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Men's Journal

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YOU'RE BREATHING ALL WRONG

To improve your athletic performance and to feel clearer all the time, start with the most fundamental act of life. *by* CHUCK THOMPSON

WE ALL COME INTO THE WORLD WITH THE ability to take full, unencumbered breaths, but as we get older we forget how to breathe properly," says Don Campbell, a journalist turned wellness expert who champions a new movement among doctors and athletes known as "conscious breathing." A host of challenges conspire against our breathing well, Campbell says: "Poor posture, restrictive clothing, bad habits such as smoking, diets that lead to high blood pressure and racing hearts, increasingly rapid and emotionally stressful lives, lack of exercise, multitasking, polluted environments, and slouching in front of computers are just a few of the things that literally take our breath away, creating a lifestyle that's incongruent with proper breathing." Modern life causes the average person to use about a third of his natural lung capacity, while drawing about 15 breaths a minute.

The trouble began with industrialization. "Up until the past 100 or 150 years, our daily activities — farm chores, hunting animals, hard manual labor — required that we use our diaphragms as our main breathing muscle," says Dr. Louis Libby, a pulmonary physician at the Oregon Clinic, in Portland. "In the past century we've become sedentary. We can go days without using our diaphragms. We've become lazy, sitting in front of computers and using the weaker intercostal breathing muscles in the rib cage for breaths that are incomplete but adequate for living."

By studying yoga and qigong practitioners, along with current scientific

parasympathetic nervous system," says Muench, "which helps the body relax when it has been injured. Slow breathing activates the vagus nerve, the primary cranial nerve, which is associated with a recuperative state." University of Phoenix studies have also demonstrated that slow breathing increases alpha waves in the brain, calming mid-range waves that foster a relaxed yet alert state of mind.

Perhaps more important, slow breathing tends to increase heart-rate variability, a measurement of the fluctuation in heartbeat during an activity. "If your heart rate fluctuates 60 to 80 beats per minute, cardiac-wise that's healthier than someone whose heart rate varies between only

I began my conscious breathing program a few weeks before a ski trip to Breckenridge, Colorado. The regimen is boring and easy to forget to do (see sidebar), but it has immediate benefits. My mental focus improved, I was cranking out work faster and with more creativity, and the tightness I normally experienced in my neck and shoulders decreased. Though I didn't feel stronger or find the "zone" during my usual workouts (basketball and lifting), the conscious oxygen intake helped me summon valuable bursts of energy and mental focus as I got deeper into a breathing routine.

It stood to reason that executing Campbell's breathing technique at the top of an intimidating slope with moguls the size of rhinoceros haunches would be a tougher task than at home on my couch. But as I stared down a terrifying 100-yard pitch of inverted egg cartons from the top of the Burn, a black diamond widomaker that had been taunting me all afternoon, I realized how calm conscious breathing had made me. I was determined to eat these bumps alive.

I knew a few extra particles of oxygen weren't going to turn me into Bode Miller, but halfway through a pretty clean run it became clear that my sharper mental focus and increased energy had a far greater impact on my technique than my pricey new Rossignol boards did. I slowed (but did not stop) for a session of conscious breathing, and the Burn looked just as nasty from the middle of the slope as it had from the top. Nevertheless, I popped off the tops of the bumps and ripped to the bottom as easily and smoothly as drawing my next breath. ■

The regimen is boring and easy to forget to do, but it has immediate benefits.

reports, Campbell, who with Al Lee co-authored *Perfect Breathing: Transform Your Life One Breath at a Time*, discovered that 10 or fewer deeper, slower breaths per minute is best for overall health. "The main physiological benefit to slower breathing is that it increases oxygen saturation in cells," says Dr. Fred Muench, whose Mobile Health Interventions company recently developed BreathPacer, an iPhone application that monitors breathing and displays optimal breathing rates. "This unleashes a cascade of positive effects, including giving you more energy and increased cognitive abilities."

"For example, once you go below 10 breaths a minute you start to engage the

70 and 75 beats per minute," says Muench. "It means your system is not so rigid. Someone like Lance Armstrong has a massive swing in heart-rate variability, whereas an unhealthy or older person has a much smaller one. The way to increase variability is to breathe slowly."

While somewhat skeptical, I decided I'd give conscious breathing a try, first sharing my doubts with Campbell. "We experimented with lots of different ways of slowing down breathing, but this one really seemed to work the best," Campbell said. "We're not saying you need to do it all the time — five or six times a day is fine — but trust me, you'll notice your body functioning better."

RELEARN HOW TO BREATHE

Do this exercise five times a day and you'll start thinking and performing better in no time.

