



*“Without daily physical exertion, our bodies become storehouses of unreleased tensions. With no natural outlet for our tensions, our muscles become weak and tight, and we lose touch with our physical nature, with life’s energies.”*

— Bob Anderson

Author & Sports Trainer

BIONETICS. THE STUDY OF LIFE.

## BREATH OF LIFE: BREATHING, RELAXATION & STRETCHING FOR STRESS RELIEF

### BREATHING

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It's no secret that one of the keys to longevity is to keep breathing as long as you can. But simple breathing—the involuntary act so many of us take for granted—is much more than the mere physiological act of taking in oxygen. Ancient practitioners of Chi Kung, Tai Chi and other forms of martial arts have long known that disciplined, intentional breathing affected physical as well as emotional vitality. Virtually every major spiritual discipline uses a form of breath awareness as part of its practice. In most languages, the word for *breath* is the same as the word for *spirit*. In Japan the word is *ki*, in Hindu writings, *prana*, and in China, *Qi* or *chi*. Breath is the life force and the significant carrier of energy in the human system. Through mindful breathing techniques, individuals have learned to control their heartbeats, blood flow, blood pressure, immune system, mental conditions and even pain. Qi Gong masters direct the breath to heal specific body tissues and organs.

Carola Speads, a German movement therapist, in her book *Breathing: The ABC's*, says that disciplined breathing “gives us physiological and psychological balance and the balance of yin and yang,” a symbolic expression of masculine and feminine energy.

Recently, there has been an upsurge of interest in the various techniques of breathing and the many ancient practices that utilize breath to develop the exploration and empowerment of the inner self. Breathing from the chest is too shallow and limits the amount of oxygen that enters the blood stream. Breath must be drawn in from the belly, expanding the abdomen in smooth and rhythmic movements.



The word *relaxation* should bring to mind the definitive work of Herbert Benson M.D., Associate Professor of Medicine at The Harvard Medical School. In his book *The Relaxation Response*, Benson elaborates on the necessity to learn relaxation techniques in today's stress-filled existence. He outlines a simple meditative technique that can be used alongside of any other discipline or spiritual practice:

- **Find a quiet environment** — a place free from distraction.
- **Find a comfortable position.** Avoid undue muscle tension. A sitting position works well. You can use a chair that supports the head if the idea of *sit up and relax* doesn't come naturally to you. Only a few are comfortable with the *lotus* position of the yogis. Do not attempt to lie down, as you may get drowsy or fall asleep. (Sleep itself isn't a bad way to relax, but it's not a form of active, conscious stress reduction—and *consciously falling asleep* doesn't count!)
- **Choose a mental device** — a sound, word or phrase—repeat it silently or aloud. Follow your breathing, become aware of your breath. Relax. Do this as you fix your gaze at a stationary object—preferably *not* the TV.
- **Assume a passive attitude.** Don't worry about how you're performing, what you're getting out of the exercise, or what you should be doing *instead* of the exercise. Just let it happen. Let the words sink deep within you. Do this twice a day for at least fifteen minutes—it has been proven to help heal the body.

This is meditative, *intentional* relaxation. Finding the *still point* in your life and letting all the to-do stuff and heavy baggage go for a while can be truly challenging, but well worth the time. Pursuing other means of relaxation such as swimming, canoeing, playing chess, or any participating in any activity that relieves anxiety will also contribute to your physical and emotional well-being and balance. Be sure to do those things that you enjoy doing! Life is too short to be doing things that you don't enjoy. Enjoyable activities gives you a zest for life!

Stretching is a “*simple, painless way of getting ready for movement,*” says physical fitness expert Bob Anderson, author of the book titled *Stretching*. Anderson has taught stretching techniques to the Denver Broncos, New York Jets, U.S. Olympic teams and many other athletes. According to Anderson, taking time to stretch before and after physical exertion keeps muscles supple, heightens performance, and prevents injury; simple stretching is a great way to melt off the stress that leads to sore backs, stiff necks and *uptight* attitudes. The practice of stretching is worthwhile even if its not associated with physical exertion, and especially for those less able or inclined to be physically active.

Stress in the muscles has as much to do with resistance to acceptance of change as it does with pure tension or over-exertion. Both of these attitudes can affect you no matter active or inactive you are. Before getting out of bed in the morning even a minute or two of stretching prepares the muscles for the day's events. What is more, it *feels* great!

#### PROVEN EFFECTIVE AND HEALTHY

While there are many approaches to stress relief, these methods have proven to be most effective: mindful breathing techniques, learning to relax using a simple meditative practice, and simple stretching before and after physical exercise. These healthy lifestyle habits may seem simple but they are proven to help reduce stress and prevent potential illness caused by the constant exposure to and impact of the stresses of life.

