

## CHAPTER TWO

# Breathe



"For breath is life, and if you breathe well you will live long on earth."  
~Sanskrit Proverb

Theresa, a mother of four children under the age of ten and wife to a husband on disability due to post-traumatic stress from serving in Iraq, owned her own private therapy practice where she counseled dozens of clients with a wide range of challenges. Needless to say, Theresa lived a high stress life. Theresa came to my yoga class looking for a way to relax. She also wanted to learn stress management tools to provide to her clients. One day in class I suggested that students try taking deep breaths every time they came to a stop sign or stoplight on their drive home. A few weeks

later, Theresa gave me an amazing testimonial of what this little exercise did for her. The first day she noticed she was less anxious about getting home to feed her kids. The second day she noticed she wasn't as short-tempered or angry with her family. The third day she realized she had gone three days without her usual after-work glass of red wine. The fourth day she discovered she was enjoying her family time more than usual.

The simple practice of focused breathing at stoplights was having a significant impact on her life. Breathing deeply at stoplights became habit to Theresa. She had even learned how to ignore the little honks of cars behind her when she didn't immediately put her foot on the gas when a light turned green because she hadn't finished her breath. One evening, she had not yet finished her long exhale when the light turned green, and as she had done many times before, she took the extra couple seconds to finish her exhale. In those moments, a semi-truck came barreling through the intersection against his own red light. If she hadn't waited to finish her breath, a tragic crash would have occurred, and she would likely have died. Stopping to breathe didn't just improve her quality of life, that day it *saved* her life.

You breathe all day long. Every breath provides your body with energy in the form of oxygen that is circulated through your entire body via your bloodstream. On the other hand, you only eat at certain times a day, and when you eat, your body must consume energy in order to convert food into energy. Therefore, 80-90% of energy comes from breath while only 10-20% of energy comes from food. The more you breathe, with better efficiency and fullness, the more energy you have to supply your daily life activities.

## Benefits of Focused Breathing

- Lowers the heart rate
- Decreases blood pressure
- Relaxes muscle tension
- Cleans, filters, warms and humidifies air
- Calms the nervous system
- Oxygenates the body
- Decreases infections and bacteria
- Improves immune function
- Removes toxins from the body
- Aids in digestion
- Enhances circulation
- Quiets the mind
- Calms the nerves
- Decreases anxiety
- Improves focus
- Slows the thoughts
- Promotes clarity
- Increases awareness
- Stabilizes emotions
- Releases tension and stress
- Lowers impulse reactivity
- Provides time to process a situation

## Focused Breathing Pre-Test

Answer the following questions based on how you feel RIGHT NOW.

I feel stressed.

Agree 5 4 3 2 1 0 Disagree

I feel focused, aware, and able to act with purpose.

Agree 5 4 3 2 1 0 Disagree

I feel relaxed, open, calm, and aware.

Agree 5 4 3 2 1 0 Disagree

I feel physically open, flexible, and free.

Agree 5 4 3 2 1 0 Disagree

## Journal

How aware are you of your breathing patterns? How deep is your natural breath? How full is your natural breath? How long is your natural breath? When do you stop to take deep breaths? When should you stop to take deep breaths? How do you feel when you get a long, full, deep breath? When in your life do you think you could benefit from becoming more aware of your breathing?

## Focused Breathing Technique

1. Take a deep breath and pay attention to the depth, volume, tone, and quality of your breath.
2. Hold your hand up in front of your nose and mouth as if it were a mirror that you are going to fog up with your breath.
3. Breathe in AND out of your mouth as if you are fogging up the mirror of your hand. Pay attention to the feeling and sound at the back of your throat.
4. Drop your hand and close your mouth, and continue to breathe as if fogging up the mirror.
5. Try to keep that feeling at the back of your throat. The feeling and sound will be like a subtle snoring sensation and make sound like an ocean inside your skull. Be sure to keep that feeling and sound on BOTH the inhalation and the exhalation.
6. Take 5-10 more focused breaths like this. Pay attention to the depth, volume, tone, and quality of your breath.
7. Return to normal breathing. (Focused breathing is a practice to help you focus in the moment and is not meant to be sustained all day long.)
8. Make a few notes here of what differences you notice from before employing the focused breathing technique to after.

## Homework

Practice this Focused Breathing Technique every time you come to a stop during your day: at stop signs, at stoplights, while waiting in line, while waiting on hold, while taking a break from work, before switching to a new task, etc. Make a few notes here about how you feel at the end of the day after practicing this Focused Breathing throughout the day.

## Focused Breathing Post-Test

For best results, practice this exercise for a day or longer before taking the post-test. Then, answer the following questions based on how you feel RIGHT NOW.

I feel stressed.

Agree 5      4      3      2      1      0      Disagree

I feel focused, aware, and able to act with purpose.

Agree 5      4      3      2      1      0      Disagree

I feel relaxed, open, calm, and aware.

Agree 5      4      3      2      1      0      Disagree

I feel physically open, flexible, and free.

Agree 5      4      3      2      1      0      Disagree

Compare your answers here to the answers you gave in the pre-test. Make notes here as to the differences:



## Questions for Review

**Body** – when you take a long, slow, focused breath, what effects do you notice in your body? Be specific and include which body parts you feel affected and what the effect was.

**Mind** – when you take a long, slow, focused breath, what shift do you experience in your thoughts and ability to process information? Be specific. Give an example of something you were thinking and how it changed with focused breath.

**Spirit** – when you take a long slow focused breath, what shift do you experience in your mood, feelings, and emotions? Be specific.