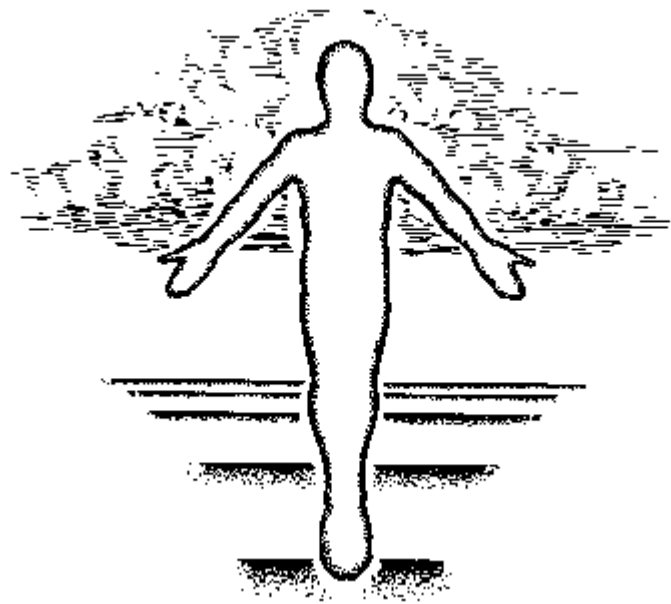


Therapeutic Breathwork

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Awareness of Breath Throughout History

The power of the breath to promote powerful changes in personal consciousness is something that has been known throughout time. The Greek word “pneuma” means spirit, soul, and breath. Breathing, which is the aspect of life energy itself, is practiced in many religious traditions. Kundalini yoga, Taoist meditation, and Sufism all involve various forms of breathing to cleanse and heal the body, and to connect with spirit. The original baptism practiced by the Essenes, a monastic order found in the Old Testament, involved various forms of breathing and immersion in water. In the Old Testament there is a reference to breathing as a means of connecting to the Holy Spirit in Job 32:8, “But is the spirit in man, the breath of the Almighty, that makes him understand.”

It is not necessary to have a spiritual orientation or belief system in order to gain the benefits of Therapeutic Breathwork. Some people find this connection by connecting with nature, art, or with other people. The Therapeutic Breathwork process intensifies an individual’s ability to connect with everyone and everything more easily and deeply. It brings us into our emotional body and helps us experience a state of oneness with all that is. It makes us aware of what is most meaningful in our lives and brings us out of the painful illusions of our past and into the ever-powerful present.

What is Therapeutic Breathwork?

Therapeutic Breathwork combines the power of the breath with evocative music, therapeutic communication, and the use of focused body movement. It brings together Western psychology with Eastern and Western spirituality to produce personal transformation and healing.

The Therapeutic Breathwork process usually lasts from about one hour to an hour and a half. The experience is unique to each individual. It may vary from session to session and from person to person. At the end of a session, people feel a sense of completion, inner peace, personal healing, and even ecstasy.

The breathing is done in a dimly lit room with a unique ambiance. The room is large enough to allow for freedom of movement while lying down on a soft comfortable surface. Specially selected music is used to facilitate emotional release, healing of the past, and a non-ordinary state of consciousness. Participants breathe deeply and continuously in a circular rhythm either through the mouth or nose. Most find a rhythm of breathing that is most comfortable for them after about ten minutes. The assistant and the trained group leaders work with each person individually until a comfortable rhythm is achieved.

Note: See *Prerequisites for a Therapeutic Breathwork Session*.

Therapeutic Breathwork Experiences

Therapeutic Breathwork often creates both ordinary and non-ordinary experiences, including emotional and physical release, healing of memories, and healing of illness and addictions.

Releasing Emotions

Many people will begin to release emotions very quickly. This can facilitate the experience of others in the group as they identify with those who may be more emotionally expressive. However, emotional expression is not necessary to heal and experience positive change through Therapeutic Breathwork. It is a body-mind-spirit type of therapy and often works on an unconscious level.

For those who have difficulty releasing emotions, they will find that healing occurs through changes felt in the physical body. These bodily sensations can vary. Many people experience a tingling sensation beginning in the extremities and often moving throughout the entire body. The sensations are often exhilarating. In most cases, individuals feel easily led to problematic situations in need of healing in their lives, and find a place of understanding and resolution. Personal self-esteem is increased when individuals recognize that the answers to difficulties in their lives reside within themselves.

It is normal for people to find that unconscious unresolved memories come into their awareness during sessions. In my personal experience, as both participant and teacher, I have found that we only remember what our psyche is able to handle during any one session. If our past needs healing from unresolved pain and suffering, then the emotional issues come up gradually, in layers, to take us into deeper levels within our unconscious.

In Therapeutic Breathwork, if we are unable to let go emotionally, then the physical body reacts in such a way as to push us to release unresolved feelings and memories that are most in need of healing. The inability to discharge emotions may cause the body to react with extreme physical tension. Although the tension is harmless, it can result in temporary discomfort in the body. If this discomfort occurs, then we are asked to symbolically express it with sound, which is often expressed as anger or rage, grief and sadness, or unresolved fear.

Physical movement such as kicking the feet or hitting the padded mat can also facilitate the release of the physical tension in the body. Most individuals find it easy to release strong emotions during a Therapeutic Breathwork session, as the breathing in itself

reduces inhibitions to self-expression. They also find that behind anger or rage there is often deep sadness or grief. It is not unusual that many people who have been unable to cry are once again able to do so and thus experience an intense feeling of relief and healing.

Healing Memories and Past Traumas

Some may question whether memories that occur during Therapeutic Breathwork are real or manufactured by the mind. It is important to our healing process that the memory be realized, felt, and expressed. The memory resides in our emotional body, and for that reason it is significant to our life's purpose as well as to our healing. There is no need to question our experiences during Therapeutic Breathwork. Swami Muktananda, an Eastern mystic, once said, "Who can say what is real, the dream state or the awake state?" Our experiences and feelings are simply as they are and we do not need to question them. What occurred in the past is not as important as finding peace in the present.

In addition to resolving past trauma, and the understanding and healing of past memories, experiences of a transpersonal nature are very common with Therapeutic Breathwork. Just as with memories, transpersonal or non-ordinary experiences do not occur until we are psychologically ready for them. Stanislav Grof, M.D., describes many of the possible transpersonal experiences one can have during intense breathing in his book *Beyond the Brain: Birth, Death, and Transcendence in Psychotherapy*.¹ Dr. Grof is the author of many books and originally began his work with psychiatric patients using mind-altering chemicals. Later in his work, he began to use intense breathing with evocative music and found that similar healing was achieved as with the use of mind-altering chemicals.

Healing Birth Experiences

It is not uncommon during Therapeutic Breathwork sessions to recall birth and intrauterine experiences. This is especially true for those who have had a particularly stressful birth and intrauterine life. An infant begins their life journey at the time of conception, and the unborn infant often feels the feeling states of his or her mother. If a mother has been particularly anxious, fearful, depressed, or angry while carrying her infant, then the infant will feel what the mother feels. An especially traumatic birth experience can be deeply embedded in the adult's unconscious mind and can have a profound effect on one's day-to-day experience. Arthur Janov, Ph.D., in his book *Imprints: The Lifelong Effects of the Birth Experience*,² includes twenty years of research

¹ Grof, Stanislav, M.D., *Beyond the Brain*, 1986, State University of New York Press, Albany, N.Y.

² Janov, Arthur, Ph.D., *Imprints, The lifelong effects of the Birth Experience*, 1983, Coward-McCann, Inc. New York

on the enormous effect that birth and intrauterine experiences can have later on in an adult's life.

Conscious memories of the birth and intrauterine experience may not always occur during a Therapeutic Breathwork experience; however, feeling states similar to those experienced at birth may occur at some point in the process. A participant may have a feeling of regressing to an infantile state if the body-mind sees it is necessary to journey into this realm for personal healing. The body-mind of each individual will go wherever the healing is most needed at a particular time in the life journey. If that place of healing is in and around experiences of birth or intrauterine life, then this is where the Therapeutic Breathwork experience will take us.

Birth and intrauterine experiences are just as significant to the healthy development of an individual as early and late childhood experiences, despite the fact that many traditional theories of psychology discount these experiences as bearing any relevancy to an individual's healthy development. I was first introduced to the relevancy of birth experiences through Leonard Orr in the mid 1970s. Leonard Orr is the creator of "Conscious Breathing," a psychological and spiritual technique using deep breathing to resolve birth and childhood trauma. He is also author of more than 20 books, including *Rebirthing in the New Age*.³

Healing Ancestral Memories

Ancestral memories are another form of transpersonal experience often found through the breathing process. It is common knowledge that we inherit physical attributes from our parents and relatives. It is also true that our ancestors pass on to us their unresolved feeling states, memories, and traumatic experiences. If our parents had tragedies that were never discussed or grieved, we can carry their unresolved conflicts with us throughout our lives. These unresolved conflicts can manifest in the form of free-floating anxiety, fears, grief, or behavioral patterns that seem abnormal considering the situations we encounter in our lives.

I once had the opportunity to do Therapeutic Breathwork with a young Jewish man

³ Leonard Orr and Sondra Ray, *Rebirthing in the New Age*, 1983

Other resources:

Grof, Stanislav, M.D. *The Adventure of Self- discovery Therapeutic effects of Intense Breathing (Pneumocatharsis)* pg. 170-184, 1988, State University of New York Press, Albany, N.Y.

Verny, Thomas, M.D., *The Secret Life of the Unborn Child*, Delta Delacorte, 1988.

Grof, Stanislav, M.D. *Realms of the Human Unconscious*.

whose primary complaint was depression. He had several years of cognitive therapy and various forms of talk therapy before coming to see me. He did not understand it, nor did I at the time of our sessions, but during every Therapeutic Breathwork session he would go immediately into a non-ordinary state of consciousness in which he experienced himself viewing scenes of torturous abuse in Jewish concentration camps. When witnessing these scenes, he would scream and grieve in agony as if he himself were the victim of torture. He had no knowledge of any of his ancestors having ever been imprisoned in concentration camps. However, after about seven sessions, the memories ceased to occur and the young man's depression disappeared. I had the opportunity to speak with this young man nearly a year after his Therapeutic Breathwork sessions, and he said that he had not needed to return to therapy and that his previous depression continued to be absent.

Healing Addictions

Because Therapeutic Breathwork can take us into non-ordinary states of consciousness to promote healing, it is very appealing to recovering addicts. Addiction is often an attempt to transcend and heal unresolved pain. With addictions, we inevitably reach a dead end. Any attempt to find peace through a source outside of us always leads to increased pain and suffering in the long run. There are many pleasures in life that can be used as temporary distractions from our suffering. We live in a society that promotes turning to outside sources to find satisfaction. As human beings, we turn to relationships, sex, food, alcohol and drugs, spending, and many various forms of fulfillment outside of ourselves.

For most of us, a taste of instant pleasure is never enough. We tend to want more and more psychologically and physiologically, and may need more and more to find the peace we seek. Eventually our pleasures, if used to excess, become the source of much of our suffering. However, there is always enough breath. Our breath can become the pathway to our awareness of spirit. It is always there; it always heals us and always fills us up. We need only learn to use it.

Healing Illness

Some people may be healed of an illness not considered treatable by traditional methods. A colleague of mine, whom I met while traveling with Leonard Orr and a group of spiritual seekers many years ago, was bedridden with crippling arthritis. She was able to heal her body completely by regularly doing a form of this breathwork practice. Later, she was able to hike over 10 miles into the Himalayan Mountains when we traveled to India and met the Guru Babaji. Dr. Stanislov Grof describes the non-ordinary experience of a young woman diagnosed with a psychological conversion disorder that caused a paralysis of her feet and legs. The debilitating condition was healed spontaneously during a session conducted by Dr. Grof when the woman experienced herself as becoming one

with a tree that was firmly implanted in the earth. Experiences such as these cannot be explained through traditional logic-based thinking. If healing occurs, then there is little need to question our experience. We are simply healed.

Reconnecting through Therapeutic Breathwork

Mystical connections with loved ones who have passed into the spirit realm, connection with other forms of life such as nature and animals, and a deeper connection with significant others, are often profound, non-ordinary experiences attained while doing Therapeutic Breathwork. People may feel flooded with feelings of love, benevolence, and forgiveness. They may have a sense of the heart chakra opening and clearing the body-mind of resentments buried and held for many years. This can result in a softening of the body-mind, and a release of physical discomfort held in the body that may be manifested by pain and disease.

When doing the breathing, we breathe in a circular rhythm. We connect the inhale and the exhale breath. The breathing connects us with our heart and spirit, and this creates in us awareness that we are one with all forms of life. This is similar to what Carl Jung describes as our connection with the “collective unconscious.” In essence, a continuous thread holds us all together through the unconscious mind, heart, body, and soul. This ties us to everything and everyone that exists in the universe. When we develop this awareness we undo the painful illusions of separation. We develop an ability to understand and relate to others whom we may have previously misunderstood. We see a thread of commonality between all people and all things. This awareness of connection is ultimately what heals us. We may burst with love while looking at a red rose. We feel as if we see and smell the rose for the first time. We feel as if we *are* the rose. As we journey deeper within, we connect with spirit more deeply. We encounter oneness with that which we know as God.

Prerequisites for a Therapeutic Breathwork Session

Most of us should have at least one individual Therapeutic Breathwork session prior to joining a group. Participating in an individual session with a well-trained therapist assists us, as well as our therapist, in being able to ascertain whether or not the process is best for your personal healing. The appropriate number of individual sessions necessary before entering a group often depends on the extent of our previous insight-oriented therapy, as well as the extent of past trauma in our personal history.

For some people, especially those of us who may have more serious forms of emotional difficulties, Therapeutic Breathwork may be contraindicated and other forms of therapy

such as cognitive therapy or the use of psychotropic medication may be needed. An accurate psychosocial assessment may be necessary before participation in a session if one has had no prior experience with this form of therapy.

Choosing group or private therapy is an individual choice. Groups offer access to a community of supportive people who tend to connect deeply with each other over time. This can offer us a network of people to call on between sessions if we need mutual support or understanding. The day-long groups also offer two opportunities for sharing about the emotionally significant aspects of our lives, as well as the opportunity to learn to use art, music, writing, and other creative outlets for healing.

Group members should consider the following:

- 1 **Confidentiality** – Mandatory among group members, who are given the option to share on only a first-name basis if so desired.
- 2 **Regular Attendance** – Encouraged to facilitate an environment of trust and safety among members. Group members can choose to attend monthly and can request attendance on a month-by-month basis.

Note: The number of participants in a group is limited. For larger groups, other certified Therapeutic Breathwork therapists and licensed counselors are available to assist people through their experience.

The Therapeutic Breathwork process is unique to each individual. Therefore, each experience in a session varies from session to session, as well as from person to person. Therapeutic Breathwork is an experiential therapy. This means it needs to be experienced to be fully understood.

Information and Resources on Therapeutic Breathwork

For more information about Therapeutic Breathwork, see the works referenced at the end of this article. You may also refer to the following resources:

1 Grof, Stanislov, M.D., *Beyond the Brain*, 1986, State University of New York Press, Albany, N.Y.

2 *ibid.* *The Adventure of Self-discovery: Therapeutic effects of Intense Breathing (Pneumocatharsis)*. See pages 170-184.

3 *ibid.* *Realms of the Human Unconscious*.

4 Jonov, Arthur, Ph.D., *Imprints, The lifelong effects of the Birth Experience*, 1983, Coward-McCann, Inc. New York

5 Leonard Orr and Sondra Ray, *Rebirthing in the New Age*, 1983

6 Thomas Verny, M.D. *The Secret Life of the Unborn Child*.

Additional writings based on our participant's personal experiences will be available on our Web site in the near future.