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**Best Practices for Teaching Pranayama (so you heal and don't harm)**

This guide is to help yoga teachers at all levels of practice experience better breathing from the "inside out" and refine teaching techniques with students or private clients.

Overbreathing, also called hyperventilation and hypocapnia, is very common even within the yoga community and can contribute to or cause serious negative health effects. It is the yoga teacher's professional responsibility to "do no harm" and guide the student toward greater wholeness. Using this strategy of teaching the breath to students is the most evidence-based practice and also supported by the ancient texts. Please try these yourself prior to integrating them into your teaching.

Experiential Breathing Practice

- ❖ Positioning
  - Lie in a supported supine position with the knees bent, chest elevated.
- ❖ Practice awareness of breathing without changing the natural pattern
  - Notice the physical, emotional, and mental states present
  - Notice signs of tension, depth of breathing, nose or mouth breathing, preferred pattern (chest, abdominal, lateral, etc).
- ❖ Cue for relaxation of the upper chest, shoulders, accessory neck muscles, and the abdominals
- ❖ Instruct for effortless breathing pattern with no audible sound, as if exhaling without blowing candle flame (use ear plugs or place fingers in ears for added experience)
- ❖ Encourage breathing to feel natural and not controlled or forced. Have them soften and focus on the feeling of breathing slowly, gently, through the nose, and with a relaxed upper chest.
- ❖ Guide the student to allow the exhale without rushing to the next breath in. Suggest to stay present to the transition time between the breaths. Allow the inhale to come on its own and to observe that not much air is required to feel comfortable.
- ❖ Allow the exhale to lengthen compared to the inhale. If this is too uncomfortable then slightly shorten the inhale phase so the exhale is relatively longer.
- ❖ Practice awareness for any changes after at least 3 minutes of breathing in this manner. Notice any change in emotions or physical sensations with this breathing.
- ❖ Teach to notice the effect of breathing on consciousness (arousal, attention, presence, thoughts, sense of self, and relationship to people and environment).
- ❖ Set the intention for them to feel the stimulus for the next breath and how to naturally breathe "from the inside-out" intuitively.

For some this will feel natural and for others they may realize this does not feel good and that they "need more air." This is a possible sign of a breathing pattern dysfunction, such as hypocapnia, and they will benefit from further practice to retrain better breathing. If there was a specific aspect of the experiential breathing practice (from above) then their homework is to work on that specific piece. Start with one-minute practice sessions throughout the day. If that

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feels like too much then aim for doing this corrective breathing exercise for one breath cycle five times per day.

By doing short intervals of proper breathing their physiology can begin to restore. Starting with supported positioning in a quiet, relaxed environment and then integrating it more and more into regular daily life is the way to progress.

Know that some individuals need a more experienced teacher to assist with breath retraining. Listen to your student and know that good mechanics does not necessarily mean good physiology. They could appear to be breathing fine from your observation, but they may be trapped in a state of hypocapnia (reduced CO<sub>2</sub>) and need expert guidance to restore to normal and stop negative symptoms.

Advanced therapeutic breathing patterns

As therapeutic practice progresses, you may integrate these breathing patterns (with the same cues from above). Do not cue for “deep” breathing – ever. Use “full or natural” instead!

- ❖ Dirgha Pranayama (3-part breath with diaphragmatic pattern)
  - Extend pauses between the inhale < exhale
- ❖ Ujjayi Pranayama
  - *Gentle* sound creates pressure and may support slower, less effortful breathing. This helps them sense the pause between the breath cycles since it is an absence of sound. Stop if this creates excessive tension in the neck or chest muscles.
- ❖ Viloma Pranayama
  - Complete a relaxed, comfortable inhalation followed by an exhalation with gentle pauses throughout (exhale, pause, exhale, pause and then inhale slowly and easily). The client should never feel that they need to gasp or rush the breath in on the inhale.
- ❖ Kapalabhati Pranayama
  - Done extremely gently can help a student learn to experience a passive inhalation and gain comfort with the feeling of slight emptiness at the bottom of the exhale.
  - Give cues for 3-5 recovery breaths between each cycle of Kapalabhati, if needed

Dr. Crystal Frazee is the founder of the Mindful Pain Relief Method where she teaches women holistic, mind-body strategies to restore hope, ease pain, and reclaim their bodies and lives. In addition to being a pain and breathing sciences specialist, she mentors yoga professionals to upgrade their understanding of therapeutics so they can help more students with less guess work and bigger results. If you would like to reach out to discuss mentorship or get help with a challenging client case then email to set up a call at [drcrystalfrazeept@mindfulpainrelief.org](mailto:drcrystalfrazeept@mindfulpainrelief.org).