

Promoting Learning

by Dr. Marvin Marshall

Using Breath Management for Better Listening And Voice Preservation

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When breathing is active, listening and speaking are improved.

Listening and learning are most effective when breathing is active--rather than passive.

Breathing is ordinarily a passive and unconscious act. However, breathing can be made a conscious activity and thereby energize the body for more effective learning and listening alertness.

Once active breathing is learned and practiced, we find ourselves in possession of an extraordinarily powerful technique, which includes:

1. lowering blood pressure,
2. calming the emotions,
3. pumping the spinal fluid,
4. helping the body realign itself,
5. calming and controlling the thought process,
6. managing stress, and
7. enriching the sound of the voice.

CONSCIOUS BREATHING

To begin teaching your body conscious breathing, imagine that someone hands you an extraordinary gift; you GASP in surprise and delight. Notice your mouth opens as you gasp. Now, slowly and deeply gasp. Fill your back and rib cage. Both are lifted and expanded in the act of gasping. Take a moment to fully appreciate what your upper body feels like when it is full of air. Now let the air out slowly. When your lungs are empty, take a moment to fully appreciate what your body feels like when it feels empty of air. Repeat this process until "full" and "empty" feel equally familiar.

As you become more and more familiar with feeling “full,” you will notice the following:

1. Your peripheral vision increases.
2. Your hearing becomes more acute.
3. Your emotions begin to calm down.
4. You begin to listen more actively.

Once you have become comfortable with the feeling of your body in a “full of air” position, you are ready to practice.

PRACTICING CONSCIOUS BREATHING

First, without inhaling, elevate your sternum--the breastbone, the center of the chest. This will automatically raise the rib cage and provide a more efficient breathing position.

If you find that lifting your sternum without inhaling is difficult, lift both arms above your head, pointing to the ceiling. Then, careful to leave the chest where the high arms put it, lower your arms. You will find your chest much higher than it was originally, your ribs expanded farther than they were originally, and you will be conscious of your back moving. This high chest, rib expanded, shoulders-relaxed position is the one you want to maintain.

Just keeping the sternum up puts you in a more relaxed, alert, in-control physiological position. You will find yourself listening, thinking, and speaking more clearly because the body is being used more efficiently. More oxygen is reaching the brain.

The typical breathing cycle is to inhale (“full”), exhale (“empty”), pause, pause, pause. We spend a great deal of time with a minimum amount of air in our lungs--or on “empty.”

Practice slowly gasping (through your mouth) for 4 slow counts. Hold “full” for 4 counts. Slowly exhale for 4 counts. Hold “empty” for 4 counts. Repeat this process for 3 minutes. You have now learned a 3-minute “Stress Buster”!

Next, practice holding “full” for longer and longer periods of time. Begin with 5 seconds. Increase to 10 seconds. Continue increasing the amount of time you can stay “full” until you have reached 30 seconds.

Listen to a conversation, a radio program, or newscast while you practice listening on “full.” Whenever your body becomes uncomfortable with the “full” feeling, exhale to “empty” for a moment, and then inhale back to “full.”

By practicing conscious breathing and listening on “full,” you will listen more actively. increase the flow of oxygen to your brain, and lower your body’s stress. In addition, you will receive, store, and retrieve information more efficiently.

TEACHING YOUR STUDENTS

INSPIRATION--filling and holding air in the body--can dramatically increase their ability to listen and learn.

The following is a simple formula to teach your students to increase their active listening skills. (Notice that this is not the 3-minute “stress buster” count.)

Once practiced, START EACH NEW ACTIVITY with the procedure.

Raise your sternum.
Inhale for 4 counts.
Stay “full” for 8 counts.
Exhale for 2 counts.

Sternum up.
In for 4.
Hold for 8.
Out for 2..

Sternum up.
4.
8.
2.

Sternum up.
Repeat.

SAVING AND IMPROVING A TEACHER’S VOICE

Teachers rely mostly on the voice to communicate. Overuse of the voice is a common problem for classroom teachers.

Using the active breathing approach of gasping and SPEAKING ON FULL reduces strain on the voice while simultaneously making the voice more resonant.

As a player of the great highland bagpipes, I have learned that to keep the skirl of the pipes constant and consistent, the bag must be full at all times. The fuller the bag, the easier the play! So it is with the human voice. The fuller the lungs, the less strain on the vocal chords.

When gasping, the larynx automatically lowers--thereby releasing tension in the throat. In addition, speaking on "full" holds the vocal chords tight, thereby reducing stress on them when vocalizing.

The author is indebted to William Hanrahan of Vocal Integration Concepts for his expertise in this area: <http://www.vocalintegration.com/>

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Dr. Marshall's website: <http://www.MarvinMarshall.com>

E-mail Dr. Marshall: marvmarshall@teachers.net

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