are the core components of the therapeutic Breathwork process and help to identify it as a uniquely powerful and dynamic healing modality.

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