



Get Better Bodywork Results with Extending the Exhale Breath

Breath work is a powerful and ancient technique backed up by modern science that can have dramatic benefits for your clients. While you may have learned some of the basics of the mechanics of breathing in your bodywork or massage training, there are simple methods you can do to get incredible results. With the right application of some powerful lesser-known techniques you can create astounding results with your clients, with benefits ranging from releasing chronic pain (especially neck and shoulder), to relieving anxiety and insomnia, to better athletic performance. It's one of the most powerful things you can offer those who come to you for help. Plus, it's easy on your body to teach which can help you to extend your career.

You could get a deeper and quicker release of muscle tension

It has been known for some time that you can quickly shift a nervous system state from the fight or flight (sympathetic) to the rest and digest (parasympathetic) parts of the nervous system through how you breathe. Polyvagal theory has also shown you can also shift from an immobilized, shut down state (think depression) to a state of social engagement (think the state of being open, receptive) through breath. For millennia and across different cultures and disciplines (ranging from yoga, meditation to martial arts) people have worked with some form of this nervous system control.

Currently, understanding the neurophysiology of breathing is a hot topic of research. I will give you a very brief summary here and two references below if you want to dive deeper into this information.

How extending the exhale breath works:

We can measure the effects of extending the exhale through something called heart rate variability (HVR). Basically, when we inhale, our heart rate rises slightly and our pulse is stronger due to a natural slight activation of the sympathetic nervous system tone. When we exhale our heart rate and blood pressure drops ever so slightly as a result of increased parasympathetic nervous system tone. When we are calm and relaxed, we have high heart rate variability (HVR). When we are chronically stressed, we have less variability in our heart rate and therefore low HVR.

Because there is a slight shift to the rest and digest (parasympathetic/ ventral vagal) part of the nervous system when we exhale, you can nudge your nervous system into a calmer place by making your exhale breath longer than your inhale. We are able to slow down the heart rate and increase the heart rate variability. This can lead to less muscle guarding, a more receptive nervous system and better results.

Its so simple and yet very effective.

How do you apply this to you clients in a session?

When I am working on a client, and come to a tight place, I'll say "take a deep breath for me right here" and notice how the client breathes. Many times, clients naturally extend the exhale breath. However, if they are guarding a little and take a big breath in and a quick exhale, I'll cue them again saying "let's try another breath. This time I want you to take a big breath in and a long slow exhale out". This is usually enough for most clients to switch their breathing. For clients that may still have difficulty lengthening the exhale, I may softly count in for 3 counts and out for 5 counts with them and I may have them do it several times. I have found that cueing the client to breathe this way helps decrease tension, increase relaxation and receptivity all without any greater physical effort on my part.

Adding this simple breathing technique can increase your impact for your client. But don't take my word for it. Give it a try in your next session. And then let me know how it goes! I always love feedback.

References:

Accessing the Healing Power of the Vagus Nerve: Self-Help Exercises for Anxiety, Depression, Trauma, and Autism by Stanley Rosenberg (pp 50-51)

Breath of Life: The Respiratory Vagal Stimulation Model of Contemplative Activity by Gerritsen Roderik J. S., Band Guido P. H., *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* V. 12 2018
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