

Recently I've run across a smattering of information about breathing and its effect on overall health. The information can be contained in the general areas of body chemistry, cognition and qigong.

This isn't a comprehensive article on the issue of breathing. It is meant to be a catalyst to further study and consideration. Therefore, this information is necessarily incomplete.

ALKALINE VS ACID

When we breathe properly we maintain the appropriate ph balance in our system. The appropriate balance for humans is slightly alkaline. Based on a scale of 14, a pH of 7.0 is neutral. A pH below 7.0 is an acid; the lower the number, the stronger the acid. A pH above 7.0 is alkaline; the higher the number, the stronger the alkali. Blood pH is slightly alkaline, with a normal range of 7.36-7.44.

In a slightly alkaline state the human system is more resistant to infection. On the other hand, a slightly acid state is conducive to illness, as many infectious diseases grow extremely well in a slightly acid environment.

COGNITION

Other benefits to proper breathing include improved memory, enhanced thinking and problem solving, improved concentration, reduced anxiety, a decrease in fatigue and better management of stress and anger.

On a recent special with Dr. Phil McGraw (yes, THAT Dr. Phil) several students were profiled who were significantly underperforming in school. Dr. McGraw had each of them work with a representative of the MENSA (high IQ) group. The MENSA rep concentrated on three techniques proven to make the biggest difference in cognition -- breathing, rhythmic movement and focus.

The MENSA expert explained that breathing oxygenates the blood providing more oxygen to the brain for better thinking. Rhythmic movement helped to release endorphins to calm the student, facilitate a mind/body connection and provide a feeling of wellbeing. Finally, by practicing concentration, or focus, the student learned to block out distractions.

Each student was tested, given a brief lesson in the three techniques and tested again. In every case the students' performance increased significantly. In the follow up, one young man went from failing grades to A marks in three weeks.

QIGONG

The ancient practice of qigong is credited with helping to reduce muscle tension, diminish physical pain, facilitate meditation, improve memory, improve thinking and problem solving, reduce anxiety and fatigue and more. As a person who deals with chronic pain on a daily basis, I can attest to the claim regarding pain. I will also add the feeling of well being to the list. There is a sense of centeredness and calm I find in the practice of qigong. I feel as if my body and mind are working more efficiently by the time I complete the meditation and exercises.

However, I had no proof of qigong's effectiveness beyond the anecdotal until I ran across a study published in the International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry. The authors were interested in studying depression and its treatments in the elderly. Apparently, there is a strong correlation between clinical depression and illness in the elderly.

The authors of the study took a look at how other culturally based medical systems address depression. In China, qigong exercises are commonly used for a variety of medical conditions. The researchers designed an experiment to examine if Qigong breathing can help clinical depression in the elderly.

Qigong is actually two words. Qi (pronounced chi) can be translated as "life energy"...and gong can be translated as "develop" or "strengthen." The focus of qigong is breathing, often synchronized with simple physical movements.

The study included eight elderly patients with clinical depression as well as a history of stroke, Parkinson's disease or rheumatoid arthritis. The patients practiced qigong daily for three months. By the end of the study seven of the eight improved significantly without any other medical interventions. Their physical activity, sleep patterns and depression all improved.

Even though the rate of improvement when employing qigong was slower than with medication, there were no side effects and it was less expensive. Other benefits included improved physical function, such as greater strength and flexibility.

It is important to point out that this is only one study. One study's positive results are not enough to be considered conclusive. As I become aware of additional studies, I will add their findings to this article.

CONCLUSION

So there it is; a smattering of information about breathing. Use this information as a springboard to you own investigation. Go ask some questions, google the internet, talk to your doctor...learn something. Here's to you and to the breath of life.

