

The Upwave Interview

This interview was conducted via email with freelance writer Susan Fishman for Upwave: Turner Broadcasting's web-based health and lifestyle magazine. I have not seen the finished article. But here is the original, unedited exchange.

SF: Hello Dan, I have four questions:

1) Is there a proper way—a good, a right, healthy way to breathe—in terms of everyday normal breathing?

2) What is the wrong way to breathe?

3) What kind of benefits can we see from proper breathing and/or deep breathing techniques?

4) Can you share an example?

DAN: Hi Susan, I did my best to answer your questions... maybe not in strict order... and you will find that I hopped around a bit... And spent no time editing... Offering instead something like chaotic prose... Trusting that you will glean from it whatever you find useful or interesting.

So here we go...

First, I'd like to reframe your question, because the word "proper" and the term "normal" gives rebellious people like me the heebie-jeebies!

"Proper" means, appropriate, fitting, polite, good, correct, right... Maybe I just suffer from vocabulary trauma, but the word "proper" carries such a charge for me! "Sit up straight, keep your elbows off the table, sit still and be quiet, mind your manners, don't laugh, don't cry."

Yikes! Who can breathe fully or freely or naturally when they are worried about such things?

"Normal" means: usual, typical, ordinary, standard, customary, average, habitual... There ain't much of room to breathe there either—especially for those of us who were born to be bold, original, pioneering, innovative, creative, or exceptional!

And so my quick answer to, "is there a proper way to breathe" would be No! Heck No!

But I'll try to behave considering the spirit in which the question was asked... if you'll try to forgive me for railing against orthodox, traditional, conventional, status quo, in-the-box thinking, or anything that has the potential of choking off the spirit in people!

By the way, the word "spirit" is the root of the words "inspiration, expiration respiration." That's no coincidence. And so when you think about it, the flow of breath and the flow of spirit are basically synonymous.

Take yawning for example: a perfectly natural and healthy—in fact vital—breathing reflex. And look what society and culture have done with that! It's considered to be not polite and not appropriate. It means we are bored or tired. It can even be taken as an insult!

And so what do we learn to do? We learn to suppress it, inhibit it, block it, hide it, disguise it! (I advise people to yawn a lot, to yawn on purpose, to yawn often and deliberately, because it's good for you, and it feels good too!)

Anyway... I rather think in terms of "optimal." Everyday life has ups and downs. We are involved in many different activities, requiring different levels of energy, focus, and so on. And therefore we require different ways of breathing. For example running up a hill requires a different kind of breathing than relaxing in the park.

Proper breathing should be such that it is free to change with the ebb and flow, the ups and downs of everyday life. Our breathing should be full and free and alive, not stuck or locked into any set pattern. It should be changing, fluid, flowing...

One of the first things we need to do in order to become optimal breathers is to develop "breath awareness." In other words, we need to cultivate the habit of tuning into our breathing, observing it, paying attention to it at different times, during different activities,

in order to learn how to move ourselves into or out of certain states.

How do you breathe when you are feeling very calm, peaceful and content? How do you breathe when you are upset, angry, afraid or in pain? It's important to bring awareness to your breathing at those times, because the way you breathe (either consciously or unconsciously) will either exacerbate or relieve the short and long term effects of those states.

How do you breathe when you are enjoying music, or when you are struggling with a math problem? Very differently. How do you breathe when you are being insulted, or when you are being praised? Very differently.

Every psychological, emotional and physiological state has a corresponding breathing pattern or quality. When your state changes, your breathing pattern changes. And vice-versa: by changing your breathing pattern, you can change your state. Get control of your breathing and you get control of yourself.

So that leads to the next practice: "Conscious Breathing." It is important that we practice conscious breathing. Children unconsciously model the breathing habits and patterns of their parents and others around them.

But the odds are that their parents were not breathing "properly" at all! Then if the child grows up to become a musician, he or she may have to un-learn certain habits and re-train their breathing mechanism in order to excel in their chosen vocation.

Without conscious breathing training (breathwork), just about everyone lives with sub-optimal breathing habits and patterns. In fact, it has been shown that poor breathing habits are an underlying cause of many health problems.

A standard idea about proper breathing (which I agree with in general) is that we should breathe thru our nose. The nose was meant to breathe through. Nature designed it for that purpose. It has hairs that filter dust. It has structures that spiral the air. It has tissues that moisturize and condition the air, warming it or cooling it, before it enters the lungs.

To breathe through your nose is to be in harmony with nature's design, and so doing so can be considered "proper." But have you ever tried to laugh or cry or speak or sing or whistle thru your nose? And so mouth breathing really ain't all that bad in some situations, so it can also be considered proper!

Chronic hyperventilation or over-breathing, and its opposite habitually inhibited or restricted breathing, from a health point of view, are each "wrong." Both those patterns trigger the fight or flight stress response, along with a host of debilitating effects.

Think of this: when you are in a state of pain, you hold your breath. When you are afraid or in shock, you hold your breath. Then, when the pain goes away or the fear passes, what happens? A sigh of relief! You don't make it happen, you don't think about it. It is

naturally triggered by your change in state.

Have you ever seen a person who was locked in tremendous pain or paralyzed by fear Take a big soothing sigh of relief? I doubt it. Those crisis states and that soothing pleasurable breath are like oil and water: they don't mix.

And so what do you think would happen if you could give yourself a big luxurious soothing pleasurable sigh of relief when you feel afraid or in pain? Something would have to give. The pain or the fear would have to leave you!

A sigh of relief sends a powerful message to our lizard brain—that simple ancient part of our brain that monitors every breath we take—that frog brain that sees life in a very simple way: “Should I eat it? Or will it eat me?”

Here's a secret: sighs of relief, consciously and deliberately practiced throughout the day sends wonderful signals to this ancient part of our brain, to our nervous system, and to our subconscious mind.

And just as that breath expresses naturally when we move from a state of pain to no-pain, or from a state of fear to no-fear... when we consciously muster up a big luxurious sigh of relief, we tend to shift our state away from fear and pain and toward comfort and pleasure, peace and calm.

Our breathing system is the only system in the body that is both voluntary and involuntary, both conscious and unconscious. That is not an accident; that's not a coincidence. That's an opportunity, an invitation, to take part in our own evolution, to determine our own nature!

We can look at breathing as an untapped natural resource. Most people have no idea of the power and potential that conscious breathing holds. The breath can be used as a tool, a force, a bridge for health, growth, and change... It can be used to benefit body, mind and spirit.

You might by now guessed by now that breathwork is my passion (pass-I-on). It's also my profession (profess-I-on). Breathwork may be the most “holistic” of all holistic approaches to health and wellbeing—the most complimentary form of alternative healing methods.

Breath awareness and conscious breathing is ‘proper’ breathing. It helps us to become more in tune with ourselves. We can use it to strengthen, support, enhance, change or even transform ourselves.

On the “bad” side of the spectrum would be anything approaching sub-optimal breathing, anything that interferes with the free and full and natural flow of our breath. Things like physical tension: especially in the shoulder, neck, chest or back regions...

Proper breathing is breathing in a way optimizes cell function, metabolism, and the release of toxins. In order for any living organism to stay healthy, to survive, it must eliminate wastes.

In our case, 3% of metabolic waste is eliminated thru defecation; 7% thru urination; 20% thru respiration; and a whopping 70% thru what? Respiration! And so if you think that regular bowel movements are important, and working up a good sweat from time to time is healthy, then you need to think again about the importance of breathing!

Another standard idea about proper breathing is the idea of “deep breathing.” However, there is a lot of misunderstanding, misinformation and hype about how deep breathing “super oxygenates” our cells.

The fact is that unless you suffer from some severe pathological condition, your blood is already about 97 % or 98% saturated with oxygen. So it really doesn't make much of difference how much you huff and puff.

And deep breathing, if it involves hyperventilation, results in the blowing off of too much carbon dioxide. CO₂ is a key to oxygen delivery. And so hyperventilation (over-breathing) actually decreases the oxygen supply to the cells and tissues of the body! (See the attached article: “*CO₂: Good For You And Tasty Too!*”)

Optimal breathing, conscious breathing, and specifically the practice of breathwork supports us in living longer, it helps us remain healthy and fit.

“Wrong” breathing or sub-optimal breathing as I prefer to think of it... results in premature aging, inefficient metabolism. Our cells are not fed properly, we don't sleep well, we have unnatural cravings, we suffer a poor quality of life, and we increase the likelihood of many diseases and illnesses.

The health benefits of “right” breathing are numerous. We can move out of inflammatory states; we can activate and support the body's innate wisdom, by generating authentic energy VS ‘adrenalized’ energy...

Proper breathing supports the body's natural ability to heal, renew, repair and recover...

Many people have learned to apply remedial breathing for: asthma, anxiety, pain management, chronic fatigue, high blood pressure—low blood pressure, weight loss, headaches, insomnia, depression, allergies, auto-immune diseases.

“Proper” breathing strengthens the immune system. And it support clarity of thinking and feeling.

And so, yes there are proper ways to breathe... if proper means enhancing and improving our wellbeing, if it means helping us to achieve or maintain higher or more resourceful emotional and psychological and physiological states of being.

When it comes to breathing, I believe that we need to explore alternative approaches, new techniques. I encourage people to learn and practice new ways of breathing.

I do my best to persuade and encourage people to discover, explore and develop breathing abilities they don't know they have.

I help people break their old breathing habits, and to experiment with therapeutic breathing exercises and techniques.

I love showing people how they can consciously change their breathing habits and patterns in order to get free of stress, fear, anxiety, lethargy, ennui, and to awaken innate creative and healing energies.

Technically or practically speaking, one wrong way to breathe would be to chronically use accessory muscles—neck, back, shoulder muscles—muscles that are not meant to be involved in the breathing process...

A few examples of people who have gotten benefit from conscious breathing:

Linda lost 50 pounds in a year with no exercise and without changing her diet in any way. She also healed herself of deep anxiety and unhappiness..

Pierre eliminated his stuttering, and got comfortable with public speaking. He cleared his anxiety. He was able to relate his chronic shoulder tension and pain with the death of his father... a profound insight into a long standing condition. A competitive cyclist, he dramatically improved his sports performance.

Grace eliminated four out of five of her blood pressure medications. At 70 years old, she is now qualifying for her pilot's license.

Penny could not breathe thru her nose. From childhood, she suffered with sinusitis, bronchitis, and allergies. At the age of 27, with six months of conscious breathing practice, her chronic sinusitis, bronchitis and allergies completely disappeared, and have not returned. With a year of practice she could breathe fully and freely thru her nose for the first time in her life at age 28.

Helen got rid of her chronic tension headaches in less than a month of conscious breathing.

Naynesh rid himself of panic attacks and chronic anxiety with only three conscious breathing sessions.

Julia healed herself of chronic debilitating asthma in six months.

John healed himself of psoriasis after 10 years of suffering with it.

An interesting piece of information:

Have you heard about Stig Severinsen? He recently broke his own Guinness world record of 20 minutes, by holding his breath under water for 22 minutes!

He did not do it by concerning himself with what is proper or normal! He accomplished it thru deep practice—relaxing into and thru the feelings and sensations that arise when we hold our breath.

Now, unless you are a free diver or stuck in a smoke-filled building and looking to escape without inhaling deadly toxins, then this is probably not very high on your list of desired skills or abilities.

But everyday stress and anxiety are related to feelings and sensation that arise in the body. And they can be overcome with breathing practice.

Ok, I could go on forever, but I'll stop here. Thank you for the opportunity to share my ideas.