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Classes in breathwork touting benefits ranging from increased vitality to mental clarity are a hot draw from coast to coast. Could controlled breathing take your Pilates practice to the next level?

by Joanna Powell

FOR YEARS, ASHLEY DELEON WAS DEATHLY AFRAID OF FLYING. As the plane taxied for takeoff, her heart would rev. She'd clench her eyes and shrink into a ball of anxiety. But that's in the past. These days, five deep breaths calm her panic and allow her to return to her normal self.

Likewise, on cardio runs around NYC, where she's a Pilates instructor and owner of the Ashley DeLeon Pilates studio, the new mom has seen her stamina increase. She credits the changes to one tweak in her wellness routine: breathwork. "Once I started practicing breathing," she says, "I could run longer, become less winded and feel less exhausted afterward."

BREATHING? WE GOT THAT.

To the uninitiated, the concept may sound ridiculous. Learning to breathe? Please! "When I first started to teach breathing, people would cock their heads and say, 'Um, well, actually, breathing is one of the things I do well,'" recalls Belisa Vranich, PsyD, a clinical psychologist, breath coach and author of *Breathe: The Simple, Revolutionary 14-Day Program to Improve Your Mental and Physical Health* (St. Martin's Griffin, 2016). "I got a lot of sarcasm."

But the truth is, most of us are getting our air intake all wrong. Many people are "lazy breathers," says Dr. Vranich, "taking short, shallow breaths from the chest, filling only the very top portions of the lungs with air. Then they do not exhale fully, and with most breaths, 30 percent of stale air stays in the body."

"I never realized how little I inhaled," DeLeon, who learned controlled breathing from Dr. Vranich, recalls of her own respiratory challenges. "I was chronically exhaling, operating on the bare minimum."

WOO-WOO NO MORE

While fringe practitioners have been panting with purpose for years, breathwork has suddenly gone mainstream—with classes cropping up at gyms, meditation centers and community programs across the country. "It makes me giggle that it's now trendy," says Dr. Vranich.

When it comes to the healing benefits for body and mind, however, this stuff is serious. Devotees say that practicing breathing has improved everything from soothing their mental and emotional trauma to lowering blood pressure, clearing brain fog, even boosting weight loss. And science backs up many of those claims.

"Research is showing that proper breathing can help overcome anxiety, counteract disease and improve stamina and physical performance," says Patricia L. Gerberg, MD, assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at New York Medical College and co-author of *The Healing Power of the Breath*:

Simple Techniques to Reduce Stress and Anxiety, Enhance Concentration, and Balance Your Emotions (Shambhala, 2012).

Breathwork's value in treating anxiety and depression was illustrated in a 2011 study in the *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy*, which successfully employed a three-component breathwork model to help patients with mood disorders find relief. Stress? A 2016 study found that people who practiced two 10-minute breathing sessions a day produced significantly lower levels of inflammatory cytokines (proteins associated with stress).

Jordan Beinhorn, instructor and owner at Pilates on Traction in Los Angeles, is walking proof of breathwork's therapeutic powers. The former professional figure skater suffered extensive injuries—and lingering PTSD—when the Mini Cooper she was driving was struck from the side in a shattering crash. "I suffered a concussion and side whiplash, with jaw, back and neck issues," she says. "Then after the accident, I was afraid to drive or to be touched for physical therapy, especially my face, head and neck."

She finally recovered thanks to the breathing techniques she learned studying with David Elliott, a renowned California instructor. "The breathwork was a significant part of my healing," says Beinhorn, who now teaches breathing herself. "It is an active meditation, which forces you to disconnect from the mental process and focus on the physical."

For Jennifer Savino, a Pilates instructor and breath coach in San Juan Capistrano, CA, proper breathing worked like an antidepressant. "There was a time when I was very depressed because I had a job that left me physically, mentally and emotionally depleted," she says. Through conscious breathing, Savino realized that she was holding on to a belief instilled by her parents—that the only path to success is through hard, grinding work, at any cost



Joseph Pilates famously said, "Breathing is the first act of the life, and the last...above all, learn how to breathe correctly."

OPPOSITE PAGE: ASHLEY DELEON CUES A CLIENT IN HER NEW YORK CITY PILATES STUDIO, WHERE SHE ALSO CONDUCTS POPULAR BREATHWORK CLASSES.

ABOVE: CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST BELISA VRANICH, PSYD, SPECIALIZES IN HELPING CLIENTS DEVELOP HEALTHY BREATHING HABITS.

PICK YOUR RESPO STYLE

IN PILATES, THE FOCUS IS USUALLY ON LATERAL BREATHING—expanding the sides and back of the rib cage while drawing in the abdominals, notes Pilates pro Ashley DeLeon. Joseph Pilates explained that on the exhale, “always [try] very hard to squeeze every atom of impure air from the lungs in much the same manner you would wring every drop of water from a wet cloth.”

Other breathwork techniques have different focuses:

COHERENT BREATHING

This introductory exercise is used to slow down breathing to the optimal five breaths per minute (see sidebar on page 77). “Coherent breathing activates the healing, recharging part of the system while quieting the defensive, energy-burning parts,” says Patricia L. Gerbarg, MD.

BELLY BREATHING (DIAPHRAGMATIC BREATHING)

This technique teaches you to breathe from the lower part of your body by jutting your belly out when inhaling, explains Belisa Vranich, PsyD. She adds that expanding the abdomen rather than the chest strengthens the diaphragm and lung capacity. “Because air is now going to the bottom of your lungs, where the densest, biggest tissue is, you maximize the amount of oxygen reaching your cells,” she says.

PRANAYAMA

This is the yogic practice of controlling the breath (which is called “prana,” or life force, in Hindi). “In this practice, we breathe in through the mouth, hold that breath in the belly, take a second breath through the mouth into the chest and then exhale,” says Pilates

and breathwork teacher Jordan Beinhorn. “There are different types of Pranayamic breathing [e.g., three-part breath, alternate nostril breathing], with different purposes—some for healing, some for grounding, some for meditation or just to stay present in the body.”

TRANSFORMATIONAL BREATHING

A more advanced technique popularized by Dr. Judith Kravitz, this method is said to heal the body and clear emotional baggage. Exercises are based on a deep breath in through the mouth and a gentle sigh out on the exhale—with no pause between inhale and exhale. The emphasis is on optimal physical, mental and spiritual health.

HOLOTROPIC BREATHING

If you’re looking to release a flood of emotion, this controlled hyperventilation fits the bill. People often experience a trippy, altered state due to reduced carbon dioxide levels in the blood, followed by a deep state of relaxation. “Some people cry, some feel like they’re floating or enter a trancey state,” says Vranich. “Others get to learn what meditating feels like in a very accessible way.”

to one’s health. “Breathing helped me slow down and trust my intuition that something didn’t feel right,” she says. “Soon, I left that job and ended up teaching Pilates, a career I love.”

WHAT IS BREATHWORK?

Joseph Pilates famously said, “Breathing is the first act of the life, and the last...above all, learn how to breathe correctly.” In Pilates, breathing is a founding principle for the rhythm of the exercises and the activation of muscles. But dedicated breath practice goes further.

“A sustained period of focused breathing is a workout for the diaphragm, just as the gym is for other muscles,” explains Dr. Vranich. “A breathing class is an exercise class (you’ll sweat!) for your lungs.” Through counting, following music, chimes or other prompts, participants learn to go from shallow, rapid breaths to deep, slow breaths—optimally four to six per minute.

“Controlled breathing automatically stimulates the vagus nerve [a long nerve that extends from the brain to the abdomen],” notes DeLeon. “It literally chills you out.” Moreover, fuller lung capacity increases oxygenation to the blood and nourishes the body on a cellular level.



TOP TO BOTTOM: JENNIFER SAVINO FOCUSES ON PRANAYAMA TECHNIQUE IN HER SAN JUAN CAPISTRANO, CA, SESSIONS; AT PILATES ON TRACTION, JORDAN BEINHORN'S LOS ANGELES STUDIO, A STUDENT EXPERIENCES THE DEEP RELAXATION OF CONTROLLED BREATHING.



HOW IT'S DONE

A typical breath class lasts about an hour. It begins in a seated, upright position while you observe your own natural breathing patterns. An instructor then guides you through a series of inhaling and exhaling exercises, often including breath counts, pauses and resistance breathing. "We go through different tempos and depths of breath, both lying down and standing," says DeLeon, whose breathwork sessions culminate in the supine position, finding the deepest, longest breath possible and then fading back into the natural breath. "It is always very apparent," she says, "how the state of one's natural breathing is changed from the beginning of the session to the end."

THE PILATES CONNECTION

Beyond its myriad health benefits, breathwork can also be a valuable tool for improving your Pilates practice. "Proper breathing increases stamina as it helps utilize more lung capacity, sometimes increasing the surface of oxygen exchange by as much as 50 percent," says Dr. Gerbarg. "When you don't have to breathe as frequently to get the same oxygenation, you can apply that extra energy to Pilates or other athletic activities."

Savino found that breathing lessons helped her feel more connected with her body, resulting in a gain in fluidity "that helps me transition from one Pilates movement to the next with more grace and confidence," she notes.

As a Pilates instructor, DeLeon discovered that her breathwork practice enabled her to help get her clients moving properly. "Cueing the breath is the most effective way to engage the core," she adds. "The abdominals are always involved when breathing, so sometimes if a client is having a hard time figuring out how to use their abdominals in an exercise, paying attention to their breath is the simplest way to fix it."

There's also a case for integrating breathing techniques directly into Pilates movements. "In our workshops, we've found that almost any exercise routine, including Pilates, will be enhanced by adding breathing practices during the movement," says Dr. Gerbarg. "People see better results in a shorter time." In particular, she observes a heightened ability to elongate key muscles by stretching on the inhale and relaxing on the exhale.

HOW PILATES ADVANCES BREATHWORK

"Two words," says Beinhorn. "Body awareness." Having a Pilates background prepares the novice breather to make the mind/body connection required for breathwork, she says.

On a physical level, having a strong core translates to effective breathing patterns because the same muscles are involved. "Pilates can literally make you a stronger breather," says DeLeon. "And breathwork can make you stronger in Pilates."

READY TO TRY IT?

When starting breathwork, it's preferable to learn from a trained instructor in order to tailor the exercises to your specific needs (i.e., relaxation, anxiety, digestive disorders), and to get the kinks out of your personal technique.

Classes are widely available and cost as little as \$10 for a group session (even at NYC's buzzy MNDFL

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studios) to \$200 for private appointments. There are also YouTube tutorials (Andrew Weil, MD's "Asleep in 60 Seconds: 4-7-8 Breathing Technique" is a good one) and instructional CDs, such as the 11-part audio program—complete with chime cues!—included with Dr. Gerbarg's book, *The Healing Power of the Breath*.

Once you're ready to practice on your own, Savino suggests "a daily session of 10 to 15 minutes—and sometimes 30 to 45 minutes, depending on your needs and available time."

The beauty of breathwork is that it can be done anywhere. Yes, it's optimal to practice alone in a calm, quiet room—either on a comfortable chair, floor or bed. But it's also possible to squeeze in 10 minutes in a public space. Headphones do wonders for blocking outside noises in order to focus on breathing.

While you'll be slowing down your respiratory rate—along with your body and racing mind—you can expect remarkably fast-acting results. "I found breathing exercises used with my patients got them feeling better right away," says Dr. Vranich, "especially the ones with anxiety and depression. I mean, right away. One session!" PS

EVERY BREATH YOU TAKE: INHALE, EXHALE 101

Want to experiment on your own? This simple, coherent breathing technique is a good place to start. It will slow your breathing to the optimal five breaths per minute—ideal for calming stress and rebooting energy.

1. Sitting upright or lying down, close your eyes and place your hands on your belly.
2. Slowly breathe in through your nose, expanding your belly to the count of six.
3. Gently breathe out through your nose to the count of six.
4. Repeat.
5. Practice this pattern for five minutes at first, then work up to 10 to 20 minutes a day.