**Diaphragmatic Breathing aka “Belly Breathing”**

When people of all ages, suffering from health problems ranging from asthma and hypertension to anxiety, depression, insomnia and chronic pain, learn to breathe the same way that infants do naturally, their symptoms improve. The way we breathe powerfully affects every system in our bodies – cardiovascular, nervous, endocrine, lymph, immune, digestive, and of course, respiratory.

If you watch a baby breathe, you will see the infant's belly rise and fall with each breath. They are effortlessly practicing diaphragmatic breathing aka “belly breathing”; full, natural breathing that engages the diaphragm, a thin sheet of muscle that lies below our lungs. Every time they breathe in, the diaphragm stretches downward, allowing their lungs to expand to their full capacity. And when they breathe out, the diaphragm contracts upward, decreasing their lung volume.

When our diaphragm is fully engaged in the act of breathing, our lungs can expand to twice the volume compared to when a breath is taken without fully using the diaphragm. Slow, rhythmic diaphragmatic breathing gives us a feeling of relaxed energy. And over time, this type of breathing provides an important long-term health benefit. It increases “vital capacity”, the maximum volume of air we can exhale from our lungs. Research shows that vital capacity is a strong predictor of cardiovascular health and longevity.

Unfortunately, most of us long ago stopped breathing the way we did when we were babies. We tend to breathe shallowly, mostly breathing with our chest and relying on our chest and shoulder muscles to provide most of the power. Chest breathing produces increased heart and breathing rates. It can make our neck and shoulder muscles tense and activate our body’s stress response, known as the “fight or flight” response.

Though the goal here is to continually and naturally breathe with our diaphragms, consciously bringing our attention to our breath can be relied upon during stressful situations where our breathing may have subtly become shallow, or even held. Once we recognize the shift in our breathing pattern we can turn to belly breathing to calm us, bring the body back into balance and help us think straight. The more you or I practice belly breathing, the more we become aware of subtle changes in how we feel and these changes can then trigger our attention.

Sources:

<http://www.rodalenews.com/diaphragmatic-breathing-and-health> accessed 24 Sept 2014

<http://www.amsa.org/healingthehealer/breathing.cfm> accessed 24 Sept 2014

<http://cmhc.utexas.edu/stressrecess/Level_Two/breathing.html> accessed 24 Sept 2014 –instructional video

Author’s personal experience; working with my naturopathic doctor in Toronto, ON, Canada 2008-2013.

**HOW-TO BELLY BREATHE**

1. Sit comfortably in an upright chair. When you are first learning, it may be helpful to lie down on the floor or a bed, which makes it easier for your abdomen to expand and contract with each breath.

One hand is placed on the upper chest and one hand on the abdomen about one inch above your navel.

2. Take a deep inspiratory breath and notice which hands moves the most. This is your normal breathing pattern, which is most likely chest breathing.

3. Now begin practicing taking breaths by moving only the abdomen while keeping the chest motionless.

The goal is to keep the hand on the chest almost still, while the hand on the abdomen rises and falls with the diaphragmatic breath.

4. Inhale slowly while counting four seconds. Pause for a count of two seconds.

5. Exhale slowly for a count of four seconds. Pause for a count of two seconds.

To enhance slow breathing, you can purse your lips so you exhale through a small opening and/or use imagery such as blowing up and deflating a balloon in your abdomen.

6. Repeat the breathing pattern:

IN for 1, 2, 3, 4…*PAUSE*…. OUT for 1, 2, 3, 4…*PAUSE*.

Belly breathing will get easier the more you practice. Once your body recognizes how it feels, you will no longer need to use your hands as visual tools.

🡪*If you feel light-headed while you are learning to belly breathe, just hold your breath a second or two and then release it. It's possible you were in the very early stage of hyperventilation. Paradoxically it occurs when the amount of carbon dioxide in the blood is below where it should be. Holding your breath for just a second or two allows the carbon dioxide to increase just enough to return things to normal.*